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RESEARCH BRIEF ON FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN

The past decade has seen increased national discussion about the need for and impact of offering full-day kindergarten. The transition in many states from half-day to full-day kindergarten has been motivated by a number of factors, such as: an increase in the number of families where both parents, or the only parent, work full time; an increase in the number of children with some baseline educational experience as a result of preschool or day care; evidence that quality early childhood programs, including full-day kindergarten, contribute to later school success; greater emphasis on standards and accountability in the kindergarten curriculum; an increase in the number of students with limited English language skills; and greater numbers of educationally and economically disadvantaged students.

There is a variety of considerations for those states implementing full-day kindergarten.

DISTRICT PARTICIPATION

Should district participation be required? States have taken different approaches to this question. Some require that full-day kindergarten be provided by districts in the traditional classroom setting; others allow districts to apply for waivers to providing full-day kindergarten. Some states offer the curriculum in nontraditional ways, such as through cooperation with day care providers or in community-based settings with parents involved in the delivery of the curriculum. According to Education Commission of the States (ECS), as of March 2014, 11 states required school districts to offer full-day kindergarten and 34 states required districts

to offer half-day kindergarten. Nevada has joined those states with a full-day requirement, which will be fully implemented in School Year 2016–2017.

ADMISSION ASSESSMENT

Recent years have seen a proliferation of Kindergarten Entrance Assessments (KEA) required by state statute, which are used to evaluate whether a student is prepared for the demands of kindergarten. Assessments may include language and literacy development, cognition and general knowledge, social and emotional development, and motor skills. As of late 2014, there were 29 states with mandatory KEAs. In 2013, the Nevada Legislature enacted Senate Bill 486 (Chapter 522, *Statutes of Nevada*) to pilot a KEA. The assessment tool that was piloted proved burdensome to use, so an appropriate tool is still being sought.

THE LENGTH OF THE SCHOOL DAY

The school day length in the traditional kindergarten program has been a half-day of attendance ranging between two and three hours per day. This scheduling allows two groups of students, taught by the same teacher, to use the same classroom and materials in a single day. Full-day kindergarten programs are typically five to six hours in length. In some programs, all kindergarten students attend for a full day for the entire school year. In other programs, only those students who have demonstrated a need for extra instruction participate in the full-day program; the remaining students are enrolled in a half-day program.

Policymakers should consider whether the required hours:

- Provide sufficient learning time for students to be well prepared for first grade;
- Are aligned to the hours required in pre-K and first grade classrooms; and
- Are equitably offered between districts and schools.

ATTENDANCE REQUIREMENT

According to ECS, as of March 2014, only seven states required that school districts offer full-day kindergarten while also requiring that students attend kindergarten. Nevada allows a parent to opt a child out of kindergarten. However, if a child is assessed at age seven to be developmentally unprepared for first grade, that child must attend kindergarten.

FUNDING

State structures for the funding of kindergarten can create either an incentive or a disincentive for school districts to offer full-day kindergarten. Some states provide an incentive by funding full-day kindergarten at a higher level than is provided for half-day kindergarten. Some also provide funding for full-day kindergarten that is equal to or greater than the amount funded for the first grade, making the incentive greater. Nevada is among the states offering such a funding incentive.

On the other hand, some states provide a disincentive to school districts for full-day kindergarten by providing no difference in funding for full- and half-day programs.

HOW TO ENSURE QUALITY OF INSTRUCTION

Research indicates the impact of early childhood education can be mixed, and the most important factor affecting impact is the quality of the instruction provided. The developmental needs of students in pre-K through third grade are unique to that age group and specialized training is needed for teachers to fully understand how young children learn and to gain the skills needed to provide developmentally appropriate instruction. Unfortunately, teachers lacking the critical knowledge or skills for teaching young children are often assigned to kindergarten classrooms.

Teacher preparation programs ideally should offer specialty education for those planning to work in the early grades. Teacher licensure should be specific to the early grades in order to ensure teachers possess the skills necessary to teach early literacy and mathematics, and to ensure they have a deep understanding of the developmental needs of young children. Currently, Nevada offers an early childhood license, covering birth through second grade. However, a teacher with a general K–8 license can also teach in the early grades.

In addition to teacher preparation and certification, an essential element to ensuring high-quality instruction is ongoing, effective professional development that is specifically designed for early childhood education.

NEVADA'S HISTORY

State-funded, full-day kindergarten was approved for the first time by the Nevada Legislature in 2005. A school district was not required to offer full-day kindergarten, and a family could request that their child attend for less than a full day.

Through the passage of Assembly Bill 4 (Chapter 3, *Statutes of Nevada 2005, 22nd Special Session*), the Legislature appropriated \$22 million from the State General Fund to provide full-day kindergarten in certain schools during School Year 2006–2007. These funds were utilized to implement full-day kindergarten in 114 at-risk schools across the State. These schools were determined to be at risk when their count of students receiving free and reduced price lunch was at least 55.1 percent of student enrollment.

The 2007 Nevada Legislature planned to expand full-day kindergarten. However, the expansion was eliminated in the first round of budget cuts in late 2007. The 2009 and 2011 Legislatures essentially maintained level funding for the program. During the 2013 Session, with the economy improving, program funding was effectively doubled to nearly \$50 million per year.

Finally, in 2015, the Legislature approved the Governor's proposal to expand full-day kindergarten statewide over the 2015–2017 Biennium. Program funding is \$75 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 and \$96 million in FY 2017, with an additional \$2 million over the biennium to fund portable classrooms.

