

Kindergarten

By Ann Geracimos

(THE WASHINGTON TIMES -- October 30, 2006) The push is on. Five-year-olds are going to school full time, especially this year in Montgomery County, where compulsory all-day schedules for kindergarten pupils were phased in starting in 2000. The system today has every one of its 126 elementary schools following suit.

Anne Arundel County, by contrast, is close but has yet to get all of its 77 elementary schools in line. Both counties planned ahead to comply with a Maryland law that requires all kindergarten classes in the state be full-day by August 2007. In addition, the Bridge to Excellence Act, passed in 2002, provided a significant increase in funds to help implement the program and direct special help to at-risk children.

"We took high-need population schools first and moved through the list," says Barbara Griffiths, Anne Arundel County's Coordinator of Early Childhood. The impact was greatest on facilities -- finding space -- than on transportation, staffing and food services, she says. Even so, the former kindergarten teacher calls the extended-day program "the highlight of my career, in that I'm not fighting for funding or fighting on philosophical grounds."

A similar approach, beginning in schools with high levels of poverty, occurred in Montgomery County, where Janine Bacquie, director of the Division of Early Childhood Programs and Services, points with pride to measures showing that 81 percent of kindergarten pupils now can read what she calls "full text" -- up from 39 percent in 2001. There also were increases across the board in math achievement, she says.

"What happens early is so critical," she says, referring to a book titled "Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children" that maintains, in her words, "If by grade three, a child is not reading by grade level, he will continue to be behind his peers without significant intervention."

Asked whether too much pressure is being put on young children, she says, "The answer is that we are not overloading them, but really accessing their potential. ... That added time allows each child to be planned for individually."

The National Center for Education Statistics has reported that full-day kindergarten enrollment rose from 28 percent of the country's children in 1977 to 68 percent in 2004 and is still growing.

"Full-day kindergarten has been around for a long time," says Dominic Gullo, professor of elementary and early childhood education at Queens College, City University of New York, and editor of "K Today: Teaching and Learning in the Kindergarten Year."

In addition to the difference between mandatory and voluntary programs, there always have been funding issues, he points out.

"Only seven states provide an explicit incentive for offering funding for this," he says. "Twenty-one others provide funding incentives for kindergarten, but not necessarily for full-day."

He agrees that pressure for extending kindergarten schedules comes, in part, from the federal No Child Left Behind Act that has school districts having to prepare pupils early for a third-grade assessment test. But it is also because "policy-makers have seen the research that quality early childhood education programs give children a better start, especially those from lower economic status families or those where English is not the primary language."

He emphasizes the benefit comes only from "high quality" programs and cautions that "just because you have twice as much kindergarten doesn't necessarily mean [pupils] will learn twice as much."

The needs of parents play a part as well, especially in households where full-time workers juggle young children's half-day schedules.

Arelis Burke of Gaithersburg additionally faced what she says was "a big transition," since her three children -- ages 9, 8 and 7 -- had not gone to a pre-school before kindergarten. Instead, a friend of the family took care of her children at the friend's house.

"So it was definitely different," says Mrs. Burke, a pharmaceutical company representative.

To help them prepare for kindergarten, Mrs. Burke tutored her children in some reading and writing basics. Doubtless, it also helped that the family, which lives close to Summit Hall Elementary in Gaithersburg, has a restricted television viewing schedule in place.

"I guess my idea was that kindergarten was kind of playing around, but kindergarten isn't like that anymore. It is very structured," she says, admitting that, at first, she wondered "Do they really have to know this?" But she also concedes that "kids' thinking these days is a little more advanced than when I was growing up. I'm amazed at half the stuff they know."

At Summit Hall, kindergartners, who must be 5 years old by September, are in school from 8:30 a.m. to 3:05 p.m. with a lunch hour separating the more structured morning instruction between 8:50 and 11 a.m. from a more varied hands-on afternoon curriculum during which teachers can use flexible grouping and, ideally, reinforce lessons learned earlier in the day. There is no nap time, but afternoons offer enough stimulation to keep children alert, in the opinion of teacher Kim Sepanik. Post-lunch activities include art, music, science, physical education and social studies.

Those children with preschool experience are "pretty well adjusted," says Miss Sepanik, while those from home care, without any previous organized education, need a few weeks. "They are doing great," she attests. "I think I am more tired than they are."

"[The transition] was not without its pitfalls, but we adjusted reasonably well. ... The first year was harder, and the second was easier," says Summit Hall Principal Keith Jones, acknowledging the difficulty of doing progress assessments on the very young that can require different methods and extra personnel. "One of the biggest challenges of full-day is freeing up teachers to be able to plan and in turn make the children successful."

Ultimately, Mrs. Burke says her family has had "a really good experience. It has helped them. I've never felt like they should not have done it."

An extended school day was a big boon, too, for working parents who pay heavily for day care.

"My husband and I have really good jobs and were blessed to have a baby sitter we knew and trusted, but how do [other] people do it?"