

Centennial, Hatboro-Horsham study merits of full-day kindergarten

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer | Posted: Monday, February 1, 2016 5:00 am

Two area school districts, Centennial and Hatboro-Horsham, are considering implementing full-day kindergarten.

Hatboro-Horsham recently launched a survey to determine interest from parents and other district residents about whether to increase the half-day format in its five elementary schools.

Centennial has created a task force to analyze the pros and cons of a full-day program. The group, which includes members of the district's administration, teachers, and a school board and community member, is scheduled to meet four times this month before reporting back to the school board's education committee on Feb. 22.

"I think this is something really worth looking at," said Chuck Kleinschmidt, president of the Centennial School Board. "We're in the middle of planning a budget (for 2016-17) so we want to move quickly to get updated information so we can make an intelligent decision."

Of Bucks County's 13 school districts, six have full-day kindergarten — Bensalem, Bristol Borough, Bristol Township, Neshaminy, New Hope-Solebury and Pennsbury.

Districts nearby Hatboro-Horsham in Montgomery County have the full-day program. They include Abington, Cheltenham, Jenkintown, Lower Moreland, Upper Dublin, Upper Moreland and Wissahickon.

"We've looked at this before, early in the 2000s," said Curtis Griffin, Hatboro-Horsham superintendent. "It's one of those issues we revisit."

In addition to the survey, which Griffin said will help the district determine its next steps, he said Monica Taylor, the district's assistant superintendent, is chairing a steering committee to research the topic.

One of the reasons Hatboro-Horsham didn't move forward with full-day kindergarten, he said, was a lack of space in its elementary schools. With a new Hallowell Elementary School scheduled to open later this year, and renovations planned for schools, room is no longer a problem.

"Space is not an issue," he said. "Is it academically valuable and academically feasible? Research has



Apply on textbook

shown that with certain populations there's a clear gain with all-day kindergarten. But just extending the time of day doesn't mean you'll achieve academic growth.

"So the super question is would all-day kindergarten be a benefit to our student population. That's what we're seeking to explore."

Dana Morgan, Centennial's newest school board member and the mother of three young children, advocated for the idea during a December meeting of the district's education committee.

"I'm a very firm believer in it," she said, adding that it would have "such an impact on young, fertile minds."

The district had both one-year and two-year full-day programs in the 1980s, Kleinschmidt said. He believes cost played a role in eventually shifting to half-day.

Indeed, fellow director Jane Schrader Lynch said restarting the program "has always boiled down to money. ... In our last study it was \$1 million and we couldn't afford it. And it just died at that point."

David Baugh, Centennial's superintendent, called full-day kindergarten "a passion of mine."

However, during his time with Bensalem, where he worked as a superintendent, the district had a lottery to gain entry to the full-day program. He called the practice "one of the cruelest things I've had to implement in my life. When I'm pulling the pingpong balls and watching sad parent after sad parent walk out the door, it became a very bittersweet moment for me.

"It was a clear opportunity for kids who made it through the lottery, and it was a clear door-shutting for many families. ... In my professional estimate, it was one of the more horrific things I've ever had to participate in. I was incredibly happy when the school board voted to go to universal full-day kindergarten."

Research, according to Baugh, shows that by fourth or fifth grade it's not apparent what student had full- or half-day kindergarten. But by the time they graduate, the full-day students "had higher graduation rates, more success in college," he said. "They had lower divorce rates, lower criminal rates. So in an investment in education, I think it's a huge investment in the education of our students, and I think it's a huge boon."