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P-O considers switch to full-day kindergarten

By Anne Danahy
adanahy@centredaily.com

Philipsburg-Osceola Area could become one of a growing number of school districts in Pennsylvania offering full-day kindergarten.

The school district is considering several options for full-day programs this fall, including having it at all its elementary schools and continuing to offer half-day sessions. Right now, school officials say they are trying to find out what the community thinks about the options.

"We really want to take a look at it," said Superintendent Sam Peterson. What funding is available from the state, and how long it might last, also will be considered, he said.

Gov. Ed Rendell has included support for full-day kindergarten through block grants in his proposed 2004-05 budget. As of 2002-03, about one-third of Pennsylvania's kindergartners were in full-day programs, up from 25 percent in 1997-98, according to the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. That organization and others point to studies showing the benefits students get out of full days.

Philipsburg is not the only Centre County district looking at full-day options.

The Bald Eagle Area school board voted Thursday to switch to full-day kindergarten this fall if funding from the state comes through. State College Area now offers full-day kindergarten through a lottery but is considering making it available to all students this fall. Penns Valley Area started full-day kindergarten at all its elementary schools in 1999-2000, following an optional pilot program, and Bellefonte area switched from half-day to full-day kindergarten in 2002.

Philipsburg-Osceola Area board President Cathy Hayes said the district is considering it now in part because the new Philipsburg Elementary School is scheduled to open in the fall. That, along with redistricting of three elementary schools, will make space for full-day kindergarten available.

Connie Baine, vice president of Osceola Mills Elementary's parent-teacher organization, likes the idea. She has a child in kindergarten this year, and said between sick days, snow days and delays, a lot of school is missed.

"I have a younger one. I hope that by the time she's in kindergarten it's all-day. For what they're expected to learn, I think they need the time," said Baine.

Tina Sinclair, a third-grade teacher at North Lincoln Hill Elementary who will have a son in kindergarten in the fall, said she hopes the board supports the idea.

"I feel a full-day kindergarten is a step in the right direction. These are critical years in learning. I feel if the program allows for periods of relaxed pace activities integrated with periods of more intense activities it will be appropriate for most children," said Sinclair, who is also president of that school's parent-teacher organization.

But full-day kindergarten has its share of detractors and people who would like it to remain optional. When State College Area was considering offering a full-day program at Ferguson Township Elementary in fall 2003, one possibility being considered was combining full- and half-day classes. That upset some parents who thought it was unfair to students who would only be there for half of the day. In the end, the district kept the classes separate.

Peterson said he would like to see the district offer parents the option of full- and half-day programs.

Susan Genesi, principal at North Lincoln Hill and Wallaceton Boggs Elementary schools, said she thinks the topic does need to be discussed.

"Kindergarten is not state-mandated, but it's a start to have students ready to be proficient in math and reading, so we've met the No Child Left Behind requirements by the time they get to third grade," Genesi said. "It's a building block."

Anne Danahy can be reached at 231-4648.

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