



FOUNDATION FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

**PreK-3rd:
Putting Full-Day
Kindergarten
in the Middle**

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PreK-3rd
Policy to Action Brief

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Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK) deserves far greater attention than it has generally received in the perennial debates about how to transform education.

At present, several major national reform efforts are underway—including Race to the Top, the Common Core State Standards Initiative, and reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—that grapple with how best to reform K-12 education.

There is also a growing movement around the country to strengthen the PreK-3rd Grade continuum as the essential foundation for lifelong learning (Guernsey & Mead, 2010). In all of these policy discussions, Kindergarten is at the margins. This brief presents both rationales and recommendations for moving FDK from the margins to the middle of the education reform debate.



Full-Day as the New Standard for Kindergarten

While Kindergarten's history reflects a tradition of half-day programming (Beatty, 1997), fundamental and far-reaching changes in American society and in education require that full-day become the new standard for Kindergarten. Just as middle school, high school, and higher education have evolved over time in response to the nation's changing demographics and economic requirements, so, too, must the early years of education. The prominent expansion of state-funded PreKindergarten programs over the past two decades represents one major shift in how the American education system is conceptualized.

Making full-day/full-week the new standard for Kindergarten should be another shift, ensuring that the Kindergarten schedule is similar to that of First Grade and beyond. Further, with increasing numbers of children attending Full-Day PreK, the shift to FDK will also ensure both continuity and a consistent schedule for children and their families.

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Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K), as well as research from school-district-based studies, show that children who participated in full-day programs made statistically significant gains in early reading skills by the end of the Kindergarten year when compared to their peers who attended only a half-day program (Lash, Bae, Barrat, Burr & Fong, 2008). Some of these studies also show

a relationship between attendance in FDK and higher levels of early math skills (Cannon, Jacknowitz & Painter, 2006; Walston & West, 2004).

These gains in both reading and math achievement by children in FDK close the achievement gap between the highest- and lowest-performing students by nearly one-third in reading and by one-fourth in math (Walston & West, 2004). Particularly relevant given the changing demographics of the school-age population in the United States, research shows that FDK is especially beneficial for children who are Second Language Learners (Hall-Kenyon, Bingham & Korth, 2009).

Beyond cognitive skills related to reading and math, FDK also contributes to children's development of other essential learning skills that support social competence and creative problem-solving. Full-day programs allow teachers more time for both formal and informal instruction, as well as more flexibility to modify the curriculum to meet students' needs and interests. FDK provides more time for children to play and learn experientially, encouraging not only their cognitive development, but also their physical and social-emotional development (Guarino, Hamilton, Lockwood, Rathbun & Germino-Hausken, 2006).

The majority of parents prefer FDK for their children, as evidenced by the fact that the majority of Kindergartners (more than 65 percent) now attend full-day programs (Shin, 2005). Anecdotal evidence and media stories report that parents' support for FDK is two-fold: (1) they recognize the educational value of a full-school-day, and (2) given the prevalence of employed parents across all socio-economic categories, they depend on the full day to stabilize children's daily schedules, reducing the need to find child care or other arrangements for nonschool hours. In some cities, when FDK registration opens, parents camp out overnight to attempt to secure spots for their children.

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Because of the benefits to both children and families, full-day should become the new standard for Kindergarten in education reform.



Kindergarten at the Margins of K-12

Given these advantages of Full-Day Kindergarten, it is particularly disheartening that Kindergarten remains at the margins of most education reform efforts. The “K-12” label is misleading: Kindergarten does not hold the same standing, funding, or support as Grades One to 12.

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While every school district in the country guarantees access to Grades One to 12 to all students, there are still six states (Alaska, Idaho, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, and Pennsylvania) that do not require school districts to provide even a half-day of Kindergarten. Table 1 (available on the FCD web site) provides a 50-state overview of state-level policies related to Kindergarten (Education Commission of the States, 2005 update; 2009 update, with additional updates by Kauerz). Only 16 states require students to attend even a half-day of Kindergarten.

When it comes to FDK, even fewer guarantees exist for children. Only 12 states require school districts to provide FDK; two of them (Louisiana and West Virginia) require children to attend FDK. Along with the mandated provision, 11 of these 12 states provide funding for FDK at a level that is equivalent to the amount of funding provided for First Grade (Delaware is the exception). Twenty-one additional states also fund FDK at a level equivalent to that of First Grade, but these states do not require school districts to offer FDK.

When states do not establish the expectation that FDK be an opportunity for all children (by requiring school districts to provide FDK and/or providing funds that are equivalent to those provided for First Grade), especially in tight budget times, FDK is often put on the chopping block as a means to save costs and balance budgets. While there is no comprehensive compilation of state budget plans related to FDK, in the current economic crisis, at least three states (Arizona, Colorado, and Kansas) have announced plans to reduce or eliminate funding for FDK.

The most dramatic withdrawal of state support is occurring in Arizona. Between 2005 and 2009, the Arizona legislature expanded its funding of FDK, providing funding to all school districts. In a striking and broad reversal in 2010, the legislature eliminated *all* state funding for FDK, even for the state’s poorest schools.

When states cannot or will not fund FDK, school districts face several options. First, they can undertake a local campaign to raise taxes, although this is not allowed in nine states (Griffith, 2004) and tax initiatives are a hard sell to the general public. Second, they can charge tuition to parents, thereby reducing the likelihood that

all families will be able to afford FDK. Further, Kindergarten tuition is not a tax-deductible expense, whether paid to a public or private school. Third, they can use categorical or grant-based funds—most of which are time-limited and, therefore, do not have long-term sustainability—to offer FDK to a limited number of students. Fourth, school districts can choose not to offer FDK at all.

None of these options is ideal. When the decision to offer FDK is left to individual district decision-making, local tax bases, or parents being charged tuition, it raises serious questions of educational inequities. The Ohio Supreme Court, for example, ruled in 2007 that school districts could not charge parents for FDK, and a similar 2008 ruling by Oregon’s Attorney General declared that school districts do not have authority under state law to collect tuition for FDK.

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Daily news stories across the country reveal that large and small districts alike are—or will be—reducing or altogether eliminating FDK programs. These cuts are especially troubling because they coincide with an unprecedented time during

which student achievement appears to be stagnating and the K-12 system is under intense scrutiny and pressure to increase student learning at each grade level. The 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly known as “the nation’s report card,” shows that American Fourth Graders’ proficiencies in reading and math are unchanged since 2007 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009a, 2009b). In reading, there have been only the slightest of gains since 1992.



The Impact of PreKindergarten Expansion on Kindergarten

Beyond the traditional K-12 education system, Full-Day Kindergarten takes on even greater importance when viewed vis-à-vis the unprecedented expansion of PreK programs for four-year-olds (and some three-year-olds) across the United States.

While Kindergarten once served as the “entry point” to formal, out-of-home, often full-day education for most young children, this is no longer the case. In 2000, an estimated 69 percent of the nation’s Kindergartners had attended some form of center-based preschool program (West, Denton & Germino-Hausken, 2000). With the rapid expansion of state-funded PreK over the past ten years, this number is likely higher today. FDK not only provides a familiar and consistent schedule to children accustomed to attending PreK, but also provides crucial opportunities for children to build upon their PreK experiences that sustain the development of their cognitive, social, and emotional skills.

Despite this, the importance of ensuring that PreK is followed by FDK seems to be missing in many state and school district policy decisions.

Despite this, the importance of ensuring that PreK is followed by FDK seems to be missing in many state and school district policy decisions. For example, of the ten states with the highest percentage of four-year olds enrolled in PreK (Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Boyd & Hustedt, 2008), only four (Georgia, Maryland, South Carolina, and West Virginia) guarantee children access to FDK and, by academic year 2011-2012, Oklahoma will also require school districts to offer FDK.

While universal PreK is a justifiably important policy priority, research has repeatedly shown that only one year of early childhood education is insufficient for sustaining children’s achievement gains (Magnuson, Ruhm & Waldfogel, 2007; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – Administration for Children and Families, 2010). To sustain the positive benefits children gain from attending PreK, FDK should be offered to all children.

Kindergarten as the Bridge

One promising approach to moving Full-Day Kindergarten from the margins to the middle of both K-12 and PreKindergarten policy discussions is the growing PreK-3rd movement (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005; Kauerz, 2006; Shore, 2009a). PreK-3rd relies on expanding and strengthening the presence of effective teachers and high-quality learning opportunities in *both* PreK *and* throughout the primary school years, Kindergarten through Third Grade. In PreK-3rd FDK is the “pivot” year, serving as the pedagogical bridge between PreK and the early elementary grades.

PreK-3rd represents the stretch of years that form the basis for children’s later and lifelong learning and success. The PreK-3rd years are when children acquire three types of skills and knowledge: (1) strong foundational cognitive skills, such as reading and early math; (2) social and emotional competence that enables children to interact constructively with both their peers and adults; and (3) patterns of engagement in school and learning. A high-quality FDK experience plays a central role in the PreK-3rd years.

The superintendent of Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools, Jerry Weast, talks about public education as a “value chain” where each grade adds some value to the eventual outcome of college- and career-readiness, but the whole is greater than the sum of the parts (Childress, Doyle & Thomas, 2009). Thinking about PreK-3rd education as a “value chain,” highlights the interconnectedness of, and the push/pull relationship between, each year. For example, high-quality FDK will *push* better-prepared and well-rounded learners into First Grade, compelling elementary schools to continually improve to meet students’ needs. At the same time, high-quality FDK helps to *pull* young learners who are eager and prepared to learn into its classrooms, thereby providing incentive for more and better PreK programs.

What Matters in Full-Day Kindergarten?

In general, these teachers are most effective when they are trained to understand—and prepared to put into practice their knowledge about—child development, diverse learning styles, social and emotional development, cultural diversity, successful teaching strategies, and engaging families.

To achieve the best outcomes, the quality of Full-Day Kindergarten matters. Consensus is emerging that the factors that have long-term impact on children's achievement include both the social interactions in classrooms and the quantity and quality of literacy and math instruction (Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts & Morrison, 2008). These variables relate to how much instruction occurs and in what setting, how teachers interact with children, and overall classroom qualities such as the emotional climate. Unfortunately, there is increasing evidence that the quality of elementary school classrooms, in general (Pianta et al., 2008), and of Kindergarten classrooms, specifically (Pianta, LaParo, Payne, Cox & Bradley, 2002), is widely variable at best.

Both instruction and social interactions rely largely on the skills, knowledge, and behaviors of teachers. A compelling body of evidence exists about the knowledge and skills that teachers of young children must possess (Kagan, Kauerz & Tarrant, 2008; Shore, 2009b). In general, these teachers are most effective when they are trained to understand—and prepared to put into practice their knowledge about—child development, diverse learning styles, social and emotional development, cultural diversity, successful teaching strategies, and engaging families. Unfortunately, the formal education and certification required of Kindergarten teachers, as well as the professional development provided to them, rarely reflect the research about how best to support young children's learning and development.

The National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators (2008) recommends that Kindergarten teachers, as well as teachers in First through Third Grades, hold certification specific to early childhood education. Only 14 states require Kindergarten teachers to hold an early care and education license (Fields & Mitchell, 2006). For the remaining 36 states, Kindergarten teachers must be licensed in elementary education, which covers Kindergarten through Sixth or Eighth Grade, but often neglects the principles and practices that are unique to children from age three to eight (PreK-3rd Grade).

In addition to state licensure, school district administrators can play important leadership roles in building comprehensive professional development systems that support PreK-3rd teachers and their efforts to create effective learning environments. There is an increasing amount of knowledge about what works in professional development (Childress, Doyle & Thomas, 2009; Elmore, 2002). Research shows that teachers who regularly participate in collaborative professional development positively impact child outcomes (Brown & Bogard, 2007).

High-quality FDK must move squarely to the middle of education reform and must become a non-negotiable year for PreK-3rd efforts. To move FDK from the margins to the middle of the PreK-3rd movement, changes are required across a range of policies. Accomplishing these changes will require leadership at national, state, school district, and community levels. The following recommendations include key strategies to be pursued.



Recommendation: Establish Full-Day Kindergarten as an integral part of 21st Century P-20 education systems.

Increasingly, states are framing education reform as P-20 (PreKindergarten through post-secondary) efforts. Simultaneously, school districts are becoming providers of PreK-12 education. FDK should become an expected and embedded grade in every state's and school district's education reform efforts. For children and their families, accessing FDK should be as predictable and easy as getting into now required First Grade, Fourth Grade, and Twelfth Grade. There should never be a question whether or not FDK will be provided. To accomplish this:

- **States should enact policies requiring school districts to offer Full-Day Kindergarten – and provide adequate funding to districts.** Written into state law as a mandatory part of the PreK-12 school system, FDK should be planned for and implemented just as are Grades One through 12. In addition, FDK should be integrated into states' school finance formulas, providing funds to school districts that are equal to or greater than the amount of funds provided for First through Twelfth Grades.
- Recognizing that achieving universal provision of Full-Day Kindergarten will not happen overnight, **policymakers at every level should include FDK as an explicit and primary component in all formal, comprehensive PreK-12 and P-20 education reform initiatives.** Major reform proposals are under debate across the country. In states, policymakers are crafting Race to the Top proposals, establishing Early Childhood Advisory Councils, planning to establish or expand PreK programs, and convening P-20 councils. At the national and federal level, policymakers are beginning the process to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and crafting Common Core State Standards. State and federal

policymakers can raise the bar on the importance of FDK by incorporating it as a central component of each of these comprehensive education and early childhood education reform agendas.

- Integrating Full-Day Kindergarten into state education funding formulas is also likely to take time. In the meantime, **the federal government should encourage school districts to use a portion of their federal Title I funds to support FDK.** The majority of federal funds for K-12 education comes from Title I of ESEA, known today as No Child Left Behind. More than 90 percent of the nation's approximately 16,000 school districts receive Title I funds (U.S. General Accounting Office [USGAO], 2000). Given the impact of FDK on student achievement, using Title I dollars to expand FDK would be a wise investment.
- To improve both policymakers' and researchers' ability to understand the effectiveness and influences of Full-Day Kindergarten, **state and federal policymakers should require school districts to collect and report data specific to FDK.** Currently, school districts do not consistently disaggregate Kindergarten data according to half-day and full-day programs. To align with data efforts for Grades One through 12, it is important to have enrollment, expenditure, attendance, and achievement data that are specific to FDK.

Recommendation: Improve the Quality of Full-Day Kindergarten.

As with all of education, quality matters. Regardless of whether FDK is targeted to only some children or, ideally, provided to all children, policy leaders can undertake efforts to ensure that FDK is of high quality. To make progress toward this:

- **States should require all Kindergarten (and First through Third Grade) teachers to hold a renewable certification/endorsement in early childhood education.** Such certification should include preparation in child development, diverse learning styles, social and emotional development, cultural diversity, effective teaching strategies, and family engagement.
- In addition to the formal licensure of Kindergarten teachers, **states and school districts should establish (and provide incentives for participation in) professional development systems, including joint professional development between Kindergarten teachers, the full array of early learning teachers (i.e., school-based PreK, center- and community-based child care, Head Start, family child care), and teachers in Grades One through Three.** This kind of collaborative professional development is one of the core components of PreK-3rd effectiveness (Childress et al., 2009; Sullivan-Dudzic, Gearns & Leavell 2010).
- To measure—and support the improvement of—classroom quality, **district and school administrators should assess the quality of Kindergarten (and First through Third Grade) classrooms using standardized, systematic method(s) that evaluate not only classroom structure and climate, but also the interactions between teachers and students.** These assessments provide useful information that informs day-to-day instruction and highlights broad areas of quality that can be addressed through professional development and/or policy reforms.

Conclusion

For too long, Kindergarten has been relegated to the margins of education reform. It is not only time for full-day to become the new standard for Kindergarten, but it is also time for Kindergarten to move from the margins to the middle of discussions about how to improve education systems and increase student achievement.

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The goal of ensuring that every American student is college- and career-ready requires greater attention to the early years of education that establish the foundations for learning. PreK-3rd provides just such attention. The years between PreKindergarten and Third Grade are when children acquire both the cognitive skills and the social and emotional dispositions that propel them to be competent and eager learners. Ensuring that high-quality Full-Day Kindergarten is an integral part of PreK-3rd efforts, providing a bridge between the early childhood and early elementary years, should be a top priority for every state and school district.

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Online PreK-3rd Resources

These key resources aim to inform policymakers, educators, researchers, and others about PreK-3rd issues. For more in-depth resources, visit our Resource Library web page (<http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/>) which houses all materials published by FCD and our grantees.

The Case for PreK-3rd

- Lisa Guernsey & Sara Mead, New America Foundation (2010). [A Next Social Contract for the Primary Years of Education](#)
- New School Foundation & Foundation for Child Development (2010). [PreKindergarten - 3rd Grade: A New Beginning for American Education](#) (Eight-minute video)
- New America Foundation (2009). [Fighting Fade-Out Through PreK-3rd Reform](#) (Seven-minute video)
- Rima Shore (2009). [The Case for Investing in PreK-3rd Education: Challenging Myths about School Reform](#)
- Foundation for Child Development (2008). [America's Vanishing Potential: The Case for PreK-3rd Education](#)
- Ruby Takanishi & Kristie Kauerz (2008). [PK Inclusion: Getting Serious About a P-16 Education System](#), *Phi Delta Kappan*
- Grantmakers for Education (GFE) (2007). [Making the Most of Our Investments: How PK-3 Alignment Can Close the Achievement Gap from the Start](#)

Financing PreK-3rd

- Rima Shore (2009). [PreK-3rd: What is the Price Tag?](#)
- Lawrence O. Picus, Allan Odden & Michael Goetz (2009). [An Evidence-Based Approach to Estimating the National and State Costs of PreK-3rd](#)

Implementing PreK-3rd

- Linda Sullivan-Dudzic, Donna K. Gearns, & Kelli Leavell (2010). [Making a Difference: 10 Essential Steps to Building a PreK-3 System](#)
- Stacey M. Childress, Denis P. Doyle & David A. Thomas (2009). [Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Montgomery County Public Schools](#)

Online PreK-3rd Resources

- Michael Sadowski (2006). [Core Knowledge for PK-3 Teaching: Ten Components of Effective Instruction](#)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAEYC) (2005). [Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do](#)

Teacher Preparation/Professional Development

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Leadership by Educators

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Federal Policy

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- Danielle Ewen & Hannah Matthews, Center for Law and Social Policy (2007). [Title I and Early Childhood Programs: A Look at Investments in the NCLB Era](#)

State Policy

- Superintendent of Public Instruction (2010). [Starting Strong in Washington State: Early Learning Lessons and Success Stories](#)
- Sara Mead (2009). [Education Reform Starts Early: Lessons from New Jersey's PreK-3rd Reform](#)
- Linda Jacobsen (2009). [On the Cusp in California: How PreK-3rd Strategies Could Improve Education in the Golden State](#)
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- Cynthia Rice, Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) (2008). [Inside and Out: Developing an Advocacy Strategy for New Jersey's PK-3 Agenda](#)

School District Policy

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Research Basis for PreK-3rd

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- Ruby Takanishi & Kimber Bogard (2007). [Effective Educational Programs for Young Children: What We Need to Know, Child Development Perspectives](#)