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Editorial: All-day strain

Expanding kindergarten programs is expensive, has questionable value

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The provision in the new, two-year state budget calling for all school districts to offer all-day kindergarten starting in fall 2010 is an unfunded mandate. The precise financial impact on cash-strapped districts is uncertain because of the measure's lack of clarity.

As with much of Gov. Ted Strickland's vision for the future of Ohio's schools, the all-day-kindergarten requirement comes with no sure funding. Although the state-aid formula technically has been changed to allow the full per-pupil amount for each kindergarten student -- in the past, districts got half the amount for each kindergartner -- overall limits on district funding increases mean most districts won't see extra money to pay the costs of full-day kindergarten.

The mandate also is squishy: It requires the offering of all-day kindergarten but doesn't require children to go all day. Under state law, kindergarten attendance is mandatory but needn't be longer than part time. Districts won't know their kindergarten costs until they know how many parents want to send their children to the all-day classes.

Further, the law says districts can ask for a waiver from the mandate for its first year (2010-11) if they can't meet it, but the Department of Education has yet to determine what will qualify a district for exemption.

Of the state's 612 school districts, 464 offer some form of all-day kindergarten. Of those, 123 did so with grants offered for that purpose to districts with a lot of poor families. Some districts offer all-day kindergarten as an option, but parents have to pay.

The new law will allow districts that charge parents to continue doing so, even though it requires other districts, starting from scratch, to create expensive new programs and offer them free.

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These uncertainties might be acceptable if all-day kindergarten for every Ohio child were a valid objective, but it may not be.

Research has shown that all-day kindergarten can be good for children who live in poverty and for those whose parents can't or don't provide them with the early training, books and other types of stimulation that jump-start learning. The same goes for preschool.

But for children who have that jump-start, a full kindergarten day isn't much better than a half. And some of the districts with the most-privileged children also are the most crowded, so they will be hard-pressed to double their kindergarten space.

Mandating all-day kindergarten for everyone may be a one-size-fits-all solution to a problem that isn't universal.

If already-squeezed districts are forced to sacrifice other good programs to meet this mandate, Ohioans will see how much it truly costs.

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