

# **KINDERGARTEN-PLUS**

## **Questions & Answers**

### **What is Kindergarten-Plus?**

Kindergarten-Plus was proposed by Sandra Feldman, president of the American Federation of Teachers, at the 2002 (July) Convention of the AFT. It would provide an extended-year, full-day kindergarten to disadvantaged children by enabling them to begin kindergarten the summer before they would ordinarily enter and to continue through the summer after kindergarten, right before entering first grade.

### **Why is this program needed?**

#### ***Inequality at the starting gate.***

The research is unequivocal in finding that disadvantaged children, on average, lag substantially behind other children in literacy, numeracy, and social skills even before formal schooling begins. The roots of the persistent achievement gap through school are to be found outside of school (U.S. Department of Education, 2000, 2001; Lee and Burkam, 2002; Alexander, Entwisle and Olson, 2001). (“Disadvantaged” means low socioeconomic status -- SES -- that is, having a variety of risk factors, such as being poor, having a parent or parents who have not finished high school, and/or who are not proficient in English.)

For example, 85 percent of beginning kindergartners in the highest SES group, compared to 39 percent in the lowest SES group, can recognize letters of the alphabet; 51 percent of the highest SES group can understand the beginning sounds of words, while only 10 percent of children in the lowest SES group can do so. Similarly, 98 percent of beginning kindergartners in the highest SES group, compared to 84 percent of their peers in the lowest SES group, can

recognize numbers and shapes; 77 percent of the highest SES group, but only 31 percent of the lowest SES group, can recognize relative size. In sum, at the onset of kindergarten, the average cognitive scores of children in the highest SES group are a staggering 60 percent above the scores of children in the lowest SES group (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2000; Educational Testing Service, 2002; Lee and Burkam, 2002).

***Disadvantaged children catch up, but gap remains.***

These findings by no means suggest that disadvantaged children cannot learn. To the contrary: once they are in school, they progress at least as rapidly as other children do. By the end of the kindergarten year, the basic-skills gap between disadvantaged and other children has virtually disappeared (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2001). School does indeed make a big difference.

Of course, advantaged children are progressing, too. And because they started out ahead in basic skills *before* kindergarten, they are more ready than disadvantaged children are to develop more complex skills *during* kindergarten. Therefore, at the end of the kindergarten year, although teachers have moved along disadvantaged children as rapidly as other children and have also closed the substantial basic-skills gap, a gap remains, with low SES children lagging behind other children in more sophisticated reading and math knowledge and skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

***More time needed.***

Clearly, then, if school makes such a big difference to disadvantaged children in compensating them for what they do not get in their time out of school, then more time in school would further accelerate their achievement. Moreover, if schools alone continue to be expected to compensate (and be held accountable) for the huge, out-of-school effects on academic achievement – and since, contrary to myth, schools are already boosting the achievement of disadvantaged youngsters at least as rapidly as they do with other children -- then it is hard to

imagine how they can do much better at catch up unless time in school is increased for disadvantaged children. By adding about four extra months to what is already a highly productive kindergarten experience for disadvantaged youngsters, Kindergarten-Plus could therefore further close the achievement gap.

### **Who would be eligible to participate in the program?**

It is estimated that there are 580,000 poor 5-year-olds who are not being served by an educational program during the summer before kindergarten and 650,000 not being served the summer after. (580,000 youngsters will be the base figure used in this document.)

### **What short-term benefits could we expect from Kindergarten-Plus?**

A study of youngsters who attended extended-year kindergarten found that they outperformed children from the regular kindergarten program the next year in math, reading, and general knowledge (Frazier and Morrison, 1998). Kindergarten-Plus would give disadvantaged children the chance to catch up earlier on basic skills – the summer before regular kindergarten entry – so they would be developmentally more ready to acquire higher skills during the regular kindergarten period. And if there was more time for reinforcement – the summer after kindergarten typically ends – the evidence suggests that the higher-skills gap that exists between advantaged and disadvantaged children at the end of the regular kindergarten year would narrow. Those more sophisticated skills are crucial for being able to read well by at least third grade.

Extending the kindergarten year for disadvantaged children also would enable earlier evaluation of academic and health risks, thereby preventing small problems from cascading into large ones that require remediation and special education.

### **What long-term benefits can we expect from Kindergarten-Plus?**

Four decades' worth of research, such as the Perry Preschool Study, the Abecedarian Project, the Chicago Longitudinal Study, and the Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study, have

found that high-quality early childhood education increases the likelihood that children in general, and disadvantaged children in particular, will become successful students and citizens. Such programs result in higher academic achievement and a reduced incidence of remedial and special education, of dropping out, delinquency, and subsequent unemployment or adult criminal activity. For every dollar spent on quality early childhood education, an estimated \$7 is saved (Barnett, 1995, 2001; NICHD, 1998; CED, 2002).

Of course, the long-term benefits of four extra months of kindergarten will be more modest than the ones cited above for pre-kindergarten education. But by reinforcing and accelerating kindergarten's already demonstrated benefits and by laying an earlier foundation for the acquisition of higher skills, Kindergarten-Plus could make a significant inroad in the achievement gap that originates outside of school and persists throughout school. And again, having all children read by at least third grade means recognizing that children who have had little or no reading foundation laid prior to school need more time than children who, in effect, have been readied for school since birth.

### **Can Kindergarten-Plus be a substitute for early childhood education?**

Absolutely not. Four extra months of kindergarten cannot entirely make up for disadvantaged children's relative lack of access to high-quality early childhood education in the first five years of life. The research shows that children who attended center-based preschool arrive in kindergarten with higher achievement, but only 20 percent of the most disadvantaged beginning kindergartners have been in such programs, compared to 65 percent of high SES children (U.S. Department of Education, 2001a; Lee and Burkum, 2002).

AFT's goal continues to be universal access to high-quality early childhood education, with priority for disadvantaged youngsters. But the nation's progress toward that goal is sluggish, and disadvantaged children pay the worst price. Kindergarten-Plus is doable and

affordable *now*. The public schools are there, and qualified kindergarten teachers are in place. The summer-before-kindergarten part of Kindergarten-Plus also could work by expanding and improving Head Start. (Note: the 580,000 five-year-olds here termed eligible for Kindergarten-Plus include children not now being served by a Head Start summer program.)

Neither preschool nor Kindergarten-Plus can be thought of as full inoculations against the corrosive consequences of poverty, including the achievement gap. Unfortunately, many effective programs have been criticized or even abandoned precisely because of the assumption that a one-shot inoculation, without continuing follow-through, would be sufficient immunization against a persistent condition. Youngsters who continue to experience poverty will continue to need, and deserve, extra supports in school.

### **Would any sort of Kindergarten-Plus program work?**

No. Quality counts, and quality means, at a minimum: certified kindergarten teachers; a program explicitly focused on academic and social readiness; and small class size. Quality, of course, is important for all children, but especially so for disadvantaged children, who must rely on schooling to make up for what their families and communities are unable to provide.

For disadvantaged children especially, quality also means a full-day kindergarten program because the reading and math skills outcomes of such programs tend to be better (U.S. Department of Education, 2001; <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=31kinder.h21>; Nielsen and Cooper-Martin, 2002). Presently, only 56 percent of 5-year-olds get full-day kindergarten. Kindergarten-Plus is therefore about providing disadvantaged youngsters more time in a high-quality, full-day kindergarten program.

The most recent lesson about the potency of simultaneously addressing quality and time in kindergarten comes from Montgomery County, Md. In 2000, the county decided to make the transition from half-day to full-day kindergarten by beginning with the highest poverty schools.

The school superintendent also succeeded in getting a research-based kindergarten curriculum and smaller class size in place and providing special training to early childhood teachers and principals. Researchers tracked the reading progress made by 16,000 children over two years in kindergarten and then in first grade and found that achievement rose for all students in the intensive, all-day kindergarten in high-poverty schools, but low-income children made the biggest gains, both within their schools and compared to low-income children in other schools in the county. Moreover, contrary to expectation, the non-poor kindergarten children in these high-poverty schools achieved at least as well as their peers in advantaged schools (Nielsen and Cooper-Martin, 2002; Washington Post, Oct. 1, 2002, page A1).

### **How much would Kindergarten-Plus cost?**

The estimated per-pupil cost is \$1,974 per year. (See [Kindergarten-Plus Cost Calculations](#) for how this figure was derived.) To provide the program to every poor, unserved 5-year-old -- at least 580,000 children -- would cost \$1.14 billion per year. Serving the neediest 25 percent of these children would cost about \$285 million per year. (To account for the additional 70,000 students potentially in the post-kindergarten summer only, add \$70 million to the universal coverage figure or \$17 million to the 25 percent coverage figure.)

This funding is based on providing Kindergarten-Plus youngsters with the same supports elementary school students receive during the regular school year, including meals, transportation, school nurses, and counseling and special education services when required. Teachers would be certified and receive professional development support to the same extent as other teachers. Children in Kindergarten-Plus would also have music, art, and other specialist teachers available to them on the same basis as during the regular school year.

### **How does the cost of Kindergarten-Plus compare to other federal spending?**

The federal government annually spends \$48.9 billion on elementary, secondary, and higher education. The \$1.14 billion needed to provide Kindergarten-Plus to 580,000 poor children would be just over 2 percent of the education budget. Providing the program to the poorest 25 percent of these children would cost \$285 million, or just over one-half percent of the education budget -- less than one hundredth of 1 percent of overall federal spending.

### **How does the cost of Kindergarten-Plus compare to recent federal tax breaks?**

The tax breaks received by WorldCom in one year alone, \$1.1 billion in 2000, would have paid to provide Kindergarten-Plus to 95 percent of the eligible 5-year-old children in the country. Between 2001 and 2010, the richest 1 percent of Americans will receive federal income tax cuts totaling \$477 billion. That is \$47.7 billion per year compared to the \$1.14 billion per year it would cost to provide Kindergarten-Plus to 580,000 disadvantaged children; \$47.7 billion per year vs. \$285 million per year – less than 2 percent of the tax cut enacted last year -- to provide the program to the poorest 25 percent, or 145,000, of these children (Citizens for Tax Justice, April 2002; June 2002).

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