

All-day kindergarten boosts reading [US-MD] ^[1]

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Children from low-income or immigrant families who attended full-day kindergarten in Montgomery County last year did significantly better than their counterparts in half-day classes, according to the results of a year-long literacy study the school district released yesterday.

The study of 7,849 kindergartners found that 71 percent of those "high-risk" students who spent all day in class mastered reading fundamentals by the end of the year, as opposed to 54 percent of those enrolled half day.

Overall, 80 percent of Montgomery's kindergarten students mastered those skills, and a full 69 percent were reading basic texts by spring, the study said.

School Superintendent Jerry D. Weast said the results validated reforms he has instituted to close the achievement gap separating the county's affluent students from those burdened by poverty and language problems.

In addition to the all-day programs, now in 34 schools, Weast has emphasized smaller classes in the earliest grades, a more academic curriculum and extensive kindergarten teacher training -- at a cost of \$9 million over two years.

"I couldn't be happier than I am today," Weast said. "For the last two years, we've had to hear, 'Look, we're pouring a lot of money into this. Will it work?' I can tell you it will work."

Without comparative data from previous years, though, the study could not assess how much any one of the initiatives, beyond all-day kindergarten, influenced the performance of kindergarten students.

The extensive study could prove a boon for state lawmakers and educators who hope to mandate all-day kindergarten.

"Your own county has provided us with incredible ammunition for the next session of the General Assembly," Nancy S. Grasmick, the Maryland state superintendent of schools, said at a news conference yesterday.

Already, 33 percent of the state's students attend all-day kindergarten, including every Prince George's County student. In the District, all schools have the full-day programs; 37 of Fairfax County's 132 elementary schools offer it.

This year, Maryland Gov. Parris N. Glendening (D) declined to fund a \$60 million proposal for statewide all-day kindergarten, saying it was too expensive and too controversial. Instead, he approved \$19 million in discretionary funding for early childhood education.

State Del. Mark K. Shriver (D-Montgomery) said yesterday that he intends to introduce an all-day kindergarten measure in the General Assembly for the third time.

But in some aspects, the Montgomery study bolsters arguments from the program's critics: The results showed that the longer school day had little impact on students who are not considered low-income or poor English speakers. Indeed, 89 percent of regular, half-day kindergartners learned their reading fundamentals, compared with 91 percent of full-day students.

That is not surprising, said David Elkind, a professor of child development at Tufts University.

"Full-day kindergarten is a day-care initiative, not an academic initiative," Elkind said. Many poorer students may come from homes or day-care centers where they had little access to educational toys or books.

"When a child who comes from a home already rich in those things, it's not going to make much of a difference, but that child who doesn't, that extra time does help," Elkind said.

The study found that 80 percent of all Montgomery County kindergarten students achieved at least what officials called "foundational reading skills" by the end of the school year.

That doesn't mean actual reading, but rather a student's knowledge of individual letters, "print concepts" such as punctuation and letter-sound relationships as well as an ability to recognize certain words on sight.

Angela Bisogno, 40, a second-year teacher at Glen Haven Elementary School, said that her whole kindergarten class of 15 students, including five who spoke English as a second language, were reading by the end of the school year after going through the literacy program, which emphasizes reading in small groups.

That was a far cry, she said, from her experience teaching in a private school in Long Island for 15 years, where only a third of her kindergarten students learned to read by the end of the year.

Students who had been in the federal Head Start program also did better in all-day kindergarten, the study said. The study also showed that 4-year-olds entering kindergarten lag behind 5-year olds.

Weast said that he hopes to expand the all-day kindergarten into 57 of the county's elementary schools that serve a large number of low-income students and non-English speakers.

Michelle Turner, the president of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs, has a daughter who is in first grade and participated in the study at Glen Haven Elementary last year. Turner said that she was impressed when her daughter left kindergarten reading at a third-grade level.

But, she said, the schools need to continue to do more for the 30 percent of the children who were not helped by the new kindergarten program.

"We need more all-day kindergarten programs, continued teacher training and after-school support that would benefit these children, like tutoring programs and homework clubs," Turner said.

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