Mandatory Kindergarten Bill
Approved By House Panel

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BATON ROUGE — The House Education Committee yesterday reversed its vote on mandatory kindergarten attendance and approved Sen. Cecil Picard's administration-backed bill which says children must attend kindergarten before entering first grade.

A week ago, the panel amended an identical bill to say that schools must offer kindergarten but children do not have to attend.

The bill passed yesterday also says that schools which offer first grade or kindergarten centers must offer at least a half-day of classes for children who become 5 years old by Dec. 31, 1985.

The committee amended the bill so the entry age is increased yearly, as is planned for entering first grade.

That amendment cleared up problems some committee members, including Rep. Mike Thompson of Lafayette, had with the bill in its original form. Thompson complained last week that 4½-year-old children were too young to be forced to go to school and he argued against the proposal.

Yesterday, however, he argued that if the state does not mandate kindergarten, "it could lead to expansive remediation" in higher grades. Without kindergarten, "we're sending kids not yet teachable to first grade."

He also suggested that the state consider having two years of kindergarten.

Lafayette Rep. Kathleen Blanco, who has argued for mandatory kindergarten from the outset, also favors the gradual rise in entry age. She said that starting children too young will "penalize youngsters when they are not mature enough to handle the situation."

Several attempts were made to change the proposal, as the House bill was last week, but this time proponents of mandatory kindergarten were in the majority.

Blanco said she does not believe there was much change in thinking but instead there was a different make-up of the committee.

Thompson was absent for the vote, which left committee chairman