

Full-Day Kindergarten: The Need for Quality

Because of the substantial impact on outcomes for children, states and school districts across the country are addressing issues surrounding early learning opportunities and school readiness for young children. Full-day kindergarten plays an important role in both. Colorado has made significant investments in full-day kindergarten as a means of providing high-quality education opportunities to young children, and better preparing them for success throughout their academic careers. There is a strong knowledge base in research and practice suggesting full-day kindergarten programs are more beneficial than half-day programs, and the benefit is most profound for low-income students.

Colorado has made a strong commitment to early learning opportunities through the Colorado Preschool Program (CPP) and, with House Bill 08-1388, a substantial investment in full-day kindergarten. CPP provides high-quality learning opportunities for preschool and kindergarten children who have the greatest social and economic need. As the Colorado Preschool Kindergarten Program (CPKP) shifts its full-day kindergarten slots to preschool, once again becoming the CPP, and CPKP standards are no longer required for full-day kindergarten, it is important for districts to consider the design and implementation of high-quality full-day kindergarten programs.

Full-day kindergarten is also a key element of the commitment Colorado Governor Bill Ritter has made to the development of a preschool through postsecondary, or P-20, education system. The governor-appointed P-20 Council is charged with considering options and providing recommendations aimed at improving educational opportunities for Colorado's children and easing the transitions between grades at the early childhood, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels. The P-20 Council's scope of work includes, but is not limited, to the expansion of early learning opportunities, reduction of the high school dropout rate, and improving transitions between secondary and postsecondary education through the development of learning standards and assessments designed to test on those standards.

Included in the focus on P-20 is an emphasis on preschool through 3rd grade, or P-3. In a P-3 system, standards, curriculum and instruction are aligned within and across grades from preschool through 3rd grade, and build on content covered in the previous school year. Components of a P-3 system include, but are not limited to:

- Voluntary full school-day/full school-year preschool;
- Required full school-day/full school-year kindergarten that builds on preschool experience;
- High quality early learning environments, including small class size and low student-teacher ratios, developmentally appropriate learning environments, and flexible classes that group children by learning readiness rather than age;
- High teacher quality where all teachers in preschool through 3rd grade classrooms possess a bachelors degree, meet state licensure requirements, and possess an early childhood endorsement; and

Benefits of Full-Day Kindergarten

A report from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) indicates children in full-day kindergarten programs spend more time engaged in valuable learning activities than children in half-day kindergarten programs. Results from empirical research suggest children in full-day kindergarten programs spend:

- 57 minutes per day in self-selected activities, as opposed to 32 minutes per day for half-day kindergarten students.¹
- 16 percent less time in large-group, teacher-directed activities, and seven percent more time in child-initiated learning activities than half-day kindergarten children.²

Research has shown that both self-selected and child-initiated activities have long-term benefits on children's learning by promoting cognitive and social-emotional development. Center-based and child-directed play time helps children develop vocabulary skills, increase cooperation with peers, practice handling conflict and develop positive approaches to learning.

¹ Jill Watson and Jerry West quoted in Debra J. Ackerman, W. Steven Barnett, and Kenneth B. Robin, *Making the Most of Kindergarten: Present Trends and Future Issues in the Provision of Full-Day Programs* (New Brunswick: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2005), 7.

² James Elicker and Sangeeta Mathur quoted in Ackerman et al.

Numerous research studies comparing the impact of full- and half-day kindergarten suggest full-day kindergarten has a positive impact on children in the kindergarten year and beyond:

- Children in full-day kindergarten programs tend to perform better on standardized achievement tests, both in kindergarten and in the years following. Children from full-day kindergarten programs also tend to have better grades in literacy, math, general learning skills, and behavior.³
- Children in full-day kindergarten programs gain 12.8 percent more than children in half-day programs on reading assessments between fall and spring.⁴
- Children in full-day kindergarten programs gain 10.3 percent more than children in half-day programs on math assessments between fall and spring.⁵
- Children in full-day kindergarten programs have lower grade retention and special education referral rates than half-day kindergarten.⁶
- In some cases, children in full-day kindergarten programs have better attendance in kindergarten and into primary grades than half-day kindergarten.⁷

Research is clear that the benefits of full-day kindergarten have a greater impact on children in at-risk families. With an increasing percentage of Colorado children living in poverty, and who have all adults living in the household in the workforce, full-day kindergarten becomes even more valuable as a tool to improve school readiness and achievement. Full-day kindergarten can provide high-quality educational opportunities, as well as child-care services that otherwise may be unavailable to at-risk children.

Full-Day Kindergarten Quality Program Standards

Accompanying the need for full-day kindergarten are program quality standards that ensure full-day kindergarten programs are effectively using the additional time. Programs must include:

- Limited class sizes with low student-teacher ratios. Many studies suggest the student-teacher ratio in full-day classes should be 15 to 1, with an instructional assistant present in the classroom.
- Developmentally appropriate activities and learning materials, including a focus on social skill development and play-based curriculum. Research has shown that a play-based curriculum is an effective tool in developing a child's cognitive, physical, and social understanding.
- Flexible classrooms that address individual learning needs and account for a wide range of student skill levels.
- Appropriate teacher professional development focused on skills related to best practices in early childhood education. To ensure quality instruction, ideally full-day kindergarten instructors would have a valid teaching license along with an early childhood endorsement or credential.

There is a significant difference in achievement of children in full-day kindergarten programs with the CPKP quality standards as opposed to programs without the CPKP quality standards. In 2005, the Pueblo City School District implemented its own full-day kindergarten program without the CPKP quality standards in five district elementary schools. In 2006, Pueblo City was awarded CPKP funding for its full-day kindergarten program, thus requiring them to make programmatic changes to comply with quality standards. The chart on the next page displays programmatic changes resulting from the introduction of quality program standards to Pueblo's full-day kindergarten program.

³ John Cryan et al quoted in Ackerman et al.

⁴ NCES Early Childhood Longitudinal Study

⁵ NCES

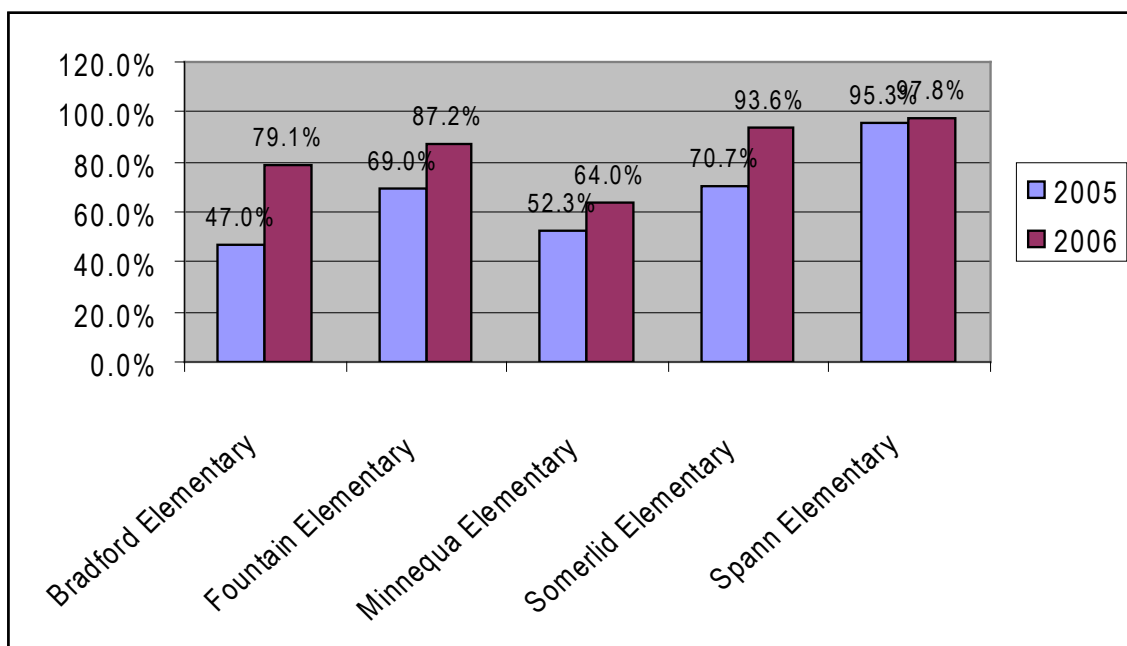
⁶ John Cryan et al quoted in Ackerman et al.

⁷ Ronald H. Nieman and Joseph F. Gastright quoted in Plucker et al., *The Effects of Full-Day Versus Half-Day Kindergarten: Review and Analysis of National and Indiana Data* (Indianapolis: Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, 2004), 6.

2005 Full-Day Kindergarten Program	2006 CPKP Full-Day Kindergarten Program
No limit on class size.	Class size limited to 15.
No instructional assistant support.	Instructional assistant added to each classroom.
All schools provided a minimum of 60 minutes of Guided Reading Groups and Literacy Centers. Only one rotation was teacher-directed and two rotations had to be independent due to the lack of additional instructional support in the classroom.	Literacy blocks were still devoted to guided Reading Groups and Literacy Centers but now included one rotation that was teacher-directed, another rotation that was lead by an instructional assistant and only one rotation that was independent.
Instruction was mostly direct, whole group.	Developmentally appropriate curriculum components were added including center-based play time which helped students develop vocabulary skills, increase cooperation with peers, practice handling conflict, and use higher level thinking skills and multiple intelligences. Multiple intelligences are the characteristics that make up the cognitive profile of a child, including linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, musical intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence, and naturalist intelligence.
District-wide kindergarten professional development was provided to teachers once a month.	Additional professional development was provided to both teachers and instructional aides on supporting language development, problem-solving skills within the play centers, and best practices in early childhood.

Source: Colorado Department of Education, *Colorado Preschool & Kindergarten Program 2008 Legislative Report*, p. 11.

Each of the five full-day kindergarten programs experienced an increase in achievement after the introduction of program quality standards. The chart below displays the percentage of students achieving “Benchmark” on the spring Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment before and after program standards were implemented.



Source: Colorado Department of Education, *Colorado Preschool & Kindergarten Program 2008 Legislative Report*, p. 11



Full-Day Kindergarten: Considerations for School Boards and Administrators

As districts begin the process of designing and implementing full-day kindergarten, there are both school board policy and administrative considerations to ensure program feasibility, quality and access. The following questions provide a starting point for conversations among school boards, district staffs and communities about quality full-day kindergarten.

- Will the district's full-day kindergarten program financially or physically crowd out the district's capacity to run or contract out preschool programs?
- How is the district involved in CPP?
- What is the vision for how full-day kindergarten fits within a preschool through 3rd grade (P-3) alignment? How will it bridge preschool and 1st grade?
- Will the board establish a policy for P-3 alignment?
- What are the district's current quality standards for kindergarten (half-day and full-day) outside of CPP that cover teacher qualifications, curriculum, and learning environment? How can the standards be improved to ensure quality?
- If the district does not have quality standards, what is the plan to establish them?
- Who in the district makes decisions about identifying children eligible for full-day kindergarten and preschool, and obtaining state funds for these programs? What criteria is used to make these decisions?
- How will full-day kindergarten slots be targeted if there is not sufficient capacity to meet the entire need?
 - Will the district first ensure that every child attending preschool through CPP is able to participate in full-day kindergarten?
 - How will the district allocate slots for the program beyond CPP students?
 - How will the district determine which children receive full-day kindergarten and which receive half-day kindergarten, if full-day kindergarten is not targeted to CPP students first?

With the benefits of quality, full-day kindergarten widely documented and support for these programs at the highest levels, it is an exciting time for communities to move forward to ensure their children have access to early learning experiences that will benefit them for a lifetime.

