

Kindergarten classes to go full-time in fall

11 Oakland schools will extend hours

By Meredith May
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The traditional half-day kindergarten, on its way out at schools in the Bay Area and across the nation, will be history in some Oakland schools beginning this fall in the district's latest move to boost student performance.

Superintendent Dennis Chaconas revealed plans yesterday to begin adding full-day kindergarten at 11 elementary schools this fall, which will give children two more hours a day to play, nap and begin learning to read.

The announcement comes as the Oakland district plans to set up separate academies to help 600 failing eighth-graders, giving them an extra year to catch up.

Chaconas said there is ample evidence that full-day kindergarten is a logical step in improving achievement in the 54,000-student district. National studies show that more school at a younger age produces better grades later on. Half of all kindergartners in the United States attend full-time classes, up from 17 percent a decade ago.

This fall, 10 Oakland elementary schools on the state's "underperforming" list will offer parents a five-hour kindergarten to give youngsters more time to develop their social skills. Piedmont Elementary, although not on the list, will also offer it. Within five years, Chaconas wants all 60 elementary schools to have longer kindergarten days.

"I think the social side of the kindergarten curriculum has gotten marginalized by all this emphasis on lifting academic stan-

Full-time Oakland kindergartners

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dards," Chaconas said.

School districts nationwide and in the Bay Area have been lengthening the kindergarten day, especially schools in large urban areas that serve children who speak many languages or come to school without any time spent in preschool, said Pat Dorman, a consultant with the California Association for the Education of Young Children.

"A longer day gives the child time to relax, and gives the teacher more time to really understand the child," Dorman said. "Three hours sometimes isn't enough time each day."

The trend comes at a time when kindergarten teachers have students who speak more languages than ever, single parent and two-income parent families are on the rise, and public pressure is mounting to get children ready for mandatory state tests that begin in the second grade.

Students are supposed to learn to read by third grade, at which point they start reading in order to learn. But in Oakland, nearly three-fourths of the 3,500 third graders are reading below the national average.

If children have more time to develop socially, they will also have an easier time learning their ABCs, Chaconas said.

"We have to learn our letters and our numbers," said 4-year-old Chanel Albright, who already spends eight hours a day in a preschool program in the Oakland public schools.

The arrangement is perfect for her mother, Patrice Bozman, who works days as a toll taker on the San Rafael Bridge. Bozman is a big fan of longer kindergarten.

"Many kids these days are so used to full-day child care, so the argument that five-year-olds can't handle more than three hours of school really doesn't hold up anymore," said Ada Hand, the California Department of Education's

Expanded kindergarten

The following Oakland elementary schools will offer a five-hour kindergarten in the fall. Traditional, half-day kindergarten classes will still be available.

Emerson Elementary
Marcus A. Foster Elementary
Golden Gate Elementary
Hoover Elementary
Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary
Lafayette Elementary
Longfellow Elementary
Piedmont Avenue Elementary
Santa Fe Elementary
Sequoia Elementary
Sobrante Park Elementary

point person for kindergarten.

Every week, about five school districts call her asking for information about switching to full-day kindergarten, she said.

Studies show that kids in full-day kindergarten are more involved in the classroom, more likely to approach the teacher and less angry and shy than half-day kindergartners, according to a

1995 study by the Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois.

This year, Oakland compared reading scores of second-graders who had gone to the district's all-day preschool versus those who had not.

Although only 10 percent of the group studied went to all-day preschool, their reading scores were 10 to 17 percentile points higher than their peers, said Dolores Ward, early childhood education director for the Oakland schools.

In the Berryessa Union Elementary district in San Jose, three of the 10 schools offer full-day kindergarten. Although the district hasn't done any number crunching, Superintendent Gerry Harge said teachers and parents notice the children improving.

"Teachers feel they don't have to cram everything in a three-hour day," Harge said. "And they notice the children remember more when they return from winter break."

E-mail Meredith May at
mmay@sfnchronicle.com.