



A Union of Professionals

## Full-Day Kindergarten

### AFT Position

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) strongly supports the implementation of full-day kindergarten to enhance school readiness for all students. Despite the increased state spending that would be necessary to fund longer days for kindergarten children, both short-term (results seen during the kindergarten year) and long-term (results during elementary school years beginning with first grade) effects on the academic and social skills of children outweigh the negative aspect of increased spending. A study of 17,600 Philadelphia schoolchildren conducted in 2002, which adjusted findings to take age, gender and family income into consideration, found that by the time former full-day kindergarteners reached the third and fourth grades, they were over 26 percent more likely than children from half-day programs to have made it there without repeating a grade. The lower retention rates in these Philadelphia school districts make up for 19 percent of the cost of providing the full-day programs (Viadero). Following is a summary of studies and research that demonstrate the academic and social benefits of full-day kindergarten, and that discuss the specific groups this program works best for.

### Academic Benefits of Full-Day Kindergarten

Though early research (in the 1970s and 1980s) *did* show significant academic gains among full-day kindergarten students, these studies were conducted without taking into consideration important factors such as the socioeconomic standing of students, their ethnicity, and the location (urban, suburban, or rural) of the full-day programs. Recent studies, however, often take these factors into consideration, making results more reliable and consistent. These research studies almost always conclude that participation in all-day kindergarten related positively to later school performance as reflected in higher standardized test scores, fewer grade retentions and fewer Title I placements (Clark, 1).

Recently assessment tests have been used to compare full-day with half-day students. One significant difference was the advanced reading and literacy skills of the full-day children. Hough and Bryde found that full-day students outperformed half-day students on eight of the nine Language Arts criteria (7). This same research study used norm-referenced achievement tests, and found that the full-day students outperformed half-day students on every criterion measured by the Early School Assessment achievement test (12). A full day of instruction increases students' exposure to activities important for literacy-development—reading books, learning phonics, reading from a basal text, etc. (NCES).

For example, one study used a reading scale that ranged from 0 to 72, and found that the average full-day kindergartner gained 10.6 points over the year, whereas the average half-day student gained 9.4 points. The differences remain solid when race, poverty status, class size and even instructional techniques are taken into consideration. The reason for this is most likely the time allotted in a full day for specific skills, such as letter recognition, matching letters to sounds, vocabulary and the conventions of print, all of which are used in the literacy-development activities mentioned above (NCES).

The effects of full-day kindergarten are again seen when these children begin first grade. Less grade retention, as well as greater levels of productivity and independent learning, are demonstrated by full-day students (Morrow, Strickland, & Woo, 24). A 1998 study conducted on students from a New Jersey public school found that first-grade students who had attended full-day kindergarten scored higher on all areas of the standardized portfolio assessment than their half-day peers (da Costa & Bell, 3). Matthijs Koopmans's study found similar findings of higher academic achievement in the first grade among full-day kindergartners as compared with half-day students.

### **Social Benefits**

In addition to improved academic achievement, many significant social skills can be better developed for children who are enrolled in full-day kindergarten programs due to more child-to-child interactions and greater progress in general social skills (Clark, 2). Full-day kindergartners demonstrate more reflectivity, independent learning, classroom involvement and productivity in working with peers than do their half-day counterparts (Rothenberg). Full-day students experience a greater number of social interactions with their peers, making them less shy and more outspoken (Hugh & Bryde). While curricula may be the same for both half- and whole-day programs, teachers preferred the latter as whole-day courses allow instructors to expound on curriculum materials with less time constraint and thus less stress. Also, a full-day program provides more time for individual instruction and small-group interaction (NWREL, 12), and an enhanced opportunity to get to know each student and his or her parents, thus allowing teachers to better assess and meet the needs of the children (Clark, 2).

Another consideration for the effectiveness of kindergarten programs is the stress students experience due to transitions from one environment to another. Especially for children of working parents, transition time from home to school, then school to home is eased when a secondary transition does not occur (ECS). Most working parents with a child in half-day kindergarten must find a second program in which to place their child for the interim time between morning kindergarten and late afternoon, when the parents arrive home. Another aspect of transition is the amount of time spent in the kindergarten class to adjust children to their new environment. Full-day schooling reduces the ratio of transition time to class time, thus providing greater continuity through the day and more time to learn (Miller). Attendance rates are higher for full-day students, who continue to come to school more often than their half-day counterparts even through the third- and fourth-grade years (Viadero).

### **Impact on Low-Income Students**

One of the most important factors to consider—and that which was left out of many earlier studies—is the impact of a full-day on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Family income and school readiness have been strongly linked in several studies, as reported by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Poor children have fewer resources that support school readiness than children from more affluent families (8). These children often start school with less academic skills, and have greater learning gains when they are enrolled in full-day programs (Miller). Research that takes this variable into account consistently demonstrates that disadvantaged children have a better chance of catching up to their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. A study done by the U.S. Education Department showed that all-day kindergartners, especially at-risk children, “fare better academically and socially as they age” (Swartzlander). In order to be prepared to learn—and more specifically, prepared to read—students from low socioeconomic backgrounds benefit most from full-day kindergarten classes (da Costa & Bell, 17–18). The results last beyond kindergarten, with

higher scores on reading readiness tests in first grade, as well as higher scores on achievement tests in grades 3, 5, and 7 (Ohio State Legislative Office of Education Oversight, 6).

### **Importance of Kindergarten Curriculum**

While we do not endorse a particular curriculum or pedagogy as a single best approach for kindergarten instructional practices and content, we offer the following positions informed by the research.

Research-based curriculum with specific goals aligned to standards produce higher learning outcomes for children. We believe that children are better prepared for the demands of later schooling when they are exposed to age-appropriate standards and curriculum that include extensive language and literacy-building activities; domain-specific knowledge in areas such as math and science; and a variety of classroom structures and activities that develop and enhance reasoning, communication and problem-solving. Objectives should also address social-emotional competence, and motor readiness and physical abilities. Multiple instructional approaches should be used and can be applied both in the context of play and structured activities. It is important to note, however, that the goal of school readiness in kindergarten should not be to promote academic instruction appropriate for older children or unreliable assessment of children.

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