



Testimony of  
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Education Committee Hearing  
February 25, 2015

***SB 943 AN ACT CONCERNING CHARTER SCHOOL MODERNIZATION AND REFORM  
SB 942 AN ACT ESTABLISHING ALL DAY KINDERGARTEN***

Good afternoon Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee. My name is Patti Fusco. I am a teacher in West Haven public schools and I am the Jurisdictional Vice President of AFT Connecticut, a diverse state federation of more than 90 local unions representing nearly 30,000 public and private sector employees. Our members include more than 15,000 teachers, paraprofessionals, school nurses and other school personnel across the state. It is on their behalf that I appear before you to testify on a two bills before you today, as well as the behalf of the state's students, who are not able to advocate for themselves.

***SB 943 AN ACT CONCERNING CHARTER SCHOOL MODERNIZATION AND REFORM***

SB 943 is well intentioned, but does not go nearly far enough to make charter schools accountable and hold to the same standards as traditional public schools. It is little more than an incremental approach to charter school accountability. What we need is wholesale change to ensure that our students in the charter schools are getting all that they are entitled to. I ask this committee to add more transparency and accountability requirements such as those we have provided the committee. They are also attached to AFT Connecticut President Melodie Peter's testimony.

Our charter school laws have almost no way to hold charter schools accountable for finances, student achievement, or administration. In a state that has such high standards for public schools, this is deplorable. ALL schools need to be held to high standards.

***SB 944 AN ACT ESTABLISHING ALL DAY KINDERGARTEN***

We support SB 944's requirement to establish All Day Kindergarten in districts that don't already provide it. Full Day Kindergarten helps close the achievement gap between young children from minority and low income backgrounds and their peers. It allows all students the time they need to reach the academic and social/emotional skills they need to be successful in school.

In their landmark longitudinal study of full-day versus half-day kindergarten, researchers Jill Walston and Jerry West found that students in full-day classes learned more in reading and mathematics than their peers in half-day classes—after adjusting for differences in race, poverty, and intellectual levels, among other things. **All** students experienced learning gains. By giving students and teachers more quality time to engage in constructive learning activities, full-day kindergarten benefits everyone.

A new study from Chloe R. Gibbs at the University of Virginia, available at [http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/34\\_Full\\_Day\\_KG\\_Impact.pdf](http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/34_Full_Day_KG_Impact.pdf), has shown many benefits for the Full Day program. The students will be studied throughout their academic career, therefore this information is incomplete, but early results of this first-of-its-kind randomized trial of full-day kindergarten shows sizable learning advantages for full-day students at the end of the kindergarten year. Most notably, the advantage for Hispanic full-day students over other Hispanic kindergartners is nearly twice that seen in the overall sample. Gibbs calculates that full-day kindergarten produces greater learning gains per dollar spent than other well known early education interventions (such as [Head Start](#) and class size reductions).

More importantly, the positive effect raised *outcomes for all students*. A full-day of kindergarten made *all* students better off, while also closing the literacy achievement gap between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students by 70 percent.

Many teachers will sadly admit that they tend to do less small group work in half day programs, simply due to the limitations of time. An all-day kindergarten program can provide children the opportunity to spend more time engaged in active, child-initiated, small-group activities. Teachers in all-day kindergarten classrooms feel less stressed by time constraints and have more time to get to know children and meet their needs. A study done by Ray and Smith in 2010 showed that an all-day kindergarten provides the ability to effectively provide the type of instruction that allows for differentiation and other pedagogical approaches which benefits low-achieving students.

Clare McCann, a policy analyst with the New America Foundation, said that the Common Core State Standards, a set of English and math standards for students in kindergarten through 12th grades voluntarily adopted by most of the 50 states, are also driving interest in expanding full-day kindergarten.

"The standards are so rigorous, I think school districts and educators are feeling like it might be difficult to meet those standards if they're not allowed more time with children and more time learning," McCann said.

CCM, COST, and CAFE will likely say that it is an unfunded mandate and districts can't afford it. I say we can't afford not to require it. We want to provide a high quality education to every student in Connecticut. We've invested heavily in early childhood education in the last four years. We have been adding preschool slots for students and working hard to give kids a good start. If we don't follow through with all day kindergarten in all districts, we risk backsliding on that investment. Two and a half hours of school is not long enough to provide students with all that they need to learn in Kindergarten.

There is \$14.4M of new money for charter schools in the Governor's proposed budget. Rather than add to charter schools we should use that money for districts that do not already have full day kindergarten programs. Kindergarten is now intensive academically. Kids don't just play and sing a few songs. Full day kindergarten is no longer a luxury any child can afford to miss. Volumes of research tell us what we already know – that early childhood education is vital to a child's lifelong academic success. I suggest full day kindergarten be required for all school districts, not just those that have been designated as Alliance Districts.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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# The half-day kindergarten time crunch

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Mary Waldman began her career teaching kindergartners how to hold a pencil and write their ABCs. Fifteen years later, she is teaching Loudoun County students to read books and write stories. While [academic expectations have grown exponentially](#) over the years, the length of the school day has stayed the same: Three hours.

She makes the most of her half-day class. Recess is not required. She rarely sets up paints or musical instruments or puppets. Some kindergarten teachers stopped offering a snack, because it takes up too much time. Waldman draws the line there.

“They are 5 and 6,” she said. “They need food so they can power through.”

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About 75 percent of kindergartners nationwide are enrolled in full-day programs, three times the rate of a few decades ago, as many school districts

have come to view kindergarten as an academic starting point, rather than a practicing ground for the rhythms and routines of school. But that leaves about a million students for whom kindergarten still lasts just a few hours a day.

That partial day represents a time crunch as teachers try to keep up with more challenging lessons. Rigorous Common Core standards are rolling out in 46 states, applying uniform expectations for the first time in kindergarten days that range from two to seven hours long. Virginia did not adopt the national approach, but the state has raised its own standards.

“It’s like saying, ‘I want you to prepare for a marathon, but you can only train for half the time,’” said Kyle Snow, director of the Center for Applied Research at the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Loudoun County is the only district in the Washington region and one of just four in Virginia that does not offer universal full-day kindergarten. Other districts are [pushing resources and attention to preschool](#), reflecting a national effort — which President Obama and his Education Department have endorsed — to expand access to early education based on research showing that quality early learning promote success across a broad spectrum.

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Some Loudoun parents view the issue as one of equity: Their children aren't getting the same preparation as other students, but they are held to the same standards, and they have to pay thousands of dollars extra if they want to have their children attend private schools for the other half of the day. Loudoun County officials believe their students emerge from half-day kindergarten doing just as well as any others, and they cite the prohibitive expense of expanding kindergarten at a time of tight budgets.

"I hear that today's kindergarten is yesterday's first grade," said Lindsay Weissbratten, an Ashburn mother who started a parent group to advocate for universal full-day kindergarten. "Loudoun children deserve to have the same education as the rest of the state."

[The District offers preschool](#) to all its 3- and 4-year-olds, and Arlington, Montgomery and Prince George's counties offer full-day pre-kindergarten classes to all children from low-income families.

State policies leave school districts wide discretion to define the kindergarten day, according to [a 2013 analysis by the Children's Defense Fund](#) . Ten states,

including Maryland, as well as the District, require full-day kindergarten. Six states don't require school districts to provide kindergarten at all.

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State Sen. George L. Barker (D-Fairfax) introduced a bill in Richmond this year that would require full-day kindergarten statewide. But the bill failed in the Senate Education and Health Committee on an 8 to 7 vote. He said in an interview that Loudoun lobbied hard against the proposed mandate.

“Unfortunately, Loudoun County, the richest county in America, has turned its back on its children and families,” he said in a statement, noting that last year no school in the county provided a full-day program to all of its kindergarten students.

Sharon Ackerman, Loudoun's assistant superintendent for instruction, said many of the county's students come to kindergarten well-prepared by their families and private preschools, so the focus has been on bringing a longer day to those with the “greatest needs.”

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Loudoun offers full-day programs to about a third of its 5,000 kindergartners, most of them English learners who get an additional half-day of language instruction. About 120 students, including graduates of Head Start, attend regional full-day kindergarten programs, and this year the district began offering full-day kindergarten at four high-poverty schools.

The School Board's proposed budget for next year includes five more schools with similar demographics.

Loudoun officials say extra classrooms and teachers for full-day kindergarten would be too pricey, particularly given the already steep costs associated with keeping pace with the county's growth. A 2012 analysis by the school system found it would cost as much as \$65 million to nearly double its kindergarten space and staff to accommodate full-day classes for everyone.

Fairfax County took more than a decade to ease the financial impact and [phase in full-day kindergarten](#). But fast-growing Prince William County made the leap in about four years, [an expedited effort](#) that Superintendent Steven L. Walts called his "greatest accomplishment."

“I feel like I did every subsequent grade level a favor,” Walts said.

[\[READ: Universal full-day kindergarten my greatest accomplishment\]](#)

Some School Board members in Loudoun said they don't see an educational need to extend the program countywide in the high-performing, well-to-do community.

“If you look at the test scores for our kids in this district, we do as fine or better,” said board member Kevin Kuesters of Broad Run.

He cited research that shows students in full-day programs get a boost academically in early years compared to those in half-day programs, but they don't maintain their edge over time.

Early-education advocates say the benefits of full-day programs go beyond test scores. The longer days [have been tied to better attendance, enhanced social and emotional development and have reduced the need for future retention and remediation](#) . Children who come from poverty tend to benefit the most, “but it's not an either-or,” said MaryLee Allen, acting policy director at the Children's Defense Fund.

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Waldman calls her kindergartners at Creighton's Corner Elementary “busy bees.” Colorful cutouts of bumble bees hover over the workstations that her class cycled through on a recent Friday.

Outfitted with hole punchers, glue sticks or No. 2 pencils, the children practiced some of the skills they have been learning, including telling time, counting by fives, counting by tens, comparing the first and 16th presidents of the United States, writing sentences about their favorite healthy foods and identifying equations or numbers that are greater than or equal to 100.

“Whew! We’ve been busy today!” Waldman said as the students gathered on the carpet to review plans for the coming week. They had already read a poem and a story together. Next she sent them scurrying for their color-coded book bags, so they could read independently before they collected their coats and got ready to leave.

The teachers cover most of the academic standards in the partial day. “We use the three hours bell-to-bell for, particularly, literacy,” Ackerman said.

What is missing is the chance to go deeper into lessons and enough time to learn through play and exploration, which experts say is developmentally appropriate for younger students.

“If you are forced to spend so much time on heavy academics, that is not quality early childhood learning,” said Fairfax School Board member Jane K. Strauss of Dranesville, who cited this as a key reason the district adopted a universal full day. “You don’t want kids being forced to sit still and accomplish tasks for which they are too young.”

Parent Kimberly Murray said she was “stunned” that Loudoun did not offer full-day kindergarten when she moved from Vienna, where her two older sons

had gone through a full-day program. The stay-at-home mother was concerned that Loudoun's program would not be as challenging.

"He was reading before he started kindergarten," she said of her youngest son, Carter. "He didn't need to practice. He was definitely ready for a full day."

So after morning kindergarten finished at 10:30, 6-year-old Carter took his place in a long line of students who supplement their public kindergarten experience with another half day at a private school.

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The kiss-and-ride outside his Ashburn school was filled with white vans and school buses bearing the names of private schools, tutoring centers and taekwon do academies. Carter boarded the bus for Golden Pond, a small brick school tucked behind a strip mall 15 minutes away.

The afternoon kindergarten enrichment program, which costs about \$6,000, starts with recess. Then comes lunch.

"We are a loud room," said Carter's afternoon kindergarten teacher, Maggie Gearing, over the din of Pizza Friday. "We know they've been sitting all morning; they need to just burn off some energy."

After lunch, the children typically have Spanish or music and lots of time for group art projects and other hands-on lessons based loosely on the state's Standards of Learning. Then there's another recess.

It's like what kindergarten used to be "before it became teaching to the test," said admissions officer Margaret Grace.

That Friday afternoon, Carter's class hosted a "fairy tale tea" with cookies and lemonade for parents to celebrate the end of a month-long unit on fairy tales. The students dressed up like knights and princesses with hand-made shields and crowns and sang "Fee Fi Fo Fum" while their parents recorded it on smartphones.

Waldman said her students often tell her about what they do in their afternoon classes, and she mentally stores them in the category of Things They Used To Do — like playing dress up and tying shoes.

"Now we are like . . . there's no time," said her assistant, Diana Rigley. "Just keep going!"

*Rachel Weiner contributed to this report.*

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