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Arizona rolls out full-day kindergarten

Ray ParkerThe Arizona Republic
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Arizona kindergartners this year will do much more than learn about playtime and Play-Doh.

Armed with studies showing the importance of early education and the testimony of schools that have long been proving it, state education leaders are launching free, full-day kindergarten in all public schools.

In short, kindergarten has become the new first grade.

"Expectations have risen for children at all grade levels, including kindergarten," said Sascha Mitchell Kay, an assistant professor in early-childhood education at Arizona State University.

Many Valley districts have scrambled this past year to prepare for the full-day learning that's been a huge draw for parents - saving households more than the \$2,000 a year that some districts once charged.

In late June 2006, less than two months before the school year, state lawmakers announced a plan to pump \$160 million over two years into all-day kindergarten.

But classroom space remained an obstacle for growing school systems, so most districts had to wait until this fall to offer all-day learning to all students.

The Valley's largest district, Mesa Public Schools, could offer the program at many schools except overcrowded Salk Elementary, where a new \$1 million classroom building will open Aug. 13.

"We had no space at all," Salk Principal Karla Carlson said.

Kindergarten used to be mostly about painting and playtime. But that has changed largely because of full-day classes, which have swept the nation's public schools in the past 20 years, stretching the instructional day from 2 1/2 to six hours.

The new kindergarten came about in part because of societal changes, such as busy two-income families, along with a sense that youngsters in trouble need to be helped from Day 1.

Parents are often surprised with today's kindergarten curriculum, which requires that children learn reading fundamentals before starting the first grade.

"I've seen how hard it is to teach reading with the limited amount of time a half-day class offers," said Phoenix mom Carol Rose, who has five children from 4 to 19 years old. "By the time the teachers get the kids to settle down and focus, it's almost time for recess, and then the day is over."

And No Child Left Behind, with its emphasis on minority reading achievement, has put added pressure all the way down to kindergartners.

Expectations also will rise for kindergarten teachers, who will likely be required by the state to have early-childhood certification in 2009.

Across the nation, more school districts have moved to full-day kindergarten. In 1977, about 27 percent of kindergartners were in full-day programs, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. That jumped to 60 percent by 2001.

A few Arizona districts offered full-day classes before this upcoming school year.

Chandler Unified officials had less than a month from the time the Legislature approved the money to the start of the 2006-07 school year, which began on July 24 because of the district's modified calendar.

They quickly hired 35 more kindergarten teachers.

"In the end, we were able to offer full-day kindergarten at every school except one, where there were no empty classrooms available," Chandler Unified district spokesman Terry Locke said.

Most districts were not so fast.

The Deer Valley Unified District spent last year preparing and used more than half of its additional \$2.8 million in state money to build classrooms.

Full-day programs require twice as much space. Instead of teachers with 23 students in the morning and another 23 in the afternoon for the same classroom, there are 23 students per classroom.

Gilbert Public School officials discussed offering more all-day classes last year, but in the end, there were still waiting lists at many schools.

Peoria Unified offered full-day classes at seven of its 30 elementary schools last year, but this will mark the first year of full-day kindergarten for all of them.

Parents still will have the option of keeping their kindergartners in for only a half-day. But the benefits of the full-day classes are numerous, said Kristin Phelps, Peoria's administrator for K-12 curriculum:

- Students will get more personal attention from the teacher.
- They will be able to practice writing more and develop those skills more thoroughly.
- They will develop better social skills.
- Teachers can better integrate instruction for all subjects.
- Classes can make better use of school resources, such as libraries and art rooms.

Still, there are differing views on the issue.

Challenges for districts include monetary constraints, transportation issues, the need to ensure quality instruction and the question of whether 5-year-olds can handle being in school all day.

Chandler father David Harbster knows about the studies trumpeting all-day kindergarten but still prefers the half-day version for his children.

"Sitting in plastic chairs all day in a structured classroom is not my idea of meaningful nor productive learning experiences for very young children," he said.

Does all-day kindergarten improve reading skills?

No recent studies show how Arizona students are reading when they exit kindergarten. Still, Washington Elementary educators tested students enrolled in their full-day program, and they showed better reading skills than those exiting half-day classes.

Several national studies indicated that full-day kindergarten improved reading, especially for minority children and those learning English. But a recent Rand Corp. study said the nearly 8,000 students enrolled in all-day classes did not score higher in either math or reading when they were in the fifth grade compared with students who had not gone to all-day kindergarten.

Early-childhood experts say there are more things than just academics to consider.

"Despite these academic pressures, it is crucial that teachers continue to integrate social and emotional skills into the curriculum," ASU Assistant Professor Mitchell Kay said. "The research clearly shows the importance of teaching to the whole child," which includes social, emotional and physical development.

On a recent morning at Fulton Elementary in Chandler, kindergarten teacher Heather Newberry had her students read the daily lesson plan outlining the day's activities. One wall of the classroom has become the Word Wall, covered with key words that she will emphasize throughout all her lessons.

Her students took diagnostic tests that tell the teacher their level of literacy skills. In a small group, for example, Newberry could group a handful of students and show them *The Best Bug Parade*.

"I'd start with a 'picture walk' and have them make predictions about what words they think they'll be learning, in this case, those dealing with insects . . . and that way the lesson is put into context for them," said Newberry, who has a master's degree in curriculum.

Phoenix father Paul Jungel echoed many parents' sentiments about Arizona's new all-day classes.

He said, "The idea of all-day kindergarten has to be one of the best anyone has ever come up with."

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