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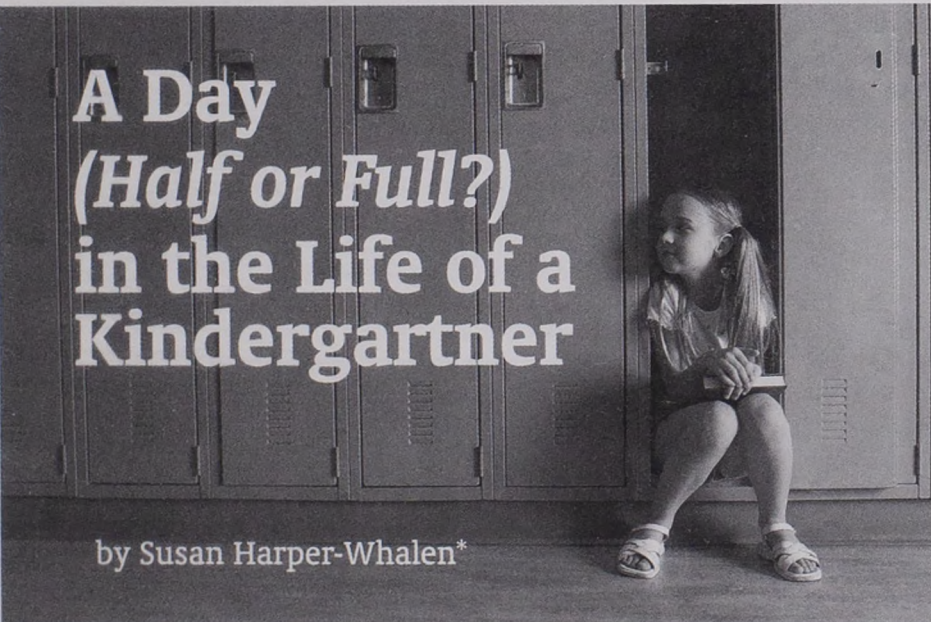
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# Montana's Agenda

ISSUES SHAPING OUR STATE



## A Day (Half or Full?) in the Life of a Kindergartner

by Susan Harper-Whalen\*

Following funding by the state legislature this year, Montana has joined about half the states in providing school districts and families with the option of choosing full-time kindergarten. Supporters of the law predict increased achievement by all students, regardless of income, plus a financial boost for Montana's working families who now pay for daycare. Opponents claim full-time kindergarten is too much school too early and nothing more than expensive baby sitting.

The 182 Montana school districts (out of 328) working to implement this shift have been scrambling to hire teachers and find additional classroom space. Parents had to decide whether to enroll their children in traditional half-day programs or in full-time programs. Kindergarten teachers are exploring how to provide stimulation without stress, how to help this youngest group of students navigate everything from lunch lines to playgrounds. Early childhood specialists are grappling with how to provide the most effective training for teachers.

To determine whether a full-time kindergarten program is worth the effort and cost of implementation, we need to know what happens in a typical kindergartner's day, 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Most adults have only memories of their own kindergarten experience and a vague notion of what is "best practice" in a kindergarten program. They might hear educators cite "active, hands-on learning," "incidental teaching," and "learning through play," but what do these terms mean and how are they implemented in a classroom? First I'll describe what a full-time kindergartner might experience:

### A Kindergartner's Full Day

8:30 - 9:00

Parents enter the classroom with their children, greeted by the teacher and a paraprofessional. They have been made to feel welcome in the school setting since the first day of school and their hopes that their children's individual strengths, interests, and needs will be met are acknowledged. Over the summer the teacher had sent a letter to the students and parents that began the process of introduction, including the daily schedule students would follow and some personal background information about the teacher, such as training and experience with young children. The teacher also listed goals for the year and provided examples of what and how the children would learn. As a result, parents are excited about opportunities their children will have to explore places, objects, and events in the community.

The classroom is home to such objects as fish, turtles, rock collections, and plants of all types and sizes. As the year progresses, paintings with splashes of color, photographs of the children and their families, and evidence of class excursions testify to the children's membership in the classroom community. Everything the children encounter is linked to their developmental needs. For example, children are eager to revisit a project initiated yesterday when the class became interested in a bird nest they found on the playground.

From the first day of school, each of the 20 children (maximum class size in Montana) has been fully accepted as a member of the group and no attempt has been made to delay the entry of children who are determined to be "unready." The daily schedule is

posted in pictures and words so children learn to anticipate and adjust to the day's activities. Children check in by themselves, using an attendance board. Then they gather in the group meeting area to read books or work with puzzles while the rest of their classmates arrive.

The teacher engages the students in a morning meeting. They discuss the activities planned for the day and read aloud a book that relates to the project on birds. The meeting introduces the day and builds the children's sense of belonging and their interest in the current project.

#### **9:00 - 10:15**

When the daily meeting ends, some children gather with the teacher for one-on-one instruction while others are assigned to small groups supervised by the paraprofessional to complete journal entries, engage in literacy-focused board games, participate in computer activities, or write and illustrate their page on birds in the book being created by the group. During this time, the resource room teacher visits to support and monitor specialized instruction for two children with identified disabilities. The groups alternate activities. After 75 minutes of work, the children are ready for recess.

#### **10:15 - 10:30**

**Outdoor Play.** A separate K-1 playground area accommodates the kindergartners' need for smaller group sizes. Musical instruments, a parachute, an assortment of balls, sidewalk chalk, and other play materials are provided to stimulate the children.

#### **10:30 - 10:45**

Children return from recess and gather at their assigned tables for a healthful snack, perhaps granola bars or apple slices. Five children are assigned to each table to create a mix of boys and girls and ability levels. Over the course of the year, students in these small groups will have developed strong connections with one another. The children learn to manage the snack routine while teachers facilitate social interaction. As snack time ends, children go to the list of "learning centers" to discover the choices available that day, which could include building blocks, art, library, science and math, dramatics, and sand table.

#### **10:45 - 11:45**

Each child makes a plan for participating in the learning centers using a combination of drawings and writing. After children choose two or three areas, teachers review the plans and send the children off to explore. Materials at each center provide children of differing abilities opportunities to practice skills they have mastered or take on new challenges. For example, children can make a shopping list for their trip to the classroom grocery store, use a ruler to measure and record the diameter of bird nests on the science table, or create a map of the city being created in the block area. The teachers circulate, observe, and document the children's participation, support language and social skills, and

provide meaningful individual instruction, such as: "You want to write 'milk.' Let's think about the first sound." "The first nest you weighed was 2 ounces. Do you think this one will weigh more or less than 2 ounces?"

#### **11:45 - 12:30**

As lunch time approaches, children are instructed to review their learning center plans and put them in their individual folders. The group is hungry and ready for lunch and a 15-minute outdoor activity.

#### **12:30 - 1:00**

A restful story time follows when children return from outdoors to the carpeted meeting area. They have the choice of selecting an item such as Legos, pegboard, puzzle, or white board and markers or just sitting or lying down and listening to the story. The teacher allows about 30 minutes of quiet time so that the children can relax and re-energize for the afternoon.

#### **1:00 - 1:30**

The class spends the next 30 minutes in art, physical education, or music activity. To get ready for full-time kindergarten, in-service education has helped teachers refresh their knowledge and skills for working with these youngest students.

#### **1:30 - 2:00**

The children gather again in the meeting area for a light snack. Math instruction follows, introducing key concepts in a logical sequence. Then children gather at their small-group tables to explore the concept through an activity. Based on their individual strengths and needs, children use different math tools and materials, while the adults provide individual support.

#### **2:00 - 2:15**

Outdoor Play

#### **2:15 - 2:55**

The final period of the day is focused on a science or social studies project. The whole group meets to discuss what they have learned or they gather to welcome an invited "expert" who provides information and responds to questions. On most days, children individually and in groups throughout the room pursue their projects and record their learning. Some children, for example, use the art center to draw what they have learned about bird nests. Some listen to a book on tape to learn more about birds, while others work with the teacher to measure the nests and graph their results. Another group armed with clipboards has gone to the playground with the paraprofessional to observe and document activity in a tree with a nest.

#### **2:55 - 3:00**

Children prepare for departure, tired but anticipating their school day tomorrow.

## The foundation of full-time kindergarten

Over the past fifteen years, medical and early learning studies have shed light on the potential of full-time kindergarten. Research shows that the language, knowledge, and skills of kindergarten children are predictive of their future academic success. Researchers, therefore, are looking at early education as a tool to enhance student achievement, especially in reading and math. While there is little research on the effects of full-time kindergarten, limited findings lead proponents to suggest that the extended school day can help alleviate the achievement gap between different socioeconomic and ethnic groups that exists prior to first grade. Research also links full-time kindergarten to economic benefits. A reduction in the number of students retained in a grade and fewer children receiving special education services translates into cost savings. Working families should receive an economic benefit when their children spend more time in school and less time in fee-based child care.

### *Kindergarten Best Practices*

- Children receive instruction and engage in activities throughout the day in individual, small-group, and whole-group settings.
- Children have multiple opportunities to learn through interaction with peers and adults, using a variety of materials.
- Children use literacy, math, and science skills in meaningful projects.
- Teachers foster and maintain strong teacher-parent partnerships.
- Teachers use a mix of educational strategies so children alternate between teacher-directed activities and child-initiated learning experiences.
- Instruction includes all learning domains: physical, social, emotional, and cognitive.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children specifies qualifications for the lead kindergarten teacher, use of a paraprofessional, and maximum class size. Because the expertise of the teacher has a clear impact on young children's learning and development, the profession wants kindergarten teachers to complete specialized education in early child development and teaching methods, recommends the employment of a paraprofessional in every classroom, and urges a maximum class size of 20 children (nationally class size ranges from 15 to 20). Scholars and professionals argue that these standards will be of even greater consequence for full-time kindergarten.

## Kindergarten in Montana, 2007

For Montana families, kindergarten decisions begin at the approach of the school year when children reach the age of 5 on or before September 10. Up to now, the major concern has been selecting and getting the morning or afternoon kindergarten session. Some families wonder about their child's "readiness" for this first school experience. While some decide to enroll their child, others may hold their child out of kindergarten for an additional year of growth and development. All public schools in the state are required to provide kindergarten for age-eligible children, but kindergarten attendance is not mandatory. This year, many families faced for the first time an additional decision—full-time or part-time kindergarten.

The new law providing state funding for full-time kindergarten is welcome news for the districts across the state that have chosen this option. Approximately 28 percent of Montana's kindergarten-age children had access to full-time kindergarten in 2006-2007; now the figure is 87 percent. Schools now receive full funding (not the previous one-half funding) for children attending a full-time kindergarten program, that is, five days a week, 720 hours annually. But school districts can choose to offer only traditional, half-day kindergarten, which meets for 2 ½ hours each day, Monday to Friday, for a total of 360 hours annually. Districts opting to add full-time programs must ensure that parents have the option of enrolling their children in a traditional half-day program.

## Resetting the stage

Difficult and consequential decisions face Montana school districts, families, and educators regarding full-time kindergarten. While the school readiness formula stresses that "ready families + ready communities + ready services + ready schools = children ready for school," many teachers and parents use their own perceptions of a child's readiness to limit access to kindergarten. Their perspective is that children must demonstrate that they are "ready for school," and that a teacher needs a homogeneous group of children to teach effectively. Many parents are even more concerned about their child's "readiness" because the demands of a full day on their child seem especially daunting.

Other potential consequences of full-time kindergarten include financial loss for child-care providers and increased demands on after-school programs that are designed for older students who need less supervision than do young children. On the positive side, the full-time option could aid families with lower incomes who



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cannot afford to enroll their child in a half-day program and pay for half-time child care.

Full-time kindergarten, even if done well, is not a magic wand that can guarantee improved academic performance in later grades. The work of the elementary grades cannot simply be pushed down into kindergarten, and kindergarten by itself cannot close achievement gaps among groups of students. High-quality full-time kindergarten, however, has the potential to serve the developmental needs of all children at this critical time in their lives, and the state has provided financial support to make this promising option available to Montana families.

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