



## Education Policy Brief

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# Full Day Kindergarten

**“There has been much debate about the appropriate length of the kindergarten day. Traditionally, it has been half that of other grades... Recent research has shown, however, that children who attend full-day kindergarten are better prepared to succeed in the first grade and beyond (Miller, 2001). Also, for children of working parents, full-day programs limit the number of transitions a child must make during a day, reducing child and parental stress. Thirty-nine states mandate that districts offer at least a half-day of kindergarten, and nine states require that districts offer full-day kindergarten. Thirteen states require children to attend kindergarten, and two of those -- West Virginia and Louisiana -- require full-day attendance. At the local level, many districts have begun implementing full-day kindergarten programs, regardless of state law, to meet the demands of parents and the needs of children. Nationally, 60% of kindergartners attend a full-day program.”**

**Source: Education Commission of the States,**

**[www.ecs.org](http://www.ecs.org)**

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## INTRODUCTION

The traditional purpose of kindergarten has been to help children transition from home to school. In the past, the main objectives of the kindergarten experience were the development of sensory-motor skills, positive attitudes toward school, general readiness, and socialization. However, over the last 20 years, changing social and economic conditions have caused a shift in emphasis. “The increase in single parent and dual employment households, and the fact that most children spend a significant part of the day away from home, also signals significant changes in American family life compared to a generation ago”<sup>\*</sup> Moreover, the impact of the accountability movement has changed the role kindergarten is expected to play. Kindergarten is now viewed as an educational experience not merely to increase children’s readiness for school but to begin their acquisition of specific academic skills. The standards movement demands that all students meet academic benchmarks much earlier than ever before. Consequently, many believe that instructional time should be increased in response to the changing educational environment. Full-day kindergarten seems to be the solution.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

*Does full-day kindergarten (FDK) have an impact on children’s academic achievement?*

Studies have consistently shown that students attending FDK did better academically and scored higher on achievement tests in the short-term. Specifically, students attending full-day kindergarten programs

- Scored significantly higher in reading and mathematics as compared to students attending half-day programs
- Showed greater readiness for 1<sup>st</sup> grade

Even though there is consensus about short-term benefits, there is conflicting evidence about long-term effects.

- FDK children received significantly higher marks in the areas of math, reading, handwriting and spelling in 1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade compared to students from half-day programs. Also, FDK children had significantly higher grade point averages in grades 6, 7 and 8 than their peers who attended only half-day kindergarten (1998).
- Academic benefits of FDK extend beyond 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade (1983 & 2000).
- Children attending full-day kindergarten had fewer grade retentions and Title 1 placements. Specifically, 25% of children attending FDK were retained in the first 3 years of schooling as opposed to 34% of children attending half-day programs (2000).
- However, some studies have shown that significant differences in achievement disappear early, some before 1<sup>st</sup> grade and some before 3<sup>rd</sup> grade (1991).

*Are there other effects of full-day kindergarten?*

- As compared to those in half-day programs, children attending full-day kindergarten
  - exhibited more independent learning, classroom involvement, and productivity
  - were more likely to approach their teachers
  - expressed less withdrawal, anger, shyness and blaming behavior
  - have better self-concepts and more positive attitudes toward school
  - earn higher conduct marks
  - attend school more regularly

*Who benefits most?*

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<sup>\*</sup> Rothenberg, Dianne. (1995). Full-Day Kindergarten Programs (EDO-PS-95-4). Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. (ED382410).

Though studies have shown that any child may benefit from FDK, the greatest benefit is to those children from low socioeconomic or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

- A 2002 study done in Montgomery County, MD found “the greatest rate of improvement ...occurred in FDK compared to the half-day program, underscoring the value of extended learning opportunities for students impacted by poverty and/or learning English.”
- “Full-day kindergarten is viewed as a way not only to help level the playing field for children with limited skills, but to reduce the chances of their being retained.”
- Several reports recommended half-day programs as an option for those families with educational resources that want to spend more time with their children and want to ease their children more gradually into school.

*What are teachers’ and parents’ views of full-day kindergarten programs?*

- Many teachers preferred full-day kindergarten programs because
  - it gave them more time for individualized instruction
  - it allowed them to get to know the children better, enabling them to better meet children’s needs
  - they felt less stress due to fewer constraints on their classroom time
- Many parents preferred a full-day kindergarten program because it
  - had positive academic and behavioral impact on their children
  - accommodated their own work schedules
  - reduced stress by eliminating the need to rush through the program
  - eliminated scheduling difficulties for after-school daycare
- Those parents opposed to FDK felt
  - they wanted to spend more time with their children
  - that FDK created unrealistic academic pressures and inadequate rest time for children

*What are some of the barriers to implementing full-day kindergarten programs?*

- The three most commonly cited reasons for not implementing FDK include
  - Insufficient funding
  - Lack of classroom space
  - Lack of qualified teachers
- Some issues to consider that may offset these immediate problems include
  - Reduced long-term costs for special and remedial education
  - Reduced transportation costs
  - Employment of qualified paraprofessionals
  - Implementation of team teaching approaches
  - Better utilization of non-classroom space

*Is it the longer day that makes the difference?*

It is not merely the length of the day but rather the quality of the learning experience that makes the difference.

- For example, the successful full-day kindergarten initiative in Montgomery County, MD
  - substantially strengthened the kindergarten curriculum
  - expanded professional development for teachers and principals
  - phased in reduced class size with a student-teacher ratio of 15:1
  - provided extended time for balanced literacy instruction
- Other research has shown that

- utilization of small group activities should be an integral part of a successful kindergarten curriculum
- children and teachers need adequate time to explore topics in depth
- there should be greater continuity of day-to-day activities,
- the learning environment should favor child-centered, developmentally-appropriate approaches

## DELAWARE SITUATION

- A recent polling of Delaware’s public schools (March 2003) showed that 33% of the elementary schools of the state’s 15\* school districts offer at least one class of full-day kindergarten. Six charter schools that include elementary grades offer full-day kindergarten.
- The *2000 Kindergarten Teacher Survey Report* † indicated
  - 77% of Delaware’s kindergarten teachers taught in traditional half-day programs, 8% in extended-day, “at-risk” and ESL kindergartens, and 3% in self-contained special education kindergartens.
  - The majority of kindergarten teachers answering the survey had advanced degrees (61% had master’s degrees or higher) and significant teaching experience (mode # of years in K was 10).
  - When asked to identify the most important skills for children entering kindergarten, teachers’ highest priority “seems to be social and behavioral skills that allow them to interact with others and work in group situations.”... “the five least important skills according to the teachers were all academic skills.”
- A longitudinal study conducted in Delaware in 2000 found that children living in poverty who received early intervention services were more likely to meet or exceed the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading and math standards, received significantly higher grades, and were less likely to be retained than their peers who had not received these services.
- Kids Count In Delaware (2003) reports that “every dollar spent on early intervention can save \$4 to \$7 later on special education and residential care.”
- The 2002 Statewide Poll on the Condition of Education found that one-third of Delaware parents with children under the age of 13 utilize some form of child care; 59% reported experiencing difficulties with availability, quality, cost, location, or hours of operation.

## POLICY QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

In light of the federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation and the state’s accountability laws, what needs to be done to ensure that all children receive *adequate and sufficient instruction* at the kindergarten level to ensure their progress toward meeting the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade standards?

Why is it that some school districts in the state offer full-day kindergarten at nearly all of their elementary schools while others may provide no full-day classes whatsoever?

Recognizing that just extending the school day is not enough, how can the state provide the necessary professional and curriculum development to ensure that efforts toward full-day kindergarten are beneficial?

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For a complete list of references, visit our web site at <http://www.rdc.udel.edu/>.

\* Delaware’s 3 Vo-Tech school districts plus Delmar do not offer elementary education.

† Gamel-McCormick et al, UD Center for Disabilities Studies. Response rate of 71.25%.