

Increasing Access to Full-Day K

A Key Strategy for Boosting Learning and Closing Achievement Gaps for Children



Children's Defense Fund

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Full-day kindergartenⁱ ("Full-Day K") plays a vital role in children's educational development, boosting cognitive learning, creative problem-solving and social competence, and promoting positive school outcomes such as faster gains on literacy and language measures, better attendance through the primary grades, and higher academic achievement in later grades. Yet too many children are not afforded an opportunity to attend kindergarten for a full school day. When offered in the context of an aligned, seamless continuum of early learning, Full-Day K is a critical strategy for closing achievement gaps by third grade, the stage at which success in school depends upon a child's ability to transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn."

Children in Full-Day K Have Better Educational Outcomes than Children in Half-Day Kindergarten

Full-Day K is a critical component of the PreK-3rd Grade early learning continuum. Research comparing Full-Day K and half-day kindergarten suggests that children benefit more from developmentally appropriate Full-Day K. Students that attend kindergarten for a full day are more prepared for school; they do better with the transition to first grade, show significant gains in school socialization and are equipped with stronger learning skills. Full-day kindergartners demonstrate:

- higher academic achievement in later grades;
- better attendance in kindergarten and through the primary grades;
- faster gains on literacy and language measures;
- enhanced social, emotional and behavior development;
- reduced retention and remediation rates.ⁱⁱ

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K) Class of 1989-99 has provided a wealth of data which has been studied over the years. This rich data source in addition to school-district-based studies have shown that children who participated in full-day programs when compared to their peers in half-day programs made statistically significant gains in early reading skills.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition to studies generated from ECLS-K data, research on closing the achievement gap in fourth grade has shown that students participating in Full-Day K close the achievement gap between the highest- and lowest-performing students in reading by nearly one-third and in math by one-fourth.^{iv}

Yet Too Many Children in America Do Not Have Access to Full-Day K

Public education in America is built on the foundation of equal access for all children. While the American public envisions children having access to a robust K-12 education system, for many young children Full-Day K is the missing half step in the early learning continuum. Consider these facts:

- **Only 10 states require by statute that school districts provide publicly funded Full-Day K.** An additional 34 states and the District of Columbia require school districts to provide half-day kindergarten, and six do not require districts to provide kindergarten at all.^v
- **The majority of states do not require kindergarten to be the same length of day as first grade.** Instructional time for kindergartners varies from a half-day of 2.5 hours to a full-day of six hours.^{vi}
- **The majority of states do not include funding for Full-Day K in statute alongside funding requirements for grades 1-12.**^{vii}
- **States and school districts across the country have cut or delayed funding for Full-Day K as budgets have tightened because of the recession.**^{viii}
- **In 13 states school districts are permitted to charge parents tuition to finance the second half of the kindergarten day.** In some circumstances, stipends or reduced tuition rates are offered to families qualifying for free or reduced priced lunch.^{ix}

Unequal access to Full-Day K means too many young children lose a critical opportunity to develop and strengthen foundational skills necessary for long-term success in school and lifelong learning.

The Importance of Full-Day K to the Common Core State Standards

Forty-five states and the District of Columbia are beginning to implement the Common Core State Standards. Kindergartners across the country will be expected to meet more rigorous academic benchmarks than ever before. While these standards are consistent across states, the number of instructional hours provided for kindergartners to meet standards varies dramatically from state to state and even from district to district within a state. Regardless of whether a state or district offers 2.5 hours of kindergarten instruction a day (approximately 450 hours annually) or six hours every day (approximately 1,080 hours annually^x), the expectation of mastery of core standards remains the same. Without Full-Day K, too many children will not be able to meet these new high expectations. If implementation of common core standards is to be successful, Full-Day K can no longer be viewed as an optional add-on, enrichment or intervention program. It must become a stable part of the PreK- 3rd grade early learning continuum in every state and school district.

Making It Right: Policy Recommendations

Policymakers at all levels of government can help make Full-Day K a reality for all children.

At the federal level, policymakers can support equal access to high-quality Full-Day K by requiring that:

- All state and local education agencies receiving federal formula grants from the U.S. Department of Education provide access to public Full-Day K *for all kindergartners*, funded at the same level as first grade;
- All state or local education agencies seeking federal education funds through competitive grant programs provide access to public Full-Day K *for all kindergartners*, funded at the same level as first grade;
- The U.S. Department of Education provide additional competitive grant opportunities for states and districts to develop high-quality PreK-3rd grade early learning initiatives that include Full-Day K in urban, suburban and rural school districts;
- The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Head Start, and Office of Child Care in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provide specific guidance to state and local education agencies and child care agencies on successful funding strategies for PreK-3rd grade education systems; and
- Education agencies that receive funding from the Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems grant program code and define essential data elements specific to student attendance in kindergarten according to the Common Education Data Standards (CEDs) v. 2.

At the state level, policymakers can support equal access to high quality Full-Day K by requiring that:

- All school districts provide public Full-Day K for the same length of day as first grade;
- Funding discrepancies between Full-Day K and grades 1-12 be resolved;
- State education agencies and advocacy organizations provide guidance to legislators and state and local school boards on the importance of Full-Day K in reducing achievement gaps by 3rd grade;
- State education agencies to provide guidance to local school districts and school boards on how to leverage existing funds to facilitate the implementation of Full-Day K;
- State education agencies and institutions of higher education that prepare PreK-3rd grade teachers review and modify current teacher certification requirements to ensure they meet national early childhood teacher preparation standards;
- State education agencies include specific professional development for teachers and school administrators on elements of high-quality kindergarten classes ; and

- State education agencies direct local education agencies to collect data on the number of students attending the types of kindergarten classes as defined by CEDS v.2 and the number paying when free Full-Day K is not provided locally.

At the local level, policymakers can support equal access to high-quality Full-Day K by requiring that:

- School boards ensure school budgets provide sufficient funding for Full-Day K for *all* children without tuition;
- School boards direct local districts to exceed the numbers of hours of professional development mandated by the state for school administrators responsible for supervising PreK through 3rd grade with specific topics relating to early childhood education.
- School boards invite local advocates and parents to talk with them so board members can be better informed in making decisions about Full-Day K.

The Children’s Defense Fund continues to advocate on behalf of children who have no voice and encourages others to join us in our campaign to make Full-Day K a reality for all children.

For more information, contact Dr. Cathy Grace at cgrace@childrensdefense.org.

ⁱ “Full-day K” as used in this document is intended to mean high-quality, full-day kindergarten that is publicly funded and offered by school districts each day of the school week and according to the same schedule as first grade.

ⁱⁱ WestEd. (2005). Full-Day Kindergarten Expanding Learning Opportunities. Retrieved from http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/po-05-01.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Kauerz, K (2010) PreK-3rd: Putting Full-Day Kindergarten in the Middle. Foundation for Child Development. Retrieved: <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/FINAL%20Kindergarten%20Brief.pdf>

^{iv} *Id.*

^v Children’s Defense Fund (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.childrensdefense.org/policy-priorities/early-childhood-education-care/full-day-kindergarten.html>

^{vi} *Id.*

^{vii} *Id.*

^{viii} *Id.*

^{ix} *Id.*

^x *Id.*