Full-day Kindergarten Helps Close the Achievement Gaps

Full-day kindergarten is a sound educational investment. Research demonstrates that full-day kindergarten, though initially more costly than half-day kindergarten, is worth the expense. Full-day kindergarten not only boosts students’ academic achievement, it also strengthens their social and emotional skills. Additionally, it offers benefits to teachers and parents—teachers have more time to work with and get to know students, and parents have access to better learning and care for their children. The bottom line: everyone gains.

Full-Day Kindergarten Boosts Student Achievement

- Longitudinal data demonstrates that children in full-day classes show greater reading and mathematics achievement gains than those in half-day classes.

In their landmark longitudinal study of full-day versus half-day kindergarten, researchers Jill Walston and Jerry West found that students in full-day classes learned more in both reading and mathematics than students in half-day classes—after adjusting for differences in race, poverty status, and fall achievement levels, among other things. All students experienced learning gains. By giving students and teachers more quality time to engage in constructive learning activities, full-day kindergarten provides benefits to everyone.¹

- Full-day kindergarten can produce long-term educational gains, especially for low-income and minority students.

In a study comparing national and Indiana research on full-day and half-day kindergarten programs, researchers found that compared to half-day kindergarten, full-day kindergarten leads to greater short-term and long-term gains.

In one Indiana district, for example, students in full-day kindergarten received significantly higher basic skills test scores in the third, fifth, and seventh grades, than students who only attended half-day or did not attend kindergarten at all. The researchers also found that the long-term benefits of full-day kindergarten appeared to be greatest for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The research also showed that full-day kindergarten helped to narrow achievement gaps between different groups of students.²

Full-Day Kindergarten Improves Students’ Social and Emotional Skills

A full day of learning offers several social and emotional benefits to kindergarteners. They have more time to focus and reflect on activities, and they have more time to transition between activities.

When children are taught by quality teachers using age-appropriate curricula in small classroom settings, they can take full advantage of the additional learning time—social, emotional, and intellectual—that a full-day allows. Further, research demonstrates that children adjust well to the full-day format. While some parents worry that full-day kindergarten is too much for kids, research shows that five year olds are more than
ready for a longer day. And, that they do better in a
setting that allows them time to learn and explore
activities in depth.³

Teachers Prefer Full-Day Kindergarten
In a study evaluating teachers’ views on full-day
kindergarten, teachers reported a number of benefits
for themselves as well as children and parents.⁴

- Participating in full-day [kindergarten] eased the
  transition to first grade, helping children adapt to
  the demands of a six-hour school day.
- Having more time available in the school day
  offered more flexibility and more time to do
  activities during free choice times.
- Having more time made kindergarten less stress-
  ful and frustrating for children, because they had
  time to develop interests and activities more fully.
- Participating in the full-day schedule allowed
  more appropriate academic challenges for
  children at all developmental levels.
- For children with developmental delays or those
  “at-risk” for school problems, there was more
  time for completion of projects and more time for
  needed socialization with peers and teachers.
- Having more time allowed for advanced students
  to complete increasingly long-term projects.
- Having full-day kindergarten assisted parents
  with child-care needs.
- Having more time made child assessment and
  classroom record keeping more manageable for
  teachers.
- Switching to full-day kindergarten gave teachers
  more time for curriculum planning, incorporating a
  greater number of thematic units in the school year,
  and offering more in-depth coverage of each unit.

Parents Prefer Full-day Kindergarten
Full-day kindergarten provides parents with better
support for their children. For parents who work
outside the home, full-day kindergarten means that
children do not have to be shuffled between home,
school, and child care. For all parents, there is more
continuity in the child’s day, less disruption, and
more time for focused and independent learning.

One study of parent attitudes found that after the
second year of a full-day kindergarten program, 100
percent of full-day parents and 72 percent of half-day
parents noted that, if given the opportunity again,
they would choose full-day kindergarten for their child.⁵

Implementation is Key
Full-day kindergarten programs offer teachers one
of the most important resources available to schools—
more instructional time. In fact, full-day kindergarten
programs offer on average twice as much instruc-
tional time as half-day programs. Research indicates
that children’s early reading skills are enhanced when
teachers use the additional time provided in full-day
kindergarten programs to implement activities that
promote literacy development specifically. Children’s
kindergarten reading achievement is a strong pre-
dictor of future reading achievement as students
move through school. Teachers will need professional
development and support, and schools may require
additional resources for student gains to be realized
and sustained in full-day kindergarten programs. Im-
plemeting full-day kindergarten should be part of a
broader strategy to improve academic outcomes for
children from prekindergarten to third grade.⁶
NEA’s Policies and Positions

At its 2003 Representative Assembly, NEA committed to work toward the following goals:

- That all three- and four-year-old children in the United States should have access to a full-day public school prekindergarten that is of the highest possible quality, universally offered, and funded with public money not taken from any other education program.

- That full-day kindergarten for all five-year-old children should be mandated in every public school in this country. These kindergartens should support the gains children made in prekindergarten, provide time for children to explore topics in depth, give teachers opportunities to individualize instruction, and offer parents opportunities to become involved in their children’s classrooms.

To reach these goals, NEA recommends the following policy priorities for full-day kindergarten:

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<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mandatory Full-Day Attendance</td>
<td>Full day does not designate a specific number of hours but means that kindergarten should be keyed to the regular school day. Kindergarten should be universal (available in all schools) and mandatory.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher Certification</td>
<td>Kindergarten teachers, support professionals, and administrators should be considered qualified if they hold the license or certification that the state requires for their employment.</td>
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<td>Program Location and Structure (class sizes, conditions for learning)</td>
<td>NEA supports an optimum class size of 15 students for regular programs and smaller class sizes for programs that include students with exceptional needs. As with prekindergarten, smaller classes generate the greatest gains for younger children.</td>
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<td>Alignment</td>
<td>State policymakers should ensure learning standards for kindergarten are created and aligned both with early learning standards and standards for first grade and beyond. Learning standards for kindergarten should be implemented comprehensively across five key domains: physical and motor development; social/emotional development; approaches toward learning; cognitive development; and language/literacy development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>Educators—teachers, support professionals and administrators—should have access to high-quality, continuous professional development that is required to gain and improve knowledge and skills and that is provided at school district expense.</td>
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| Funding                                    | Kindergarten should be funded in the same manner as the rest of the public school program, but the money should come from new funding sources. This does not necessarily mean that new taxes should be imposed. It does, however, mean that the necessary financing for mandatory, full-day, public school kindergarten, including the need to recruit and equitably pay qualified teacher and support professionals, should not be obtained at the expense of other public school programs. Public funds should not be used to pay for children to attend private kindergarten. Any portion of public money, even “new” money, going to private kindergartens, which are open to some but not all children, will reduce resources available to public school kindergartens, which are available to all children.

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<td>Parent Involvement</td>
<td>Because kindergarten is the bridge to the more structured school experience, training programs should be made available to help parents and guardians take an active role in the education of their kindergarten children. Parents and guardians should be encouraged to visit their children's schools and maintain contact with teachers and other school personnel.</td>
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<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>In kindergarten, as with prekindergarten, all areas of a child's development should be addressed: fostering thinking, problem solving, developing social and physical skills, and instilling basic academic skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessments</td>
<td>Assessment of the child's progress should also address all areas of a child's development: physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. Multiple sources of information should be used; and children should be given opportunities to demonstrate their skills in different ways, allowing for variability in learning pace and for different cultural backgrounds. As with prekindergarten, large-scale standardized testing is inappropriate. The purpose of assessment should be to improve the quality of education by providing information to teachers, identifying children with special needs, and developing baseline data.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher Assistants</td>
<td>Adult supervision is vital. Each kindergarten teacher should have the assistance of a full-time teacher assistant.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flexibility in Setting Age Requir-</td>
<td>To give children the best possible chances to benefit from kindergarten, NEA recommends that five be the uniform entrance age for kindergarten. The minimum entrance age (of five) and the maximum allowed age (of six) should not be applied rigidly, however. In joint consultation with parents and teachers, a school district should be allowed to make case-by-case exceptions to age requirements.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REFERENCES


RESOURCES


NEA on Prekindergarten and Kindergarten. NEA 2004. NEA’s policy road map for Early Childhood Education was developed by NEA’s Special Committee on Early Childhood and adopted by the 2004 Representative Assembly.

www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/mf_prekkinder.pdf

Raising the Standards for Early Childhood Professionals will Lead to Better Outcomes. NEA 2010. Provides research and recommendations for the education and training of early childhood educators working with children in a variety of early education settings.

www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/PB29_RaisingtheStandards.pdf

Great Public Schools (GPS) Indicators Framework. This Framework is designed to assist policymakers, educators, and advocates in evaluating how well states and districts address areas critical to the success of public schools. The GPS indicators include School Readiness Indicators which identify quality programs and services that meet the full range of all children’s needs so that they come to school every day ready and able to learn. The provision of full-kindergarten is a GPS indicator.

www.nea.org/assets/docs/GPS_IndicatorsFrameWork_online-final.pdf