

Then & Now: Kindergarten's taking big baby steps

By JENNIFER COLTON

Once upon a time – back in the middle of the last century – kindergarten was option and many school districts didn't offer a program. Thirty years ago, kindergarten involved naps, snacks, and story time for a couple hours before five-year-olds headed back home. Today, kindergarten is full-day, full of structured play and looks a lot like the first-grade classroom of the past.

Originally designed as a school program to bridge home and school, kindergartens have become part of primary education (after all, it is the K-12 system) and the plastic naptime mats are gone.

In 2016, researchers from the University of Virginia announced that, from 1998 to 2011, kindergarten had become first-grade, and preschool has become kindergarten. In that study, 31 percent of kindergarten teachers in 1998 said a child should know how to read by the time he or she left kindergarten; 80 percent of teachers gave that same answer in 2010.

Tracy Culligan is a kindergarten teacher at Highland Hills Elementary in Hermiston. Although she has 20 years in public education, this is her first year back in the classroom after taking an eight-year break to raise a child and teach preschool.

"So much has changed in just eight years," she says. "Technology is huge. It is unfathomable to me knowing what these five-year-olds can do with an iPad."

Culligan says when she taught half-day preschool before, things felt rushed because they had so



many academic benchmarks to meet in such a short period of time. During the No Child Left Behind era, even kindergarten felt the need to meet benchmarks on academic assessments. Now, with a swing in education policy and full-day kindergarten across the state, kindergarten is changing again, making time for more structured play, science, and music.

"If you walk into a kindergarten classroom, what may seem like play to you is actually education-based play," Culligan notes. "Play is great. I don't want kids coming to school feeling pressured. The curiosity at this age is just phenomenal."

Those are good skills to have in an educational arena where kindergarteners are expected to know how to add and subtract, sight read words, and identify letter sounds by the time they finish the school year.

With kindergarten becoming an academic classroom, some of the

preparation work has moved down to preschool classrooms. Umatilla-Morrow County Head Start began early childhood services almost 40 years ago and Executive Director Maureen McGrath says although the focus is still the same – insuring children and families are well equipped for learning and life – the approaches to learning have changed.

"Today, there is so much science backing up every aspect of each approach we take to child development, learning, environments, and the preparation of teachers," McGrath says. "Our work has become specialized and steeped in insuring our practices are designed to assure children are truly ready to learn by the time they reach kindergarten."

That work is leading to the creation of a "Kinderbridge" in Head Start to help children smoothly transition to kindergarten.

What does kindergarten in 2018 look like?

Most classes begin with some sort of circle and welcome time. In Culligan's classroom, students sing a welcome song, do breathing exercises and interact with each other.

They'll do an hour of reading, then an hour of writing, before moving on to the first recess. Skill groups target specific reading skills before lunch, and after the meal and recess, students will spend time together going over the calendar, math and practice writing. They'll have an hour of math groups, then time in centers before a second recess. The afternoon involves exploration time, whether it's science, art, library, or structured play, and they'll end the day with Early Reading Intervention programs.

Snacks don't have their own time slot in the schedule, but Culligan says they are still worked in.

To help students prepare for kindergarten, parents can teach shapes and colors, how to spell their name, and how to interact with others and listen to adults. Ideally, they'd also be able to count to 20 and recognize some letters, but the educators say not to push too hard.

"I don't want parents to stress if their child isn't responding to it yet," Culligan says. "They might not be ready."

And educators all agree on the most important piece: reading with your child as often as you can and making it fun.

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