



Children's Defense Fund

The Facts about Full-Day Kindergarten

June 2014

Full-day kindergarten boosts children's cognitive learning, creative problem-solving and social competence. Yet for many young children full-day kindergarten is a missing half step in the early learning continuum. Unequal access to publicly funded full-day and full-week high quality kindergarten means too many young children lose a critical opportunity to develop and strengthen foundational skills necessary for success in school and lifelong learning. All children should be guaranteed access to publicly funded full-day kindergarten if they are to meet the learning and work-force challenges of the 21st century.

Full-Day K as Part of the Birth-3rd Grade Early Learning Continuum

It is widely understood that cognitive, social, behavioral, and health disparities between low-income and higher-income children are evident at nine months and continue to grow throughout early childhood.¹ By the time children reach kindergarten, fewer than 48 percent of low-income children are considered school ready, compared to 75 percent of their better-off peers.² As a result, elected leaders in the states and at the national level are working to increase investments from birth to age 5 through programs such as home visiting, child care, Early Head Start, Head Start, and preschool. However, children's development and learning does not end at age 5 and the Children's Defense Fund believes that full-day kindergarten plays a crucial role in maintaining the gains made in the earliest years of a child's life and ensuring a smooth transition to first grade. If policymakers do not acknowledge the importance of full-day kindergarten aligned with both the early childhood years and first grade, too many children will miss a step in their education and potentially lose some of the gains made in their earlier years.

Full-Day Kindergarten and the Common Core State Standards

Forty-five states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core State Standards which set the course for students in achieving career and college ready skills upon high school graduation.³ The standards students are expected to meet upon exiting kindergarten are rigorous. Given the new standards and the instability of funding for full-day kindergarten across the country, children are not guaranteed an equal opportunity for learning and could be severely hampered in achieving school success.

Access to Full-Day Kindergarten

- Eleven states and the District of Columbia require school districts to provide publicly funded full-day kindergarten through state statute, which guarantees annual funding at the same level as first grade.
- Forty-five states require school districts to provide at-least half-day kindergarten.
- Five states do not require districts to provide kindergarten at all.⁴

- There is a large body of evidence going back in some cases to programs from the 1960s demonstrating the positive and lifelong impact of high quality early childhood programs for low-income children across both cognitive and non-cognitive domains.
- More than 75 percent of all kindergarteners are enrolled in full-day kindergarten.⁵

Full-Day Kindergarten Is at Risk in Some Areas

As of 2012 more than 75 percent of kindergarteners are enrolled in some type of full-day kindergarten.⁶ However, in poor economic times, full-day kindergarten has often been placed at risk, particularly in areas where districts are not mandated in state statute to provide it. In the last several years, budget-strapped states have cut funding for full-day kindergarten. In an attempt to balance education budgets, states and districts across the country have either eliminated or considered eliminating funding for full-day kindergarten.⁷ In some cases parents are required to pay tuition or qualify for tuition assistance for the second half of the kindergarten day. The uncertain future for this critical step in a child's education must be addressed.

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

Research comparing half-day and full-day kindergarten suggests that children benefit more from a developmentally appropriate full-day kindergarten as part of an early learning continuum.⁸ Full-day kindergarteners:

- 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
- Have higher academic achievement in later grades
- Have better attendance in kindergarten and through the primary grades
- Show faster gains on literacy and language measures when compared to half-day kindergarten students
- Have enhanced social, emotional and behavior development
- Have reduced retention and remediation rates.

¹ Halle, Tamara, Nicole Forry, Elizabeth Hair, Kate Perper, Laura Wandner, Julia Wessel, and Jessica Vick. 2009. Disparities in Early Learning and Development: Lessons from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). Child Trends. <http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/2009-52DisparitiesEExecSumm.pdf>

² Isaacs, Julia B. 2012. Starting School at a Disadvantage: The School Readiness of Poor Children. Brookings Institute Center on Children and Families. http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/3/19%20school%20disadvantage%20isaacs/0319_school_disadvantage_isaacs.pdf.

³ Common Core State Standards Initiative. Accessed at <http://www.corestandards.org/>

⁴ Education Commission of the States. Kindergarten Online Database. Accessed at http://www.ecs.org/html/educationIssues/Kindergarten/KDB_intro_SF.asp

⁵ Current Population Survey. 2012. CPS October 2012 – Detailed Tables. Table 3. Nursery and Primary School Enrollment of People 3 to 6 Years Old, by Control of School, Attendance Status, Age, Race, Hispanic Origin, Mother's Labor Force Status and Education, and Family income: October 2012. <http://www.census.gov/hhes/school/data/cps/2012/tables.html>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Garland, Sarah. 2010. State Funding Cuts Claim Another Victim: Full-Day Kindergarten. NJ Spotlight, July 23, 2010. Accessed at <http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/10/0722/1928/>; Miller, Barbara. 2013. School districts, state

balance budget on backs of children: Cuts in Kindergarten. The Patriot News.

http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/index.ssf/2013/08/kindergarten_district_cuts_2.html/.

⁸ Villegas, Malia. 2005. Full-Day Kindergarten: Expanding Learning Opportunities. WestEd.

http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/po-05-01.pdf.