

Fully-funded, all-day kindergarten in five years?

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Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback's announcement Dec. 16, 2013, that he plans to promote — and fund — all-day kindergarten statewide was met with relief and excitement by educators. If Brownback's plan becomes reality, Kansas would become the 12th state nationwide to provide full-day kindergarten at no charge. That's a refreshing change for educators and students, who have seen state funding for education shrink dramatically over the past five years. Between 2008 and now, Kansas cut its education spending by 16.5 percent, a decrease greater than all but three other states.

“At a time when states and the nation are trying to produce workers with the skills to master new technologies and adapt to the complexities of a global economy, this decline in state educational investment is cause for concern,” noted a report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a Washington-based think tank.



More discouraging news came in November, when Kansas students' overall scores on reading and math dipped for the first time since 2000. The state department of education said the poor results were due in part to the change in academic standards for various subjects, which meant schools had not been able to prepare adequately for the new tests.

In his December announcement, the governor said all-day kindergarten could improve reading scores for Kansas students.

"I've put a big focus on trying to get higher reading scores early on. I think this is one of the next steps that we need to do," the Republican governor told The Associated Press in an interview.

Administrators in Liberal have stated similar opinions. At a Dec. 12, 2013, meeting, superintendent of schools Paul Larkin said all-day kindergarten was a key component in the big picture of district improvement.

"It's vital for us to move in that direction if we ever want to close the achievement gap," he said, pointing out that Liberal is one of only 13 school districts in the state that do not offer all-day kindergarten. A week later, he added that "with the challenges we have with demographics and the ELL (English Language Learner) community — as is true for all districts that have a high poverty rate — it is vital that you get those kids in school all day, as soon as you can, if you ever expect to get the achievement where you want it to be."

For voters and district patrons in Liberal, Brownback's announcement was perfectly timed.

"This is a big, big deal for Kansas and for us in Liberal," noted USD 480 director of auxiliary services Robert Burkey. "It couldn't come at a better time."

With a bond issue anticipated for spring, the district has spent the past nine months gathering citizen input. A list of priorities expressed by Liberal residents ranked all-day kindergarten fourth, after three life-or-death issues — storm shelters for students, elimination of modular

classrooms (unsafe in tornadoes and hard to secure from intruders), and improved security measures at all district locations.

Architecture consultant Nicole Lopez of DLR Associates put it this way:

In terms of educational goals, "the elementary level is the community's first priority."

The desire for all-day kindergarten wasn't just talk; when DLR crunched the numbers, 85 percent of people who attended community meetings said they favored adding pre-K classes, at a cost of \$1.50 in higher property taxes per month.

Even so, additional classroom space would be just the beginning of what it takes to implement all-day kindergarten. The bond issue could pay for construction and renovation of classrooms in the five elementary schools the community groups envisioned.

"For teachers and supplies and everything else, we'd have to foot the bill with local dollars," Burkey said. That's because at present, Kansas funds only half-day kindergarten.

"One of the big questions we've been asked in the community is 'how are we going to fund operating costs for kindergarten, once the construction is done?'" noted Larkin. "The governor's support might be a great answer for that."

Brownback's proposal, yet to be formally introduced as legislative action, would commit \$16 million a year for five years running. Thus, Larkin noted,

"If this bond issue is successful, by the time we have buildings built, the funding will be place."

"It would be a great double win for the community," Burkey said.

PLANNING PROGRESS

As the next USD 480 board of education meeting approaches, a telephone survey continues to gather community input about what the district needs. After more than 30 meetings with 1,000 participants, the board, USD 480 and architectural firm, DLR, felt it best to take a final survey of public opinion.

The board will meet Monday, a Vision Team meeting is set for Jan. 13, "we will mull things over, and then on Jan. 20, we hope to be able to call a vote," outlining final details of a bond issue proposal, said superintendent of schools Paul Larkin.