

All-day first year is beneficial but costly

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Metro area school districts struggle with whether to offer full-day kindergarten and how to pay for it.

In the Fridley School District this year, parents of kindergarten students have the option to send their kids to class all day long, every day of the school week, just like older students.

That's true in the Jordan School District, too. In Lakeville, Eden Prairie, Rockford, Anoka-Hennepin and many other metro school districts, parents have a similar option, but at a cost of thousands of dollars.

That's because the state funds kindergarten students at about half the rate it does for others, paying for a half-day of education while the districts make up the rest, either through additional taxpayer dollars or fees that resemble private school tuition.

Fridley's new all-day, everyday kindergarten curriculum comes courtesy of a voter-approved operating levy last fall. Superintendent Mark Robertson said there are advantages to both all-day and half-day options. But with increasing numbers of low-income families in his district, he said, it's important that families who cannot afford tuition not be left behind, even if it costs the district about \$200,000 extra.

"Kindergarten is no longer just social; it's academic," he said. "And we feel we can significantly increase word recognition and reading skills" by offering the full-day option. Most importantly, he said, "The biggest advantage is to get kids who come from disadvantaged homes into classrooms for a the full year, so they are not disadvantaged by the time they get to first grade."

There are also pragmatic business reasons for the decision, he said. The district had been losing kindergarten students to a nearby district that offered an all-day, everyday program. In an era of open enrollment and with only 20 to 30 percent of the state's districts offering universal all-day kindergarten, he said, it can be a competitive advantage.

"Parents don't ignore that," he said. "We believe that if we get a kindergarten family through the doors, a number of them will stay. They won't go away when kindergarten is over."

There was a pragmatic competitive reason for switching from a fee-based all-day everyday kindergarten program in the Jordan School District, too, Superintendent Larry Kauzlarich said. But in the end, he said, it came down to fairness. "It wasn't fair, in our mind, that money was the deciding factor sometimes," he said. "We just felt that all the kids would benefit" from having access to classrooms all day.

'We're not hitting the masses'

Districts that offer fee-based all-day kindergarten typically do so on a sliding scale or with scholarship opportunities for low-income families. That's true in the Anoka-Hennepin district but still, said Assistant Superintendent Dennis Carlson, he worries about the potential for inequity.

"We do have sliding fee scales ..., but ultimately, it's a fee-based program and you can only do so much. You need a stable funding stream and we lack that," he said. "We worry that kids who may need it the most may have a wider gap in the first and second grades.... It's only optional for those who can afford it. Even if you provide subsidies, which we try to do, you worry about people who cannot afford it."

That's why Anoka-Hennepin has been lobbying in recent years for more per-pupil funding for kindergarten students statewide, Carlson said.

"We are playing around the edges of the need" with targeted grant money and fee-based programs, he said. "We're not hitting the masses and we're likely not hitting the need. ... All-day kindergarten is another way to make sure that the kids are not only ready to go but are caught up to other kids and not lagging behind their peers. Could we get some kind of a formula based on [poverty] or some other mechanism that would help identify an additional amount of money for kids that have a greater need than others?"

So far, generally, the answer is no. Tom Melcher, the state Department of Education's program finance manager, said all-day kindergarten is being funded at a small number of pilot test sites at an annual cost of about \$7.5 million. The state currently pays about \$185 million in kindergarten funding, he said, and he estimated it would increase costs by another \$170 million if the state were to provide a universal full-time kindergarten option.

For most districts, kindergarten choices come down to money. The Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School District had a full-time kindergarten program between 2003 and 2004. A University of Minnesota study of that kindergarten class indicated "considerable growth in all areas from fall to spring," and said "gaps between racial groups, language groups, and socioeconomic groups that existed in the fall were narrowed or eliminated by spring." Comparison with half-day students in another district, the study said, indicated the all-day students scored better on letter and numeral recognition, and in counting.

"It was something that we wanted to continue and if we had the resources we would have," said Ruth Dunn, district communications coordinator. "Those kids are now entering third grade and we think they are the living proof that it works. Unfortunately, it was just for that one year," she said, because the district cut \$11 million in 2002-05, and the universal full-day kindergarten program was part of the cuts.

'A very inequitable system'

The Minneapolis Foundation, which began lobbying for state funding for all-day kindergarten in the last year, says only about 30 percent of the state's school districts include all-day

kindergarten as part of their curriculum. Minnesota, the foundation says, is in the minority nationally in funding only half-day kindergarten.

"I think Minnesotans would be shocked to hear that Mississippi and Arkansas have been [funding all-day kindergarten] for a long time. It's a very inequitable system [here]," said Ruth Parriott, the Minneapolis Foundation's community philanthropic officer. She said her organization's focus in the past year has not been to look for an author for a piece of legislation but rather to start conversations. "There is absolutely no debate about the value. Everybody agrees that the full day is educationally superior. The only question has been when does it happen and how does it happen."

So far, what little legislation that has been offered hasn't gone anywhere. Is there a will to fund all-day kindergarten in Minnesota?

Anoka-Hennepin's Dennis Carlson said that, up until now, legislators haven't been sufficiently convinced, but his district intends to keep lobbying for it. If the state won't fund all-day kindergarten for all students, he said, perhaps it could concentrate on kids with the greatest need.

"When you look at what we're doing in some of these areas, like all-day kindergarten -- we know it's successful, and we know that the kids who aren't there are going to be left further behind -- and that's just hard to take."

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