

Full-Day Kindergarten Helps Close Achievement Gaps

Full-day kindergarten provides our youngest students more time to explore, learn, and grow in an engaging and supportive environment. NEA understands this is an important start to a lifetime of learning and academic achievement.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

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 improves 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 those in half-day classes—after adjusting for differences in race, poverty status, and fall achievement levels, among other things.¹

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.

- 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 long-term as well as short-term gains.

In one Indiana district, for example, students in full-day kindergarten scored significantly higher on basic skills tests in the third, fifth, and seventh grades than those who attended only half-day or did not attend kindergarten at all. The researchers also found the long-term benefits of full-day kindergarten appeared to be greatest for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and 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 many 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 qualified teachers, using age-appropriate curricula in small classes, they can take full advantage of the additional learning time—social, emotional, and intellectual—that a full day allows. Further, research finds that children adjust well to the full-day format.³ While some parents worry that full-day kindergarten is too much for young children, research shows that 5-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.

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 actually made the kindergarten program less stressful and frustrating for children because they had time to fully develop interests and activities.
- Participating in the full-day schedule allowed more appropriate academic challenges for children at all developmental levels.
- Children with developmental delays or those at risk for school problems benefited from having more time to complete projects and more time for needed socialization with peers and teachers.
- For more advanced students, there was time to complete longer term projects.
- Having full-day kindergarten assisted parents with child care.
- Having more time in the school day made child assessment and classroom record keeping more manageable for teachers.
- Switching to full-day kindergarten gave teachers more time to plan the curriculum, incorporate a greater number of thematic units into the school year, and offer 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 and less disruption in the child's day 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 have chosen full-day kindergarten for their child.⁵

NEA strongly supports full-day kindergarten

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

- That all 3- and 4-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 5-year-old children should be mandated in every public school in this country. These programs 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:

ISSUE	POLICY PRIORITY
Mandatory full-day attendance	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.
Teacher certification	Kindergarten teachers, education support professionals, and administrators should be considered qualified if they hold the license or certification that the state requires for their employment.
Program location and structure (class sizes, conditions for learning)	Class size—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.
Alignment	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.
Professional development	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.
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. However, it does mean that the necessary financing for mandatory, full-day, public school kindergarten, including the need to recruit and equitably pay qualified teachers 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.
Parent involvement	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.
Curriculum	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.
Assessments	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.
Teacher assistants	Adult supervision of young children is vital to the safety and success of the kindergarten program. Each kindergarten teacher should be provided a full-time teacher assistant.
Flexibility in setting age requirements	To give children the best possible chances to benefit from kindergarten, NEA recommends that 5 be the uniform entrance age for kindergarten. The minimum entrance age (of 5) and the maximum allowed age (of 6) 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.

References

- ¹ Walston, J. and J. West. 2004. Full-Day and Half-Day Kindergarten in the United States: Findings from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2004/web/2004078.asp>
- ² Plucker, J., J. East, R. Rapp, et al. January 2004. The Effects of Full Day Versus Half Day Kindergarten: Review and Analysis of National and Indiana Data. Center for Evaluation and Education Policy. www.doe.state.in.us/primetime/pdf/fulldaykreport.pdf.
- ³ Cryan, J., R. Sheehan, J. Weichel, and I. Bandy-Hedden. 1992. "Success outcomes of full-day kindergarten: More positive behavior and increased achievement in the years after," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, v. 7, no. 2, 187-203.
- ⁴ Elicker, J. and S. Mathur. 1997. "What do they do all day? Comprehensive evaluation of a full-day kindergarten," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, v.12, no.4.
- ⁵ Denton, K., and E. Germino-Hausken. 2000. Early Education for All. "Investing in Full-day Kindergarten Is Essential," Citing West, Jerry. *America's Kindergartners*, National Center for Education Statistics.

Resources

Full-Day Kindergarten: An Advocacy Guide, NEA, 2006.
www.nea.org/earlychildhood/images/kadvoguide.pdf

Closing the Achievement Gaps: An Association Guide, NEA, 2006.
www.nea.org/teachexperience/careguide.html

NEA on Prekindergarten and Kindergarten. NEA, 2004.
www.nea.org/earlychildhood/images/prekkinder.pdf

National Association for the Education of Young Children, in collaboration with NEA and other organizations, "Why We Care About the K in K-12," *Young Children*, NAEYC, March 2005.
www.nea.org/earlychildhood/careaboutk.html