

Full-day kindergarten means long days for kids, teachers

The transition requires schedule changes and building remodels to accommodate more students

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-Observer

DALLAS — The magic word in Kari Witt's kindergarten class at Lyle Elementary in Dallas on Thursday is "school."

To her students, the district's youngest, school still may seem magical.

For some, it's the first time they have been in an educational environment and away from their parents for an extended period of time. They are learning not just reading, writing and math, but how to be students.

Concepts such as raising your hand before speaking, waiting your turn to speak, lining up to leave the room and eating in a group setting are brand new for them.

"They may have eaten at home with a couple of people, but here I'm asking them to eat with close to 100 people," said Caleb Harris, the principal at Oakdale Heights Elementary School in Dallas. "That's very exciting. You have buddies you want to talk to instead of eating."

This year, their teachers and parents are facing uncharted waters, too: full-day kindergarten.

The state is now paying for kindergarteners to attend full day — previously, funding was given for just half days — so all school districts in Polk County are making the transition.

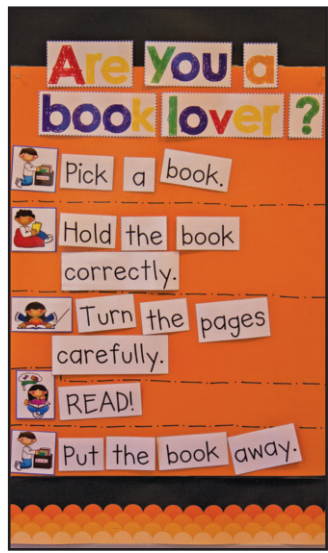
That means adding more classrooms, rearranging schedules to add more lunch periods, and making time for kindergarten students to participate in activities like art, music and physical education.

Between Dallas' two K-3 buildings, school employees had to find room for approximately 170 kindergarteners, filling three classrooms at Oakdale and four at Lyle.

Kindergarten teachers and administrators in Dallas studied full-day programs in



Tim Rawley works with teaching assistant Gwen Dudley on sorting cards by suit, a math exercise, during class on Thursday at Lyle Elementary in Dallas.



A poster teaches students book reading steps.



Teacher Kari Witt reads to her kindergarten class.

other districts for a year. Teachers were given 40 hours of paid planning time this summer to create a strategy for the beginning of the year, which will set year-long routines.

Kindergarteners have three recesses and lunch,

which breaks up the day giving teachers a chance to refocus on the next activity. That's important when working with 5-year-olds, Harris said.

"Their attention span at this stage of their life is short, so you have to be ur-

purposeful about your instruction," he said.

Teachers also must account for "the wiggles" by keeping the kids moving in class. Thursday, Witt's class danced to a dinosaur-themed song just before going to recess. They have to

line up before leaving the classroom, a process still requiring a lot of concentration and guidance this early in the year.

"They are just wiggly so quickly and I've lost their attention," said Connie Olliff, a new kindergarten teacher at Lyle this year. "Today we just took a walk, moving around. Sometimes we do some stretching."

Dancing is the consensus favorite, Lyle's teachers say, for getting 5-year-old energy out.

The longer school day won't change what the youngsters are expected to achieve, but gives teachers more time to help their students meet those standards.

"We still also want to remember, they're 5," Harris said. "I think that is an important factor that I don't want to ever forget. For many of these kids, this is a long day and they still need to be 5."

"We will have larger chunks of time for math, reading and writing so that is beneficial," he continued.

"We still have pretty high standards of what we would expect in a half-day program. I just think it will be more solidified. For those kids who may struggle, we have more opportunity to provide interventions for those kids who need it."

Witt added that full days make it possible to put activities into the schedule they couldn't before.

"We have the opportunity to add more fun back into kindergarten because we have more time," Witt said. "It's not all reading, writing and math."

In Central, making room for 215 kindergarteners meant some remodeling of classrooms that hadn't been in use previously.

Superintendent Buzz Brazeau said the biggest challenge has been scheduling kindergarteners for

music and PE classes.

"I think it's gone pretty well," he said. "We are learning new things every day."

In Falls City, the adjustment has been more for the teacher than the students. Elementary Principal Art Houghtaling said 11 of the 14 students in the class attended the district's pre-school program, which was longer than a half day.

For the past five years, kindergarteners in Falls City have had full school days, the first half in regular class and the afternoon in a session offered by the Child Development Center and FACES after-school program.

"It's not a huge adjustment," Houghtaling said.

Teacher Katie Waugh is the one needing to get used to a new schedule, moving from part time to full time, he said.

School officials say the results of moving to full days won't be clear until the end of the year — and will continue to be measured as the students move through their early elementary years.

"All the research indicates that kids who have more time do better," Brazeau said. "I believe that should be the case, and I would be concerned if that wasn't the case."

Falls City Superintendent Jack Thompson saw the impact firsthand when he worked in the Sntiam Canyon School District.

"Their results were amazing," he said. "Lots of kids would be reading by the end of the year."

Witt said her hope for the switch to full day is a better start to first grade.

"When they go to first grade, they can kind of take-off running because they will be used to staying all day," she said. "Yes, September is going to be an adjustment, but it won't take as long. The goal is that they get more accomplished sooner."



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