

New academic research in the *British Educational Research Journal* (tinyurl.com/TNstream) has just reignited the issue of England's summer-born children, which is arguably a national scandal that our policy-makers just have to tackle. However, politicians know that if they were to address it, it would likely open up the 'can of worms' that is England's scandalously low school starting age – and our political class routinely adopts a studied “*la la la...* I can't hear you!” position whenever anyone raises this issue. In her *Guardian* column (tinyurl.com/TNdorr), cultural commentator Deborah Orr has recently joined the cacophony of voices challenging England's early school starting age, of which the summer-born question is just one aspect.

The researchers found over 16 per cent of children to be in streamed classes in Year 2. One of the best predictors of being in the top stream was being born in autumn or winter, and one of the best measures predicting being in the bottom stream was – yes, you've guessed it – being born in the spring/summer. They state that, “The predominance of summer-born children in the lower streams is not surprising, as some are almost a whole year younger than their autumn-born counterparts and might be expected to be performing at more immature development levels”.

The *Guardian* then picked up on this research (tinyurl.com/TNsumborn), reporting that summer-born children are “at a serious disadvantage in the majority of England's primary schools”, with August-born pupils being more than twice as likely to be in the bottom set as their classmates born the previous September, and September-born children being nearly *three times* as likely to be in the top stream as their August-born peers. It's not as if this is news to anyone knowing anything about early education, as a raft of previous studies have shown that such dividing by ability routinely harms summer-born children's development, confidence and behaviour.

For several years, some brave parents have been taking on 'the

“We have to find ways to make schools ready for children...”

It's time to take action to protect those being forced to start primary education too soon, says **Richard House...**

system' with regard to this issue. Parent Stefan Richter has been leading a grass-roots revolt against the iniquitous birth-date lottery and the negative lifetime effects it can set up. Mr Richter has challenged the opposition of his local authority to deferring his young daughter's school entry by a year so she can start Reception after her fifth birthday. Anecdotal stories are legion of local authorities pressurising parents into applying for school places as early as possible, and then using disreputable 'scare tactics', like telling them their child will have to miss Reception if their entry is deferred. In the light of the latest research findings, this just has to stop, and we have to find ways to *make schools ready for children*, rather than distorting children's early development by forcing them into a rigid institutional system where bureaucratic imperatives take precedence over children's wellbeing.

It's the modern fashion for politicians to be almost obsessed with fairness and equity; so why on earth has this

most grotesquely unfair state of affairs lasted for so long? I submit that it's because our politicians daren't go anywhere near an issue which could ignite a genuine public discussion about England's school starting age – with expedient, economy-driven reasons taking precedence, despite the fact that the system's institutional rigidity handicaps literally hundreds of thousands of children purely by accident of birth.

I think we have to shame the politicians into addressing this issue. A shadow minister once told me that when MPs start getting lots of mail about an issue, that's when they start ear-bashing ministers for answers – and action. As I write, a new public campaign is about to be launched on the summer-borns issue. No doubt there will be a petition, and I would urge readers who feel strongly about this issue to write to local MPs, alerting them to this new campaign. Early Childhood Action (earlychildhoodaction.com) is lending its full support, and we trust that we'll be the first of many. And you can lend your own support and offers of help to Stefan Richter via the contact details below.

For further information about this vital new campaign, contact Stefan at Stefan.Richter@gmail.com, visit the mailing list at [groups.google.com /group/schoolstart](https://groups.google.com/group/schoolstart) or head to the Facebook group at tinyurl.com/TNschoollst



about the author

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