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All-day kindergarten gaining traction in Chicago area

By [Lisa Black](#), Chicago Tribune reporter

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As more parents seek full-day kindergarten for their children, more Chicago-area school districts are offering it — but sometimes at a cost of thousands of dollars in tuition.

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Research overwhelmingly backs the academic benefits of a six-hour school day, as opposed to the traditional 2 1/2-hour-long half-day kindergarten program, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Yet full-day kindergarten requires more teachers, classroom space and materials, a challenge for educators during a time of budget cuts and calls to lower taxes. As a result — and despite the state education authority's opposition to the practice — districts in such suburbs as Lake Bluff, Lincolnshire, Libertyville and Wheaton charge \$2,500 to \$4,000 per year for the extended-day kindergarten.

Less affluent communities, meanwhile, struggle with determining how to offer the program at a lower cost.

"The minute you charge for something like this, there will be people who can't afford it," said Nancy Gonsiorek, a school board member for Crystal Lake Community Consolidated School District 47. "We'll just leave kids behind."

Statewide, the length of the kindergarten day varies from district to district. And though the Illinois State Board of Education "does support additional instruction time in general," a spokeswoman said, it requires public schools to provide only half-day kindergarten programs and opposes districts charging tuition. Children are not required to attend kindergarten but must be enrolled in school by age 7, according to state law.

In Crystal Lake, Gonsiorek questioned the timing of spending \$1.2 million annually to add full-day kindergarten at all nine District 47 elementary schools next fall. She also questioned the equity of offsetting that cost by charging parents up to \$170 per month.

Officials are working out the details now and looking for a way to lower costs before kindergarten registration begins in March, Superintendent Donn Mendoza said. Fees for low-income students are expected to be waived, possibly based on their eligibility for free or reduced-price lunches, he said.

In Libertyville, Elementary School District 70 piloted a full-day kindergarten program at two schools beginning last fall, using a lottery system to select students for two classrooms, at a cost to parents of \$3,500 per child for the year. A handful of students didn't get in. Other families prefer the half-day, said Superintendent Guy Schumacher, adding that parent response has been positive.

Other districts, such as North Chicago and Evanston, have offered full-day kindergarten at no extra charge for years. Chicago Public Schools offers full-day kindergarten in some schools. Parents are not charged extra for the full-day program. As of December, CPS had more than 1,000 full-day classrooms, according to a spokeswoman.

"More and more people are thinking about going in that direction," said Roycealee Wood, the Lake County regional superintendent of schools. "The fact is, you have to remember that cost is a big issue when they are not actually required to do it by the state."

Wheaton-Warrenville Community Unit School District 200 is in its second year of offering the option of full-day kindergarten for \$4,000 a year, but the price drops to \$200 a year for students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

Faith Dahlquist, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, said the district would have to build additional schools and change enrollment boundary lines to offer it to everyone for free. The number of full-day students has increased to 279 this year, from 194 in 2011-12, she said.

Naperville Community Unit School District 203 will add full-day kindergarten to seven of its 14 elementary schools next fall without charging parents an additional fee.

Philosophically, the board opposed charging tuition for full-day kindergarten and preferred to wait until it could cover the costs of adding classroom space before expanding the program to the other schools, said Michael Jaensch, school board president.

Full-day kindergarten will be provided in the schools with the largest number of low-income students, called Title I schools, "where studies have shown you get the biggest bang for your buck," Jaensch said.

"We feel it is something that should be offered to everyone," he said.

"I am thrilled," said Carrie Shen, of Naperville, whose daughter, Malia, will attend full-day kindergarten at District 203's Elmwood School next fall. "I have been pushing for this for three years."

Shen taught full-day kindergarten in Denver, where parents were charged extra for the longer day. Often that meant that the parents who could afford preschool could also afford full-day kindergarten, while students from low-income families went without either, she said.

"There was no doubt in my mind that the full-day option provided a richer experience for the children," Shen said. A half-day "is just not enough time in the day to cover everything that needs to be covered."

Board member Dave Weeks was the lone no vote in District 203. He questioned why the district doesn't offer all-day kindergarten to all of the district's at-risk students. He also said he expected to see a three-year strategic plan for the program.

"I don't see how we can be making a commitment when we're not sure how we're going to do the second year," he said.

Neighboring Indian Prairie Community Unit School District 204 has offered all students full-day kindergarten at no extra charge since 2008. Only 16 students are enrolled in one half-day kindergarten class, which the district is required to offer, officials said.

Libertyville kindergarten teacher Karen Forkner sees advantages to both, depending on the child's maturity and stamina. After five years of teaching half-day kindergarten, she is now teaching a full-day kindergarten class at Butterfield School.

She realized quickly that she would need to postpone some academic lessons and concentrate more on social interactions during the first few months of the school year. The children were together more during lunch, physical education and recess during a full day and needed to learn to get along and follow rules, she said.

"Now it's paying dividends," said Forkner, whose class quietly worked on math problems, raising hands for help one morning. During snack time, the students practice "restaurant behavior," pouring their own water from a plastic pitcher, thanking the host who provided goodies and waiting until all are served to eat.

Early in the school year, some children fell asleep during an after-lunch rest time, stretched out on beach towels, with soft music and dim lighting. Today they stay awake and use the quiet time to read, she said.

Forkner isn't sure whether they will come out ahead of the half-day kindergartners academically. But she knows they will be better prepared for the longer days and familiar routines of first grade.

In her class last week, one boy protested that another child had taken his seat. Forkner helped him solve the problem by scooting another chair closer to his preferred spot. The boy sucked his thumb and raised his hand to ask questions.

"One of the big differences is how well I get to know the kids," Forkner said. "I know their families and pets and what's going on."

Nearby, Lincolnshire-Prairie View School District 103 also charges \$3,500 for full-day kindergarten and has seen its program grow from two full-day classes in 2007 to five this school year, officials said. Even so, there were children who couldn't get in because of the program's popularity.

At Sprague Elementary in Lincolnshire, teacher Stacy Binder said she can spend more time on subjects like math and writing than she could in a half-day program. But the social and emotional gains are even more pronounced.

"It helps them to become better problem-solvers," Binder said. "I think that the first-grade teachers see they can start everything a little bit quicker. I think that they get along better with their peers. They become a classroom community."

In Illinois, 1,611 public schools provided full-day kindergarten programs in 2011-12, according to the Illinois State Board of Education. A total of 321 offered half-days, and 379 offered both the same year, according to the state, which does not track which districts charge tuition.

Some working parents also support the full-day kindergarten because their children are already spending a full day at preschool or in child care. In Crystal Lake, it will cost less to enroll a child in full-day kindergarten than in a similar program provided by the Park District.

"Our kids are very well adjusted to being out of the home eight hours a day already," said resident Melissa

Torgerson. "The more time at school, the better for teaching."

She expects to enroll both of her children, Jameson, 5, and Genevieve, 4, in the full-day kindergarten over the next two years. She is also pleased that her children will spend more time with the same teacher at one location rather than be bused to another program.

Other parents prefer the shorter day, including Colleen Steward, also of Crystal Lake.

"I think the transition to go full-day five days a week is just a lot," said Steward, a stay-at-home mom whose daughter won't enter kindergarten until next year.

"Every family is different, so it's nice we are being offered an option," she said.

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Kindergartners Zyanya Alvarez, left, and Addison Kozlowicz spin plates in PE at Libertyville's Butterfield School. The full-day program, which is new this school year, costs families \$3,500. (Stacey Wescott, Chicago Tribune / January 23, 2013)