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Family column by Jane Milburn

Working the System

I'm a convert. My children will pack their bags and hit the school grounds running as well-equipped six-year-olds eager to soak up all the system can offer them.

I don't care about the folklore which makes parents think that when our darlings are five-years-old, they go to school.

Many Queenslanders don't realise that when children start formal schooling in Year 1 in this state, they're at the start of a 12-year journey through the education system. But five-year-olds in all other states except Western Australia take 13 years to travel the same route.

That means most Australian children start Year 1 as six-year-olds, having first had a preparation year within the school system (variously called kindergarten, prep, reception, preparatory or transition).

Queensland children can emerge from our system still aged 16, with many having made vital career decisions before their 17th birthday.

Children don't actually have to go to school until the year they turn seven – the Education Act says so. The Early Education Reform Group has been beavering away for 15 years informing Queensland parents of this fact.

Why not let our babies have another happy year of childhood? Let them take joy in their freedom for they'll never again be so free of the pressures of living and learning.

Hot-housing and accelerated learning programmes may produce results in the short term, but what about burnout and stress factors?

School's no picnic. There are rules, expectations and peer pressures. And there is lots to be learned. There's reading homework, writing homework and word lists. This is hard work, not just for children but for parents.

If you want your child to start school as a six-year-old, you have to know the workings of the Queensland preschool system.

Children are entitled to only one year in a state preschool unless they've been formally assessed and deemed totally unready for school, and even then priority for places is giving to incoming children.

Smart parents I know didn't enrol their ear-of-year birthday children until the year they turned six. These parents knew the ropes – they'd worked as state school teachers.

The other way you can hold out for a six-year-old start is use a private or Creche and Kindergarten-affiliated preschool with teachers who support the starting-older school of thought.

We're not simply talking about academic readiness here. Social and emotional readiness often count for so much more.

It's the boys, particularly, who are less likely to be ready for the rigours of formal schooling. I know of one private preschool where in this year's preschool class of 25 there are nine technically school-age children – six of whom are boys.

Elsewhere there's support for an older start.

Western Australia, the state with a system most closely aligned to Queensland's, recently flagged increasing its school starting age to seven. In European countries children don't start formal schooling until they're seven.

The Queensland system is evolving. Ken Wiltshire's 1994 review of Queensland's school curriculum recommended dumping the chronological age approach and this recommendation led to a review of flexible schooling by the Department of Education which will soon report to Cabinet.

Also, the recent (July 1996) Senate committee report on early childhood education drew attention to the differing terminology and school-entry ages around the nation and the urgent need for standardisation.

But the best endorsement I have for my view is a boy I know who was offered scholarships to four leading Brisbane private schools this year. What's he doing? He's doing Year 7 again, having another happy year of childhood after all.