

## Full-day Kindergarten Helps Close the Achievement Gaps

**F**ull-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.<sup>1</sup>

- 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.<sup>2</sup>

### 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.<sup>3</sup>

### 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.<sup>4</sup>

- 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 stressful 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.<sup>5</sup>

### 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 instructional 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 predictor 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. Implementing full-day kindergarten should be part of a broader strategy to improve academic outcomes for children from prekindergarten to third grade.<sup>6</sup>

## 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:

Issue	Commitment
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, 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)	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. 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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Issue	Commitment
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 is vital. Each kindergarten teacher should have the assistance of a full-time teacher assistant.
Flexibility in Setting Age Requirements	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.

## REFERENCES

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- <sup>2</sup> Plucker, J., J. East, R. Rapp, et al. *The Effects of Full Day Versus Half Day Kindergarten: Review and Analysis of National and Indiana Data*. Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, January 2004.
- <sup>3</sup> Cryan, J., R. Sheehan, J. Weichel, and I. Bandy-Hedden. "Success outcome of full-day kindergarten: More positive behavior and increased achievement in the years after." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 1992, v. 7, no. 2, 187-203.
- <sup>4</sup> Elicker, J. and S. Mathur. "What do they do all day? Comprehensive evaluation of a full-day kindergarten" *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 1997.
- <sup>5</sup> Denton, K. and E. Germino-Hausken. *Early Education for All*. "Investing in Full-day Kindergarten is Essential," citing West, Jerry. *America's Kindergarteners*, National Center for Education Statistics, 2000.
- <sup>6</sup> Rathbun, Amy. *Making the most of extra time: Relationships between full-day kindergarten instructional environments and reading achievement*. Washington DC: American Institutes for Research, 2010.

## RESOURCES

Ackerman, D.J., W.S. Barnett, and K.B. Robin. 2005. *Making the most of kindergarten: Present trends and future issues in the provision of full-day programs*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), Rutgers University.

**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](http://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 for early childhood educators working with children in a variety of early education settings.  
[www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/PB29\\_RaisingtheStandards.pdf](http://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](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/GPS_IndicatorsFrameWork_online-final.pdf)