

The Impact of a School Entry Cut-off Reform on School Enrolment and Grade Repetition

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Abstract

School entry age policies involve a fundamental trade-off: policies aimed at earlier enrolment may accelerate educational trajectories and labour market entry, but may also trigger non-compliance with school entry rules and adverse early school outcomes, including slower school progression. This paper evaluates a reform that shifted official school entry cut-off dates in Germany to assess how this affects actual enrolment behaviour and grade repetition in practice. Using administrative state-level panel data and individual-level German Socio-Economic Panel data for the 2000–2016 school entry cohorts, we exploit the staggered implementation of the reform across federal states between 2003 and 2011 within a difference-in-differences framework. We apply the standard two-way fixed effects (TWFE) estimator as well as recent estimators that are robust to staggered treatment adoption, implementing both binary and continuous treatment measures, and additionally estimate event-study models. The results suggest that the reform did not fully achieve its intended objectives. Although it led to a modest decline in the average school starting age, it also triggered substantial behavioural responses, including higher rates of late enrolment, lower rates of early enrolment, and increased grade repetition. Overall, the results suggest that such non-compliance limits the effectiveness of school-entry cut-off reforms in achieving their policy objectives.

Keywords: school enrolment; grade repetition; school starting age; policy evaluation; difference-in-differences; SOEP
