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Full-day kindergarten to start in Moraga

By *Sophie Braccini*

Beginning next fall, Moraga School District will implement a full-day kindergarten, probably with the present first-grade schedule.

Carolyn Parker, MSD's director of curriculum and instruction, stressed that the additional minutes will allow for a more balanced day, with more instructional time, but also more social and emotional time.

"It's about creating the best teaching environment for the students," said kindergarten teacher Amanda Lorie.

Parker presented to the MSD board on April 13 the results of months of studies, other districts visits, parents' surveys and teachers' discussions. She said that so many reports, including large-scale national ones, say longer kindergarten days have shown gains in math and literacy, as well as better first-grade readiness and less need for intervention, which she equated to a cost savings for the district in the long run.

The director added that studies and visits made to the Palo Alto School District, which implemented the full-day kindergarten last year, showed that students adjust well to the full-day program, and often flourish academically as well as emotionally and socially.

Lorie said that this was exactly the benefits teachers were looking for when they asked the MSD to look into the longer day. She said that she and her colleagues were looking for the best learning environment for their classrooms, where conversation and engagement can take place, where students are able to let down their guard and take risks. She said that the extended day was a gift of time.

"We are working so hard to create this optimal environment, and for doing so we have to cut things, cut lessons or strategy short, so we can go through the whole curriculum, and we also have to cut on their playtime and socialization time," she said.

The teacher stressed that the purpose was not to teach more but to give time for students to try new skill sets, and still have time to be five-or six-year -olds.

The program is not that avant-garde; in 2012 76 percent of kindergartens in the U.S. were full-day programs, 46 percent in California. In the neighboring districts of Orinda and Lafayette, the students can stay for lunch, but no additional instructional time is provided.

Parker said she looked at studies about possible downsides. One argument that came out through the parents' survey that was done prior to the decision was fatigue, that the day would be too long for the children. The director explained that according to her research, as long as the day is balanced and includes enough playtime that would not be the case.

The increased day will add 55 of instructional minutes and 40 minutes for lunch and recess.

The transitional kindergarten program is not included in the extended day and will remain morning only. The new kindergarten day will start next fall at the beginning of the 2017-18 school year. The next steps this year will be giving time to kindergarten teachers for collaboration and discussion of best practices, finalizing the new schedule and communicating with parents.

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