COMMENTARY

English Learners and Full-Day Kindergarten

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Many state and local school district policymakers have enacted policies to expand kindergarten from half-day to full-day because of perceived benefits to student learning. In California, as of 2008, about 43 percent of public school students were enrolled in full-day classes. Research on the effectiveness of full-day programs is limited to short-term benefits, but absent from past research is the effect on English learner (EL) students, who may especially benefit from extra time. EL students are a large portion of the California student population and are at greater risk of failing to meet state education standards.

In this study, authors Jill S. Cannon, Alison Jacknowitz, and Gary Painter examine the effect of participating in full-day classes on the early achievement, grade retention, and English fluency of English learners. Additionally, they analyze whether the effect of full-day kindergarten varies by student and school-level characteristics.

The researchers analyze student-level data from the Los Angeles Unified School District (LASUD). LAUSD data are well-suited for this research as there is a large English learner population in the district and substantial variation exists in full-day kindergarten attendance during the study period. The panel nature of the data allows English learners to be followed from kindergarten through third grade.

The researchers find that, on average, EL full-day students do not perform better than their EL half-day counterparts on first or second grade academic measures. However, differences between full-day and half-day EL students exist at certain margins of the achievement distribution. First, they find that full-day students are 5.2 percentage points less likely to be retained in kindergarten or first grade than their half-day peers. This finding suggests that spending more time in kindergarten may help students at risk of being retained. Second, EL students with higher levels of English fluency at kindergarten entry were found to benefit from full-day kindergarten more than their low-English fluency peers in several ways: they are more likely to be reclassified as fluent-English proficient by the end of second grade, have higher first and second grade reading skills, and have slightly higher first grade English fluency. Finally, this study finds that students in the lowest performing schools receive the largest benefit from attending a full-day kindergarten program.

These results suggest that although EL full-day students do not perform better on average than their half-day peers on first and second grade measures, there are benefits to being in a full-day program for certain subgroups. The decision to offer full-day kindergarten should be guided by assessing these benefits in relation to the costs to implement full-day classes for individual school districts.

The full study is here: Jill S. Cannon, Alison Jacknowitz, Gary Painter, The effect of attending full-day kindergarten on English learner students, Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, Volume 30, Issue 2, pages 287–309, Spring 2011

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