

Illinois Should Mandate Enrollment In Kindergarten

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I. Introduction

Many people do not know this but kindergarten is not mandatory in thirty-five states.¹ This puts children who do not attend kindergarten at a disadvantage academically and socially compared to children who do attend kindergarten. While there needs to be a recognition of a parent's right to choose how to raise their children, there also needs to be a recognition of the child's right to be given all of the tools for success possible. Making kindergarten mandatory in Illinois would ensure that all children are given the tools they need to be successful in elementary school and later in life, as well as allowing the parent to choose what is best for their child. The parents will still have a right to choose what type of kindergarten will work best for their child whether it is a full-day program, half-day program, or homeschooling. All children are different and each option has pros and cons, so parents will be able to choose the right educational path for their children.

The first kindergarten school was started in Germany in 1873 by Friedrich Frobel.² It was based on the idea that children need to play and it started with simple activities, which progressed into more complex games. The first kindergarten school in the United States was in St. Louis, Missouri and the curriculum was based on Frobel's ideals.³ By 1914 every major city in the United

¹ National Center for Education Statistics, State Education Reforms (2014), http://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab5_3.asp

² Christina Muelle, THE HISTORY OF KINDERGARTEN: FROM GERMANY TO THE UNITED STATES, 87, FL International University.

³ *Id.*

States had established public kindergarten.⁴ In 1957, the kindergarten curriculum began to evolve from ideals of play into preparing children for elementary school.⁵

A large gap in children's academic success in elementary school began to form between the lower economic areas and the higher economic areas.⁶ This was due to the lack of kindergarten schools in lower economic areas. Educators believed that early education was the remedy for American poverty and began to build more kindergarten schools in low socioeconomic areas.⁷ In the 1960's parents and organizations put more pressure on kindergarten schools to become more academically rigorous, due to studies that proved kindergarten experiences positively correlated to academic success in later years. Kindergarten included more subjects such as, reading, writing, speaking, listening, arithmetic, science, social studies, art, music, and physical education. The subjects were not formally taught, but integrated throughout the day in various activities.⁸

Today, kindergarten is being pulled in two directions, to make it a more watered down version of first grade and to be more academic based to better prepare children for first grade. There are two drastically different views; that kindergarten should be a time when children are merely introduced to the school setting and the focus should be on play and interaction with other children and that kindergarten should be a mini elementary school where children are introduced to all of the subjects and prepared for first grade.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.* at 88.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.* at 89.

Illinois should take a mixture of the two views. Kindergarten should be a mixture of play and introduction of the subjects taught in first grade. Playtime will help the children adjust to being in school. Learning the subjects taught in first grade would help children be better prepared for first grade. This is a benefit of full-day kindergarten because children will get more time to enjoy both of these aspects of kindergarten rather than having to choose between one or the other.

II. Importance of Kindergarten

It is important for children to attend kindergarten because of its affect on their early development, to prepare them for elementary school, and to increase their chances of success in adulthood. Children experience rapid growth of their frontal lobes between the ages of three and six.⁹ The frontal lobe affects organization, planning, and maintaining attention.¹⁰ Attending kindergarten helps students learn how to learn, how to focus on activities, and how to make connections. Kindergarten also affects early behavior and social development.¹¹ A good kindergarten class can help students thrive in their early development.

At age five, a child's family is the center of their world.¹² Their emotional life is found at home and beginning school can make them upset to leave their emotional safety net. At school, children will become more independent and in control of their own behavior because they will begin to learn the idea of being right

⁹ Miranda Sinclair, *The Importance of Kindergarten*, globalpost America's World News Site, <http://everydaylife.globalpost.com/importance-kindergarten-11043.html>.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Child Development 5-6*, Raising Children Network The Australian Parenting Website, http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/child_development_5-6_years_cyh.html/context/511

and wrong.¹³ From pre-kindergarten to third grade is when children acquire three types of skills and knowledge, strong foundational cognitive skills such as reading and early math, social and emotional competence that enables them to interact constructively with both their peers and adults, and patterns of engagement in school and learning.¹⁴

By being in a school setting, children will begin their social and emotional learning. Social and emotional learning is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to recognize and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations effectively.¹⁵ These critical social-emotional competencies involve skills that enable children to calm themselves when angry, initiate friendships and resolve conflicts respectfully, make ethical and safe choices, and contribute constructively to their community.¹⁶

Kindergarten prepares young children for elementary school by introducing them to a school environment. It teaches them to sit up, obey teachers, and to cooperate with fellow students.¹⁷ It helps children adjust more quickly to elementary school because they begin to feel more comfortable in a classroom. Once

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ Kristie Kauerz, *PreK-3rd: Putting Full-Day Kindergarten in the Middle*, Foundation For Child Development Policy to Action Brief, 3 (June 2010).

¹⁵ John Payton ET AL., *The Positive Impact of Social and Emotional Learning for Kindergarten to Eighth-Grade Students*, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 4 (2008).

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Miranda Sinclair, *The Importance of Kindergarten*, globalpost America's World News Site, <http://everydaylife.globalpost.com/importance-kindergarten-11043.html>.

they enter first grade, they are more focused on learning than on their new environment. A study by the Minnesota Department of Education found that kindergarteners who attained overall proficiency were twice as likely as those who didn't attain proficiency to exceed both in reading and math standards on third grade standardized tests.¹⁸

There is also an impact on the children's adult achievement. According to a 2011 study by Harvard economist Raj Chetty, students who attend quality kindergartens are more likely to go on to college, to save for retirement, and will earn more as adults.¹⁹ Researchers believe kindergarten teaches skills like patience and perseverance and that learning these skills early contributes to later success as an adult.²⁰

III. Full-Day Vs. Half-Day Kindergarten

Full-day kindergarten can have positive effects on student's academic success and their socialization. A full-day of kindergarten gives the child more learning opportunities, which will strengthen a child's readiness for elementary school.²¹ Teachers get more one on one time for formal and informal instruction with their students so they can be more flexible with their lessons. Children who attend full-day kindergarten learn more in reading and math over the year than those in half-day programs because they spend 30% more time on reading and

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ Susan Revermann, *Positive Effects From All-Day Kindergarten*, globalpost America's World News Site, <http://everydaylife.globalpost.com/positive-effects-allday-kindergarten-5369.html>.

literacy and 46% more time on mathematics than children in half-day programs.²² Children in full-day programs receive 40-50% more instruction, which allows for increased learning activities and strategies such as group read-aloud, peer tutoring, mixed-ability grouping, and child-initiated activities.²³ Full-day kindergarteners exhibit more independent learning, classroom involvement, and productivity in work with peers and reflectiveness than half-day kindergartners.²⁴

Full-day kindergarten can also help to close the achievement gap between students.²⁵ Since children learn so fast, research from Lowell Elementary School in Albuquerque, New Mexico was measured on what a kindergartener should be learning on a monthly basis. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, the average entering kindergartener was already 22 months below grade level, showed that children in the schools half-day kindergarten made an average gain of 5.4 months during a 9 month period, while children in the full-day classes made a 16 month gain.²⁶

Children's socialization can benefit from full-day kindergarten because they have more time to socialize with their peers and as they interact they develop their language and listening skills, expand their vocabulary and learn socially appropriate behaviors.²⁷ When children play with children their own age, they learn how to cooperate, take turns and share, when to lead and when to follow, and how to

²² Titus DosRemedios, *Full-Day Kindergarten Fact Sheet*, Early Education for All, http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/eea/6research_summaries/07_FDK_Factsheet.pdf.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ Susan Revermann, *Positive Effects From All-Day Kindergarten*, globalpost America's World News Site, <http://everydaylife.globalpost.com/positive-effects-allday-kindergarten-5369.html>.

implement problem-solving skills.²⁸ Full-day kindergarten also allows for a more consistent schedule for children and reduces the ratio of transition time to class time, reducing stress for children.²⁹ Kindergarteners who attend full-day programs adjust better to first grade than half-day kindergarteners because they are already used to being in school and away from home all day.

However, some children are not mature enough to be without their mothers for a full-day. Half-day kindergarten can be a better match for five year olds who do not have a large attention span.³⁰ If this is the child's first time in a structured school then a half-day program may help ease the child into the school environment. Even though full-day kindergarteners are in school double the amount of time, they are not learning double the amount of information. There is also more parent involvement in half-day programs.³¹ Another thing to consider is that full-day programs require more funding than half-day programs.

IV. Kindergarten Laws Today

Today, parents have the option to put their children in full-day kindergarten, half-day kindergarten, homeschool them, or not send enroll them in kindergarten at all (except in 15 states³²). In 2007, only 75% of five year olds, the typical age of

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Titus DosRemedios, *Full-Day Kindergarten Fact Sheet*, Early Education for All, http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/eea/6research_summaries/07_FDK_Factsheet.pdf.

³⁰ Mary Ann Rafoth ET AL, *Kindergarten – Full Versus Half-Day: Information for Parents and Early Childhood Educators*, NASP Center, http://www.naspcenter.org/assessment/kindergarten_ho.html.

³¹ *Id.*

³² National Center for Education Statistics, *State Education Reforms (2012)*, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab5_3.asp

kindergarteners, were enrolled in kindergarten.³³ Traditionally, kindergarten was only half-day but has moved towards full-day being the norm for most children. In 2007, the number of students enrolled in full-day kindergarten was 56.8%.³⁴ In 1965 only 17% of children were enrolled in full-day kindergarten and this percentage has grown to 58.4% in 2010.³⁵ This increase is due to two main reasons, that parents recognize the educational value of full-day kindergarten and parents are using it as a form of convenient day care for their children.³⁶ Working mothers are now the primary breadwinners in a record of 40% of homes with children in 2013. This change in the modern family is up from only 11% in 1960.³⁷ Full-day kindergarten gives these working parents a way to stabilize their child's daily schedules and it eliminates their need for after school care.³⁸ In some cities when full-day kindergarten registration opens parents camp out overnight to secure a spot for their children.³⁹

When Froebel established kindergarten it was a full-day program. In the 1950's the United States reduced its kindergarten programs to half-day programs

³³ Kristie Kauerz, *PreK-3rd: Putting Full-Day Kindergarten in the Middle*, Foundation For Child Development Policy to Action Brief, 3 (June 2010).

³⁴ Preprimary Education Enrollment, National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=516>.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ Kristie Kauerz, *PreK-3rd: Putting Full-Day Kindergarten in the Middle*, Foundation For Child Development Policy to Action Brief, 4 (June 2010).

³⁷ Hope Yen, *Working Mothers Now Top Earners In Record 40 Percent Of Households With Children: PEW*, Huffington Post, May 29, 2013.

³⁸ Kristie Kauerz, *PreK-3rd: Putting Full-Day Kindergarten in the Middle*, Foundation For Child Development Policy to Action Brief, 4 (June 2010).

³⁹ *Id.*

because of cost concerns and lack of space.⁴⁰ Due to depleted state and local budgets some school districts are switching back to a half-day program or they are charging tuition for full-day kindergarten.⁴¹ At least three states⁴² have announced plans to reduce or eliminate funding for full-day kindergarten.⁴³ Some districts give a strong preference for which type of kindergarten children should attend and others leave it totally up to the parents.

While all states require access to grades one through twelve to all students, there are still six states⁴⁴ that do not require school districts to provide any type of kindergarten.⁴⁵ Only sixteen states⁴⁶ require children to attend at least half-day kindergarten.⁴⁷ Only twelve states⁴⁸ require districts to provide full-day kindergarten programs⁴⁹ and only two of these states⁵⁰ require children to attend

⁴⁰ *Kindergarten Matters The Importance of Kindergarten In The Development Of Young Children*, Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (2001).

⁴¹ Kristie Kauerz, *PreK-3rd: Putting Full-Day Kindergarten in the Middle*, Foundation For Child Development Policy to Action Brief, 5 (June 2010).

⁴² Arizona, Colorado, and Kansas

⁴³ Kristie Kauerz, *PreK-3rd: Putting Full-Day Kindergarten in the Middle*, Foundation For Child Development Policy to Action Brief, 5 (June 2010).

⁴⁴ Alaska, Idaho, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, and Pennsylvania

⁴⁵ Kristie Kauerz, *PreK-3rd: Putting Full-Day Kindergarten in the Middle*, Foundation For Child Development Policy to Action Brief, 5 (June 2010).

⁴⁶ Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Louisiana, Maryland, Nevada, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia

⁴⁷ National Center for Education Statistics, *State Education Reforms* (2012), http://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab5_3.asp.

⁴⁸ Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia

⁴⁹ National Center for Education Statistics, *State Education Reforms* (2012), http://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab5_3.asp

⁵⁰ Louisiana and West Virginia

full-day programs.⁵¹ Kindergarten does not get the same standing, funding or support as grades one through twelve even though it is usually labeled as K-twelve.⁵² Eleven of the twelve states that require districts to offer full-day kindergarten, Delaware as the exception, also require that the funding for these programs be the same as the funding for first grade.⁵³ Twenty-one additional states also require full-day kindergarten to be funded at the equivalent of first grade, but they do not require that the districts offer full-day kindergarten making it less desirable for the districts to provide full-day programs.⁵⁴ Twelve states,⁵⁵ Illinois being one of them, allow school districts to charge parents tuition for the afternoon portion of a full-day kindergarten program.⁵⁶

V. Illinois Kindergarten Programs

In Illinois kindergarten attendance is completely optional.⁵⁷ The school districts in Illinois must provide either a half-day or full-day kindergarten program, but if it provides a full-day program it must provide a half-day program as well.⁵⁸ Illinois school districts are not required by statute to fund the full-day kindergarten programs.⁵⁹ Some districts in Illinois may charge parents tuition to fund their full-

⁵¹ Kristie Kauertz, *PreK-3rd: Putting Full-Day Kindergarten in the Middle*, Foundation For Child Development Policy to Action Brief, 5 (June 2010).

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ Arizona, Colorado, Illinois, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire Ohio, Oregon, and Washington

⁵⁶ *Full-Day Kindergarten In The States*, Children's Defense Fund (February 1, 2013), <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/state-data-repository/full-day-k/full-day-kindergarten-states-2012.html>.

⁵⁷ 105 ILCS 5/10-22.18 Kindergartens

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

day kindergarten programs.⁶⁰ Full-day programs receive the same level of funding as first grade does when calculating average daily attendance for attendance purposes.⁶¹

Full-day kindergarten must be a minimum of four hours per day and half-day kindergarten must be a minimum of two hours per day. The statute does not specifically mention a teacher to student ratio but in 2005, the average kindergarten class size was twenty-one students. The majority of kindergarteners in Illinois, 57% attend full-day programs.⁶²

In August 2013, Illinois lowered the mandated age to enter school from seven to six.⁶³ Any child that turns six on or before September 1 will be required to enroll in first grade. This change took effect in the 2014-2015 school year.

VI. Mandating Kindergarten Enrollment in Illinois

Illinois is moving in the right direction by lowering the mandated age of school enrollment from seven to six.⁶⁴ Illinois should require that all children begin school in kindergarten rather than first grade. Illinois already requires that all districts have some form of kindergarten⁶⁵, whether it is a full-day or half-day program, so it is time to take the next step and require students to attend these

⁶⁰ *Full-Day Kindergarten in Illinois*, Children's Defense Fund (January 2013), <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/state-data-repository/full-day-k/2013-illinois-full-day-k.pdf>.

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² Illinois State Board of Education, Frequently Asked Questions about Kindergarten, http://www.isbe.net/earlychi/pdf/kindergarten_faq.pdf.

⁶³ 105 ILCS 5/26-1 Compulsory school age - Exemptions

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ 105 ILCS 5/10-22.18 Kindergartens

programs. Parents will still be able to have a voice in their child's education by being able to choose if their child attends a full-day program, half-day program, or homeschools them. Children grow at different rates, and parents should be able to decide which program is best suited for their individual child. The mandated age should be the same that it is now as it is for kindergarten entrance. Those children who turn five on or before September first of the year will be required to enroll in the kindergarten program of their choice.

Ideally, all fifty states should mandate enrollment in kindergarten. Since the majority of education legislation is regulated at the state level and not the federal level, the federal government could offer additional funding to the states if they mandate enrolment on kindergarten. This would give the states a great incentive to mandate kindergarten. Parents would also benefit from this because if they live in a state that currently charges them for full-day programs, they would no longer have to pay.