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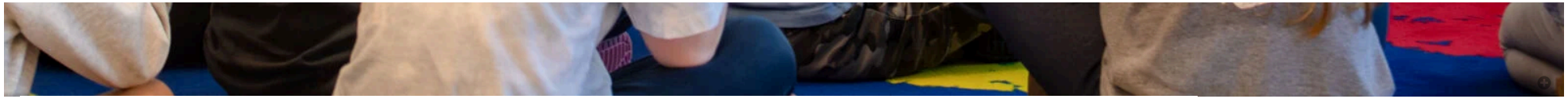
'More to offer': Lancaster County school districts consider adding full-day kindergarten programs



ASHLEY STALNECKER | Staff Writer

Apr 9, 2025


quiet voice
mountain
mermaid
crisscross
Dr. Seuss's ABC
Dr. Seuss's ABC
THE CAT IN THE HAT
THE CAT IN THE HAT
THE CAT IN THE HAT COMES BACK
HOP ON POP
WACKY WEDNESDAY
GREAT DAY for UP
Mr. Brown Can MOO! Can You?
Green Eggs and Ham
Green Eggs and
I Am NOT Going to Get up Today!
HORTON HEARS A WHO!



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Sitting before a class of kindergartners, Paradise Elementary teacher Sara Tomison takes her time, asking the students what's new before sounding out sets of words that rhyme like slide and glide or flame and blame.

Tomison even has time to throw in a quick math problem for the class to solve while teaching them days of the week. Seven calendar days subtracted by five makes two.

"We find (math) all day – not just during math time," she tells the class.

All day is the key phrase. Tomison was hired in 2004 when Pequea Valley School District took its five half-day kindergarten classes to full-day schedules. Twenty years later, Pequea Valley is one of eight school districts in Lancaster County operating with a full-day kindergarten schedule with several more about to start.

RECENT LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED OR APPROVED FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN

- Cornwall-Lebanon gears up for full-day kindergarten next school year
- Hempfield proposes extended-day kindergarten in all elementary schools for 'catch-up' support
- Elizabethtown Area will offer full-day kindergarten by lottery next school year
- Ephrata is latest Lancaster County district to move to full-day kindergarten
- Donegal to give parents kindergarten choice

Elizabethtown Area School District will pilot full-day kindergarten for 60 students selected through a lottery system in the 2025-26 school year, while Ephrata Area and Donegal will add full-day kindergarten with a half-day option.

Another two school districts – Hempfield and Solanco – are weighing the benefits of full-day kindergarten against the added cost and space limitations. While the addition of three to five full-day kindergarten programs seems like quite the influx in one year, most districts eyeing it said administrators have been considering full-day kindergarten for years.

Pennsylvania doesn't mandate full-day half-day kindergarten in schools, but 473 of the state's 500 districts offer full-day programs. Only 16 states and the District of Columbia mandate full-day kindergarten, but 44 states and the District of Columbia require districts to offer at least half-day kindergarten, according to the Education Commission of the States, a nonprofit that tracks educational policy at the state level.

Democratic State Rep. Greg Scott, serving Montgomery County, is pushing House Bill 829 to mandate full-day kindergarten. Scott's hope is to also allocate funding for districts that might be challenged by the associated costs of making the mandate a reality.

On March 10, the bill was referred to the House education committee.

"If we invest in these kids now, it'll pay dividends later," Scott said.

Full-day kindergarten gives children extra, early time to work on key skills they need to hone throughout their schooling, such as developing relationships and social skills to literacy and language capabilities, Scott explained.

For Pequea Valley – one of the smaller districts in Lancaster County – Assistant Superintendent Rich Eby can't think of any drawbacks to offering full-day kindergarten to the community.

"For us (full-day kindergarten) is essential," said Eby.

Without full-day kindergarten, Eby said low-income families in the district that struggle to provide academic resources for their children would be much farther behind their more affluent peers. And as students grow older, it's harder to bridge that gap; Eby said if students aren't proficient readers by fourth grade it becomes increasingly more difficult for them to catch up.

With full-day kindergarten, Tomison said there's time for connections and opportunities for the class to dig deeper with each lesson. Sure, Tomison said a half-day kindergarten class could meet in a circle in the

morning like her class does but it would be far more rushed. Half-day kindergarten compared to full-day kindergarten is “less and fast” Tomison said.

“Things we’re learning are woven into their whole day,” she said.



Kindergarten teacher Sara Tomison, right, works with her students In a kindergarten class at Paradise Elementary School on Tuesday, March 25, 2025.

BLAINE SHAHAN | Staff Photographer

‘We saw kids struggling’

Several Lancaster County school administrators emphasized not only the academic benefits of full-day kindergarten, which include building early literacy skills, but the improvement to social emotional learning skills and ability to catch any learning deficiencies soon enough to intervene.

A 2024 study on the impacts of expansions to full-day kindergarten shows that just a 10% increase in schools offering full-day kindergarten in a state is accompanied by gains and math test scores that remain elevated through sixth grade.

Educators have highlighted birth to age 5 as a crucial time for child development and for a student’s education in the long-term, but a child doesn’t typically start school until age 5. Capitalizing on time with students earlier in their tenure with a district will help lessen time and money spent on remediation in later years.

For example, Eby cited a study by neuroscientist Reid Lyon that shows most children can learn to read if learning problems are detected by first grade and the proper early interventions are implemented. Eby said 90% of a child’s brain development happens before the age of 5.



Caleb Himmelberger works with the Boost program by Amplify, an English language arts curriculum, during a full-day kindergarten class at Paradise Elementary School on Tuesday, March 25, 2025.

BLAINE SHAHAN | Staff Photographer

Early interventions are increasingly important in districts where much of the population lives below the poverty line. Families living below the poverty level are less likely to have the resources for early learning, including books, than their peers.

Nearly 59% of Pequea Valley’s roughly 1,300 students are considered economically disadvantaged, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

The pandemic only served to exacerbate such disadvantages.

Eby said Pequea Valley administrators noticed as many problems with student social skills as they did academic skills over the pandemic. That setback, he said, might have prompted some districts to put full-day kindergarten back on the table.

“We saw kids struggling,” Scott said. The students’ foundation “was literally sand and it was crumbling behind them.”

Ephrata Area School District – where full-day kindergarten will be implemented starting in the 2025-26 school year – didn’t need the pandemic to highlight the importance of full-day kindergarten, however. Ephrata Area Assistant Superintendent Jacy Hess said the district first proposed adding full-day kindergarten nine years ago.

Hess said that initially the administration didn’t recommend moving forward with full-day kindergarten because the district had more pressing priorities like providing instructional coaching for students and curriculum work.

Since the district first considered full-day kindergarten, though, Hess said student needs have evolved and the district has realized relationships and social skills are more important now than they’ve ever been.

“In a half day program, what we were finding is we just didn’t have enough time to be able to really hit on those important skills like relationships and social skills in a way that we would have liked to,” Hess said.

Plus, she said, district families have been asking for full-day kindergarten for quite some time.

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Full-day kindergarten at Paradise Elementary School [photos]

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‘More to offer’

Hempfield School District parent Lauren Worthington’s pleas for full-day kindergarten so far have been unsuccessful.

While Hempfield School District administrators believe full-day kindergarten would have academic and social-emotional benefits for its students, the nearly 7,000-student district doesn’t have the space or funding to support it, says Assistant Superintendent Doug Dandridge.

“We would love to have a full day for all, we're just working through the reality of the limitations that we have,” Dandridge said.

Currently, Dandridge said the district has 13 kindergarten classrooms across its six elementary schools. To accommodate full-day kindergarten, amid anticipated enrollment growth, Dandridge said the district would need between 19 and 21 classrooms.

Fixes for the space challenge, Dandridge said, could include displacing programs, moving staff rooms and renovations to existing classrooms that don’t currently have bathrooms. Kindergarten classrooms don’t need to have bathrooms, he said, but forgoing such renovations could create logistical and equity issues.

“Unfortunately, when our schools were built, we had a half-day program,” Dandridge said.

To implement full-day kindergarten for all students, the district estimated $1 million in costs – including transportation and staffing, according to a district presentation on full-day kindergarten in January.

At a board committee meeting in late March, Dandrdige proposed extended-day kindergarten for an expected total of 385 kindergarten students in the 2025-26 school year. Extended-day kindergarten is a program that extends beyond the typical half-day schedule but doesn’t quite meet the length of a full-day program.

Worthington continues to insist that the benefits of full-day kindergarten would outweigh the challenges to implement it. Worthington’s oldest child will start kindergarten next year and her other two will follow close behind.

For working parents, Worthington said half-day kindergarten is difficult to navigate and results in far too many transitions during the day for a kindergartener.

Full-day kindergarten can be a boon to working parents – especially working mothers. A 2024 study on the expansion of full-day kindergarten in the U.S. found that while the share of kindergarteners in full-day schooling doubled over the last 30 years – from 43% to 83% – the employment of mothers with kindergarten-aged children in a sample of 1,167 grew by 24%.

At Hempfield, a morning half-day kindergarten class concludes at 11:45 a.m. while an afternoon half-day kindergarten class starts at 12:45 p.m. Parents working throughout the day, therefore, have to find care for the first or second half of the day.

Worthington said she’d have to first drop her child off at Hempfield, then return to pick her up midday and drop her off at another nearby child care center.

“Even as an adult, thinking about making multiple transitions a day – like jumping from different buildings or different places of work – I feel like that over time would cause stress on anyone,” Worthington said.

If Hempfield doesn’t implement full-day kindergarten, Worthington said she’d prefer to take her daughter elsewhere for the entirety of the day. Worthington is considering enrolling her daughter at the newly built

early childhood learning center, the Goddard School, for nearly $1,500 a month.

While the cost is a burden she's willing to bear to reap the benefits of full-day kindergarten, that option isn't available for everyone – and Worthington said her daughter would have the added difficulty of adjusting to the Hempfield School District a year later than most of her peers.

"I just believe the public school system has so much more to offer," Worthington said.

Worthington would know a bit about that – she's taught as a kindergarten teacher as part of a full-day kindergarten program at Northeastern York School District in York County for nearly 20 years.

"The alternative is, hate to say this, but a lot of times, when we look at what your child does with you at home or in a day care facility versus a day in kindergarten, it's a lot different, whether that means playing on a tablet or watching TV," Worthington said. "There's just so much a school does for a kid."

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