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Kindergartners learn, have fun all day

Bald Eagle Area teachers, pupils begin first year of full-day program

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PORT MATILDA - On the first day of school, Laurice Mitchell and her kindergarten students at Port Matilda Elementary School were already counting to five.

"Give me five," she said when she wanted her students' attention. Then, she and her students held up their hands and used their fingers to count.

Listening was an important part of the first day of kindergarten, and so was counting.

To help its students succeed, Bald Eagle Area School District joined a growing number of schools this year offering full-day kindergarten rather than half-day.

All five school districts in Centre County now have full-day kindergarten.

"Twenty years ago, kindergarten was for socialization," said Barry A. Bowe, principal of Port Matilda Elementary and the district's director of elementary education.

Now, the state has specific standards for what students are supposed to learn in math and reading, Bowe said, and the teachers need time to help the students master those skills.

"What we teach them is everyone's a writer. If they just start at the beginning of the year with squiggly lines, that's OK," Mitchell said.

By the end of the year, the goal is for students to be able to write complete thoughts, with beginnings, middles and ends.

On Tuesday, Mitchell began familiarizing her students with the letter "A": "Does your name start with A?" was written on a board.

The students sat on the red reading carpet in the classroom and studied the cards Mitchell gave each of them on which was written each student's name. Each student put the name on the "yes" or "no" side.

"How many don't start with A? Let's count them," Mitchell said.

After that, she read them a book that included all the letters in the alphabet.

The students were attentive, but occasionally their minds wandered.

"Mrs. Mitchell, when are we going to eat?" Margaret Cowen, 5, asked, during a break in the story.

Keeping the kindergartners' attention for a full day is a task that a growing number of teachers are tackling. According to the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, as of 2002-03, about a third of the state's kindergartners were in full-day programs, up from 25 percent in 1997-98.

Philipsburg-Osceola Area School District, which began classes a week earlier than other Centre County districts, switched to full-day kindergarten this year too.

Assistant Superintendent Susan Genesi said that while federal requirements for what students are supposed to know were a factor in the decision, another was realizing how a full day of school can help students' learning.

"I believe that as time has gone on, we're finding that the learning of students is different and their needs are different and we can best meet those needs through a full-day program," she said.

Both districts are supporting their programs with block grants that Gov. Ed Rendell included in the state budget. Both also offer parents the option of picking their children up after a half day, as does State College Area School District.

This year, that district switched from a district lottery for a limited number of full-day kindergarten spots to making a full day the standard for kindergarten classes.

As of Tuesday, 382 students were registered for kindergarten, including 15 whose parents were opting to pick them up after a half day.

Tuesday was orientation day, with the first full day for kindergarten students coming today, said Cameron Bausch, assistant to the superintendent.

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