

BACKGROUND:

Full-day Kindergarten: A Missing Link in the Prekindergarten through Third Grade (P-3) Continuum for Many Students

Full-day kindergarten provides an essential bridge between prekindergarten (preK) and the primary grades. In kindergarten classrooms, students develop the academic, social, and emotional skills they need to be successful later in school. These benefits seem to be greater for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, far too many children have no access to full-day kindergarten, and not enough has been done in the last decade to provide more children with access to this critical link between early childhood and K-12 education.

Why is Full-day Kindergarten Important?

In recent years, state and federal initiatives have greatly expanded access to prekindergarten programs for three- and four-year-old children. This expansion provides many more children with access to high-quality, full-day, and often, full-year preK programs. Unfortunately, too many children will follow full-day preK with half-day kindergarten which may jeopardize the important academic and social gains made in preK. For example, Tennessee and Georgia offer full-day prekindergarten programs, yet the states do not require districts to offer full-day kindergarten. This is certainly a gap in state policy has the potential to undermine the impact of that state's universal preK initiative.

Too Few States Require Districts to Offer Full-day Kindergarten

- ▶ Currently, only 11 states and the District of Columbia require districts to offer at least five hours of kindergarten per day.¹
- ▶ Forty-five states require that school districts provide at least half-day kindergarten.
- ▶ There are five states that do not require districts to offer any type of kindergarten program, although many school districts offer half-day kindergarten at a minimum.
- ▶ Thirty-five states do not require children to attend kindergarten.

The Amount of Instructional Time Students Receive in Full-day Kindergarten Matters

As in all grades, the amounts of instructional time students' receive in kindergarten matters. There are no differences in the academic expectations for children attending half-day kindergarten and children attending full-day kindergarten. This places students receiving half-day kindergarten at a disadvantage because they receive less instructional time. According to a recent study, children in kindergarten programs that spend more of the school day on academic instruction—particularly on reading instruction—make greater gains in reading over the school year than children who receive less reading instruction.² Evidence suggests that children who attend full-day kindergarten learn more in general than children who attend half-day kindergarten programs and have lower retention rates in the primary grades.³

Fighting Fade Out

Critics of full-day kindergarten often point to the “fade out” phenomenon, whereby academic gains made in kindergarten diminish in the primary grades as a reason not to invest in the program. Research suggests that when districts implement full-day kindergarten as a single initiative without creating a comprehensive, aligned P-3 continuum, fade-out can occur. Fighting full-day kindergarten fade-out requires curriculum alignment, professional development for teachers, and transition planning across the entire P-3 grade span. Approaching full-day kindergarten implementation from a systemic perspective requires continuous examination of what is working well, questioning what needs to be changed, and analyzing how data can be used to improve decision making.⁴

Conclusion

Historically, kindergarten was a child’s first experience with formal, usually public, education. Today, most children enter school having had some type of child care or preK experience. Full-day kindergarten is a critical link between these early care and education experiences and student success in the primary grades. The last decade has seen significant investments in the quality of and access to prekindergarten while policy makers have neglected to close the loop holes in kindergarten policies needed to protect that investment. Ensuring that all states require children to attend kindergarten and that all districts offer full-day kindergarten has been a priority for the National Education Association since 2003. States and districts should institute the necessary policies and resources to make full-day kindergarten available to every child in every school.

NEA Resources

Full-day Kindergarten Helps Close Achievement Gaps 2015

This NEA policy brief discusses specific policies key to implementing high-quality, full-day kindergarten programs.
http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/18001_Full-Day_Kindergarten_Policy_Brief-final.pdf

Great Public Schools (GPS) Indicators Framework: School Readiness Backgrounder and Parent Brochure

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.

https://www.nea.org/assets/docs/School_Readiness_15515-print.pdf and
https://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB_01_School_Readiness_Bro_Final.pdf

Notes

¹ Education Commission of the States. Kindergarten Online Database. Accessed at http://www.ecs.org/html/educationissues/Kindergarten/KDB_intro_SF.asp

² Rathburn, A. (2010). Making the Most of Extra Time: Relationships Between Full-day Kindergarten and Instructional Environments and Reading Achievement. Washington, D.C. American Institutes for Research

³ Ackerman, D.J., Barnett, W.S. and Robin, K.B. (2005) Making the Most of Kindergarten: Present Trends and Future Issues in the Provision of Full-day Programs: Policy Report. New Jersey: National Institute for Early Education Research.

⁴ Raskin, C. Haar, J., & Zierdt, G. (Spring 2011) Full-Day Kindergarten Effectiveness: Preserve the Investment – Ready Primary Grades, *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice*, Vol. 8, No.1.