

Experts: Half-day kindergarten a 'disaster'

By Alfred Lubrano
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

The Philadelphia School District's plan to cut full-day kindergarten to help balance its budget is being decried by national education experts as a "disaster" and a "very bad decision" that could harm the development of thousands of children — especially the poor.

At the same time, many Philadelphia parents are angered and worried that half-day kindergarten would force them to choose between quitting work to be home for their children or placing them in questionable or costly day care.

And local child advocates warn that community child-care centers could not handle the tidal wave of 12,700 kindergartners likely to need placement in some kind of program.

Michael Masch, the district's chief financial officer, said the district was aware of the difficult choices, "and we deeply regret the need to take this action." But the district is hamstrung, he said, by Gov. Corbett's proposal to eliminate a \$254 million statewide block grant. The district receives about \$55 million of that, \$51 million of it earmarked for full-day kindergarten.

"If we got more funding, or if the governor chooses not to cut the block grant, we may be able to restore full-day kindergarten," a district spokeswoman said.

With just four months until the new school year, there are also concerns that schools, teachers, students, and parents may not have time to regroup for half-day kindergarten.

"It all makes no sense," said Crystal Sears, 32, whose 5-year-old daughter, Samirah Taylor, is scheduled to start kindergarten at Clara Barton Elementary School in Feltonville in the fall.

"Not only does half-day kindergarten deprive my daughter of the education she deserves, but where do I find the safe coverage I need while I'm in school?" asked Sears, a laid-

off Salvation Army worker who is on welfare and studying cosmetology.

"If we don't give kids a chance, there's no hope for a future — theirs or ours."

Numerous studies have shown that full-day kindergarten increases achievement in grades one through three, said W. Steven Barnett, codirector of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University.

The vast majority of states, he said, require districts to offer at least half-day kindergarten, but Pennsylvania does not.

"The amount of time children spend in kindergarten does matter," Barnett said. Cutting that time in half would create problems down the road, compelling teachers to spend more time on remedial courses and causing some students to be left back, he added.

Research has shown that children in full-day kindergarten demonstrated 40 percent greater proficiency in language skills than half-day kids, said Walter Gilliam, an expert on early-childhood education at the Yale University School of Medicine.

Teachers in half-day and full-day kindergartens speak differently to children, Gilliam said: "In half-day, much of the teacher time is taken up saying, 'Sit down,' 'Stand still.' There's less time for language skills and social interactions and one-on-one time. It's a disaster in a lot of ways."

Acknowledging that many districts must economize during dismal financial times, Samuel Meisels, president of Chicago's Erikson Institute, a child-development graduate school, said Philadelphia's decision to halve the kindergarten day was akin to "cutting its own throat."

"Why pick this particular program to cut rather than

something else?" Meisels asked. He added that as far as he knew, the only other major district contemplating the same budget-saving move was Chicago's.

Cutting full-day kindergarten is particularly difficult for immigrant children who need more exposure to English spoken at school, Barnett said.

And poor children generally start school with skills a year behind those of more advantaged students, Meisels said. Slashing kindergarten time only worsens their chances, he added.

Shorter school days also play havoc with the schedules of parents who must work and who count on the six-hour school day to keep their children occupied and safe.

"What are they going to do the other half of the day?" asked Joanna Cruz, 26, mother of three and a concession worker at the Philadelphia Zoo whose seasonal \$18,200 salary is well under the \$22,050 poverty level for a family of four.

Her 5-year-old daughter, Silina Rivera, is due to start at James Alcorn Elementary School in South Philadelphia. "Who's going to pick her up in the middle of the day?" Cruz asked. "I can't afford day care."

Laticia Ansley, 52, who adopted her granddaughter Talieca Nash, 5, said the kindergarten cut would force her to work more weekends as a certified nursing assistant to compensate for the weekday hours she'd lose to care for Talieca.

"It's a big inconvenience for me," she said. "I just do not understand this."

Like many low-income parents, Ansley said she was loath to leave her little one with one of many unlicensed, informal day cares in her Germantown neighborhood.

"I don't trust too many peo-



ple with my girl," she said.

Throughout the city, there aren't many places for half-day kindergarten children to land after school while awaiting their parents, said Christie Balka, director of child-care and budget policy for the nonprofit advocacy group Public Citizens for Children and Youth in Philadelphia.

"The child-care system does not have the capacity to absorb 13,000 kids in after-school programs," she said. "It's unclear where these children would go and who would pay for it."

Gloria Endres, a retired teacher who spent 31 years in the district, said returning to half-day kindergarten, which ended in Philadelphia in 1996, would be "regressive."

"It's an absolutely horrible idea" dependent on the antiquated notion that a parent is always home and available, she said.

Along with students and parents, the half-day model is a burden for teachers, said Jerry Jordan, president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers.

"Teachers will be teaching double the amount of children and will have double the amount of record-keeping," he said.

When the district had half-day sessions, the same teacher would teach both, one from around 8:30 to 11:45 a.m. and the other from around 12:30 to 3 p.m. or so, Endres said.

The district has yet to con-

firm a schedule but will shortly send letters to parents asking whether they prefer morning or afternoon kindergarten.

Double shifts "definitely add stress for the kindergarten teacher and take away time for the children," said Rebecca Stern, one of two kindergarten teachers at Anna L. Lingelbach Elementary School in Germantown.

And she worries that she might lose her job. "If we only have half-day, it may eliminate one of us."

Stern said she was at a loss to understand "how we are going to teach literacy and math every day in three hours less of instructional time. How can we expect kids to know their sounds, how to cut on a line, hold a pencil, crayons, use a scissors?"

"And I don't know about meals."

The district said it would provide breakfast for morning students but no meals for children in the afternoon.

That would place a burden on the many poor families in the district who rely on school meals to help feed their children.

"The state is creating such a dilemma," Crystal Sears said. "Without kids being educated, we're all doomed."

Contact staff writer Alfred Lubrano at 215-854-4969 or alubrano@phillynews.com.



STEVEN M. FALK / Staff Photographer

“We deeply regret the need to take this action,” said Michael Masch, the Philadelphia district’s chief financial officer, shown at a School Reform Commission meeting on proposed cuts.