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All-day kindergarten poses challenges

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A requirement to offer all-day kindergarten next fall has many cash-strapped Ohio school districts scrambling to figure out how to comply.

Twenty-three of the 49 Greater Cincinnati school districts that don't offer any all-day kindergarten classes are most affected by the new law.

The cost for adding teachers could range from \$350,000 at Southwest Schools in Hamilton County to \$700,000 at Warren County's Little Miami, which currently offers all-day every other day.

Space is also an issue in some districts, including Lakota, which has about 1,200 half-day kindergarten students this year.

"To add all-day kindergarten, we would have to add at least one building, as well as the staff and programming for that building," said Laura Kursman, district spokeswoman.

The impact won't be as great at districts that offer all-day kindergarten exclusively, such as Cincinnati Public Schools, or have some all-day and some half-day classrooms, such as Sycamore.

To buy time, the state will allow districts to seek waivers due to space or money issues, but guidelines are still being established. Local districts, such as Little Miami, Loveland, Oak Hills and Mason, plan to seek waivers.

Last spring, more than 250 Mason City Schools' residents attended community forums to help the district plan for its future.

"As a follow-up to those forums, we surveyed parents and residents about all-day kindergarten, and found that our families and taxpayers were not convinced that it would be beneficial for our students," said Tracey Carson, district spokeswoman.

"We appreciate that the Ohio Department of Education is offering waivers to school districts like ours who are high-achieving, cost-effective, and whose residents are satisfied with the current half-day kindergarten option," Carson said.

Nevertheless, the grace period is only one year, said Scott Blake, spokesman for the Ohio Department of Education. What's more, he said, the state is still discussing the conditions under which it would grant waivers.

"We're trying to figure out exactly what the districts would need to show to demonstrate that it would be a hardship for them to offer all-day kindergarten," Blake said. "The fact your parents don't want it might not be something we can even think about."

Oak Hills Superintendent Todd Yohey sees the value in all-day kindergarten, but said it will be difficult to meet the mandate.

"We do not currently have enough classroom space to implement all-day kindergarten," he said. "This mandate will increase costs in facilities, transportation and personnel costs."

At Northwest School District, all-day kindergarten also translates into additional teachers, classroom assistants, instructional supplies and equipment.

"We will have to evaluate the value of the all-day kindergarten program against the cuts we will have to make in existing programs and services to be able to afford the program," Superintendent Rick Glatfelter said.

Nationwide, educators continue to push for all-day programs, as first-grade course work trickles down into kindergarten.

"The research on full-day kindergarten pretty much indicates that children who participate in the full-day experience have greater achievement in language development, reading development and mathematics," said Sandy Miller, director of the Ohio Department of Education's Office of Early Learning and School Readiness. "Children in full-day kindergarten are less likely to be retained or referred to special education services."

State legislatures, however, have been slow to require school districts to offer all-day kindergarten. In 2008, 10 states had mandatory all-day kindergarten, the same number as in 2002. In Kentucky, like Ohio, districts can choose to offer all-day kindergarten, but it's not mandatory - until 2010 for Ohio.

The state is looking at ways to help Ohio districts comply with the new law. School districts, for example, that don't have room for the program could rent space in day-care centers licensed by the Department of Job and Family Services.

"Renting space kind of defeats the purpose of it," said Deb Semenick, director of Student Services at Finneytown School District. "You want your teachers all one on site so they can work together and collaborate."

In Ohio, nearly one-fourth of districts - 148 out of 612 - offer half-day kindergarten only. The rest offer full-day to some or all students. Once the new law takes effect, Ohio districts will still have to provide a half-day program if parents request it.

For districts that already offer all-day kindergarten, the impact will be minimal.

This year is Batavia's first foray into all-day kindergarten for all students, after two years of success with full-day for the most at-risk students.

"I used to be a kindergarten teacher, and I've always believed in all-day, every-day kindergarten," Superintendent Barbara Bradley said. "I think our National Merit Scholars start in kindergarten and, without that basis, our kids are always behind."

Districts in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky are increasingly offering all-day kindergarten, even though the states only pay for half-day.

When the requirement kicks in, Ohio districts will get full funding for each kindergartner. That's good news, especially for school districts that have offered all-day for years.

"We've been losing money at it, but we knew it was the right thing to do from an educational standpoint," said Neil Leist, superintendent at Clermont Northeastern.

Sycamore School District began offering a full-day option in 2000 on a tuition basis. The program has grown from four to nine sections. Even so, many parents still prefer the half-day option. This year,

about 200 students are enrolled in full-day and about 176 in half-day.

Meanwhile, Little Miami Superintendent Dan Bennett worries about space and money. The district has lost two levies in a row and is trying again in November. Little Miami has gone to an all-day, every other day kindergarten program this year to save money on transportation.

"Even if we could pass our levy and spread out and have the space, the new challenge is the cost," he said. "Quite honestly, we're nowhere close to being prepared for it, financially."

Additional Facts

Districts with all-day kindergarten

About half of the 49 Greater Cincinnati school districts have all-day kindergarten:

Butler County

Hamilton

Madison

Middletown

New Miami

Talawanda (also has half-day classrooms)

Clermont County

Batavia

Bethel-Tate

Clermont Northeastern

Felicity-Franklin

Goshen

New Richmond

Williamsburg

Hamilton County

Cincinnati Public

Indian Hill (three-fourths day)

Lockland

Madeira (also has half-day classrooms)

Mount Healthy

North College Hill

Norwood

Princeton (at some elementaries)

Reading

St. Bernard-Elmwood Place

Sycamore (also has half-day classrooms)

Wyoming

Warren County

Carlisle (also has half-day classrooms)

Little Miami (every other day)

Source: Enquirer research
