

The Washington Post

Fairfax County may cut back full-day kindergarten

By Michael Alison Chandler
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More than a decade after the Fairfax School Board decided to bring full-day kindergarten to the county's 139 elementary schools, nearly a third of them are still waiting for the longer school day. Progress has sputtered and stalled in recent years as the economy soured, and now the board might reverse course.

Fairfax Superintendent Jack D. Dale will unveil a budget proposal for the region's largest school system Jan. 7. An early list of potential cuts compiled by school officials this fall shows that rolling back full-day kindergarten, from 101 schools to 32 that serve the county's poorest communities, could save \$13 million and help bridge a \$176 million shortfall.

School Board member Tessie Wilson (Braddock) said she recalls discussion of three- and five-year plans to bring full-day kindergarten to the entire county. "Now it's no plan," she said. "We may go in the opposite direction.

"We are in a situation where we can't continue everything. Everything

needs to be looked at."

It's a troubling proposition for many parents who have come to expect a rigorous academic experience for their children's first year of school and who are likely to face child-care dilemmas if cuts are made.

Scott Strzinek said his wife's ability to go back to work next year will hinge on the board's decision on kindergarten. His daughter excelled in the full-day kindergarten program at Keene Mill Elementary School in Springfield last year.

"She came home smart and tired every day," he said. A shorter program next year would be "detrimental" for his 4-year-old son, Strzinek said. "This is the foundation of his education."

Shortening the day for kindergartners in Fairfax schools would heighten early education disparity in a region where full-day kindergarten has become the norm. The

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District and Maryland require full-day kindergarten in all schools, and only a handful of Virginia school systems, including Fairfax and Loudoun counties, do not offer full-day programs to all students.

The movement toward a longer kindergarten day has taken hold nationally over the past two decades, fueled in part by research that shows that the extra hours help students socially and academically. A majority of kindergarten students in the United States go to school all day, up from about a quarter 30 years ago, according to federal data.

Schools use the extra time to deepen lessons in literacy and math and to offer more playtime or music and art enrichment. Students' reading ability has risen dramatically by the end of kindergarten in the many school systems, including Montgomery County's, that have moved from half- to full-day programs in the past decade.

The costs for a longer program come in bricks and mortar for new classrooms and in staffing. Some public school systems in other parts of the country charge families a fee for full-day kindergarten.

Difficult budget deliberations are likely to cause many school systems to reexamine plans to extend kindergarten hours. But policy analysts say that funding for early

childhood education initiatives has largely been protected in recent years because the benefits of a strong start include higher graduation rates and greater academic success.

"The public understands that this is a very wise investment for the short and long term," said Robert C. Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia.

Research shows that students living in poverty achieve the greatest academic and social gains from full-day kindergarten. Fairfax's approach of giving highest priority to poorer students is not unusual.

In Loudoun, one of the wealthiest jurisdictions in the nation, only eight of 51 elementary schools offer full-day kindergarten, and only to children

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considered at risk.

School Board member Priscilla B. Godfrey (Blue Ridge) said that many well-educated parents in the county have provided a strong academic start for their children but that school officials are eager to expand full-day kindergarten when the economy recovers.

"We are just constantly comparing ourselves with other school districts and bemoaning the fact that it's not financially feasible," Godfrey said.

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