

## Many factors go into decision to have full-day kindergarten

By GEMA MARIA DUARTE Staff writer | Posted: Thursday, August 14, 2014 12:15 am

No doubt about it, educators agree, early childhood education is fundamental. Still, Pennsylvania is one of just six states that don't mandate kindergarten.

"It's not a requirement in the law. It's a decision of each local school district," Tim Eller, press secretary for the Pennsylvania Department of Education, said Wednesday.

While all districts in Lower Bucks County offer at least half-day kindergarten, funding it is an issue.



State Rep. Brendan Boyle, of Philadelphia, introduced a bill earlier this year that would have mandated and funded kindergarten. The proposal went nowhere in the most recent legislative session, so it will have to be introduced again before it can move forward.

The Pennsylvania Association for the Education for Young Children says it doesn't believe there isn't enough money to pay for kindergarten. It's about having priorities, association members have said. And the group says funding kindergarten, and even pre-K, is essential to the children of Pennsylvania.

PennAEYC officials said 90 percent of a child's brain growth happens in the first five years, so access to high quality pre-K and kindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds is needed. Providing early childhood education would reduce special education placement, grade repetition, dropouts and crime rates, they said.

State Sen. Stewart Greenleaf, R-12, of Upper Moreland, is behind the cause "100 percent."

He's part of a nonpartisan caucus, created earlier this year in Harrisburg to target at-risk youths. He said he strongly believes that intervening in children's lives, whether they're at risk or not, can only benefit society and improve children's chances of success later in life.

As the law stands now, Pennsylvania requires children to be enrolled in school at 8 years old.

That's way too late, some say.

"Kindergarten is vital to a child's social and emotional development as well as their future success," said Tracy Weaver, outreach coordinator for PennAEYC. "While public and private schools have differences, all programs instill in children the same basic life skills. Children learn the rules, routines and structure of school, which helps them to be more prepared to focus on academic subjects as they progress through school."

But until the state makes a change, school districts are left to decide for themselves whether to offer kindergarten, how long classes should run, and how to fund the programs.

Five of the eight Lower Bucks County public school districts offer full-day kindergarten. The other three -- Centennial, Council Rock and Morrisville -- deliver half-day classes.

The decision to offer a full-day or half-day program is based on a number of factors, school administrators said. They include: current and projected student enrollment, classroom space, birthrate forecasts, the cost for teacher salaries and benefits, plus student transportation.

There's no one formula for funding a kindergarten program, they said. Some districts seek grants, but they're not permanent. And state funding can be inconsistent.

If state money becomes available for a full-day program, Morrisville will jump on board, school officials said. In fact, the district went from full-day to half-day classes in the 2012-13 school year because of budget constraints.

When that occurred, Morrisville school officials tried to use educational programs paid for by outside sources, such as 21st Century, to fill in the second half of the day's program, school board member Wanda Kartal said.

Morrisville is not alone in offering half-day kindergarten.

“(Council Rock) has no immediate plans to implement full-day kindergarten. One of the planning committee recommendations is to expand to full-day kindergarten, but that has yet to be explored by the board of school directors. To implement a full-day kindergarten program, we would need additional classroom space and additional teaching staff,” said Joy McClendon, director of elementary education and curriculum services.

Meanwhile, Pennsbury is going from half-day to full-day kindergarten classes in all elementary schools this fall.

Before making the decision in June, Pennsbury researched the feasibility of the full-day program, officials said.

“Adding additional classrooms for kindergarten is possible, based on the number of currently available classrooms and the number of classroom reductions anticipated because of the decline in grade 1-5 enrollments,” according to the district’s synopsis of the study.

Additionally, enrollment projections for next fall’s kindergarten are precipitously lower than the current kindergarten class. Plus, the district's birth rate has declined.

“There were 695 births to Pennsbury residents from when the current kindergarten class was born,” according to the district's findings. “This resulted in an enrollment of 588 kindergartners in 2013-14. For 2014-15 kindergarten enrollments, there were only 515 births. This leads us to conclude that even if every age eligible kindergartner were to attend Pennsbury in 2014, our enrollment would still be far less than our current class enrollment.”

Pennsbury estimates the cost to implement a full-day program will be about \$770,000, which includes salaries and benefits, technology, instructional materials and other miscellaneous expenses, officials said.

The extra half day will be used to focus on math and literacy. Additionally, social skills, speech and language, and addressing developmental issues will all be better accommodated with the extended hours, district officials said.

PennAEYC's Weaver couldn't agree more.

“One of the biggest benefits is that children who spend time in kindergarten, and particularly full-day kindergarten, tend to have fewer needs for special education services,” she said. “Schools know that the cost of special education is very high and it is typically less expensive to provide kindergarten than special education. Furthermore, by mitigating behavioral problems when children are young, it can reduce future special education costs.”

The Bristol Borough School District is on the same page as Pennsbury. It will also implement a full-day program in the fall, after offering half-day classes for the past two years because of budget limitations.

Superintendent Tom Shaffer said the advantages of full-day kindergarten are “significant,” adding that educators have noticed that those who attended the half-day program had more catching up to do in first grade math and reading than those who went to full-day kindergarten.

To afford full-day classes this year, the district reorganized some special education programs to save money and will also use a \$169,000 state grant, Shaffer said. So far, 64 students have enrolled, and three teachers are set to teach them.

In nearby Bristol Township, the district spent about \$2 million last year to provide full-day kindergarten to 21 classes throughout its nine elementary schools. The investment is worth every penny, according to Superintendent Samuel Lee.

“It helps us early in students’ tenures to identify educational challenges and to impart structure,” he said. “It’s money well spent.”

Bensalem Superintendent David Baugh said, "there are an incredible number of benefits to full-day kindergarten," including better school readiness, increased socialization, and higher math, science and reading scores.

“We anticipate higher academic numbers for students and it helps us become competitive with parochial and charter schools,” he said of the kindergarten program, which will be in its third year this fall.

While educators agree on the importance of kindergarten, the national debate continues on the benefits of half-day instruction versus full-day classes. Some educators argue that a half day works better for younger students because children have shorter attention spans and interests. On the other side, educators say more time in the classroom allows the development of social and educational skills and

helps kids who may be at risk.

“Some educators say there's no difference,” Weaver said. “Some districts, because of funding, have moved from full day to half day. Children who attend a full-day kindergarten program learn more in reading and math over the course of a year because they have twice the instruction time and more learning activities. Students participating in a full-day program also have increased time and consistent opportunities to practice their social skills, which are necessary to a student's success.”