

IS JUNIOR READY FOR JUNIOR KINDERGARTEN?

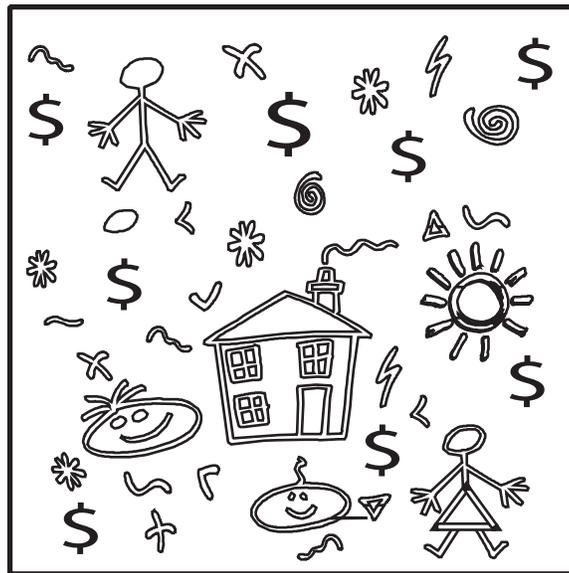
PHILIP J. MCDADE

Five years ago, with little fanfare, the McFarland School District in suburban Madison decided to begin offering full-day classes for its kindergarten students.

The district had been offering only the traditional half-day kindergarten classes. But armed with surveys indicating parental support for a full-day program, the district made the switch and lengthened the school day for its youngest students.

The change, widely publicized and discussed in school board meetings, generated hardly any controversy in the district. Indeed, the district now finds only one in ten parents of prospective kindergarten students — barely enough for a full class — wants their child to attend kindergarten for only half the day. Like hundreds of other districts in Wisconsin, McFarland has found that full-day kindergarten has become the norm.

Then, earlier this year, McFarland school officials began discussions on creating a “junior kindergarten” program for four-year-old children. After all, they reasoned, numerous national studies have stressed the impor-



tance of early brain development, and schools should play a role in that. Teachers in the district had reported that some five-year-old kindergarten students were poorly prepared for their first year of school, and would likely benefit from a program to get them up to speed. Besides, the district had received little opposition in implementing a full-day kindergarten

program just a few days earlier.

“Little did we know...” said McFarland school Superintendent Ken Brittingham with a trace of weariness in his voice.

McFarland’s attempt to create a junior kindergarten program created a small storm of protest in the community. Some of it came from parents, critical that the school district was attempting to educate students at an age when they thought children belonged at home. But the loudest criticism came from local day-care centers and pre-schools — places currently serving a bevy of four-year-olds from McFarland.

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“I thought we’d run into a little bit of, ‘You’re taking the baby out of the mother’s arms,’” Brittingham said of the district’s critics. “What they were really concerned about was losing money.”

The school district has since backed off its plans to implement a junior kindergarten program, and plans to study the idea further this fall.

McFarland’s experience with junior kindergarten has not been unusual. As more and more districts in Wisconsin consider offering programs to children as young as four, it has raised a host of questions. Among them:

- When is the best time for children to begin formal schooling? When should a parent’s responsibility for preparing a child for school cede to those of a school district?
- Can Wisconsin, which already supplies two out of every three dollars spent by local school districts, afford a broad-based educational program for four-year-olds?
- What happens when the desires of a local school district collide with the interests of the private sector providing programs for young children?

An Emerging Political Issue

Beyond those considerations, it’s clear that four-year-old kindergarten has emerged as a major political issue in Wisconsin. It became a major sticking point in this year’s state budget debate, with Democrats and Republicans taking predictable positions. Democrats, who never seem to find any educational spending they oppose, pushed for increased state spending for four-year-old programs. Republicans, fearing increased state spending on educational programs would eat into their push for state tax cuts, argued that local districts could pay for four-year-old kindergarten if they wanted it. In the end, the two sides split the difference, with state aid to four-year-old kindergarten being cut by 40 percent, but not zeroed out as Republican leaders had hoped.

Still, politicians got into the act during the Legislature’s debate over funding four-year-

old kindergarten programs. Attorney General James Doyle and U.S. Representative Tom Barrett of Milwaukee — the two highest-profile Democrats running for governor — weighed in strongly in favor of four-year-old kindergarten programs. Their voices were quickly echoed by new state schools Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster, a career teacher and principal from Madison who was elected this past spring with the endorsed help (and political clout) of the Wisconsin Education Association Council teachers’ union. And WEAC, as any student of Wisconsin politics can tell you, is anxiously awaiting the first gubernatorial election in Wisconsin since 1982 that won’t feature Tommy Thompson on the ballot. WEAC has already laid the groundwork for taking education issues front and center in the 2002 contest for governor.

Some Republicans scrambled to ward off criticism of their party during the legislative debate over four-year-old kindergarten, not wanting the GOP to be perceived as anti-education. GOP Representative Luther Olsen, R-Berlin, who chairs the Assembly Education Committee, criticized the push by his fellow Republican Assembly leaders to zero out state funding for four-year-old kindergarten. Olsen, a shrewd observer of educational trends, surely took notice that most of the districts in Wisconsin offering junior kindergarten (and receiving state aid for it) are in small town, rural communities like Fall River, Fennimore, and Wauwatosa — places that form the backbone of the GOP’s political base. (Only a few of the state’s larger districts — notably Milwaukee, La Crosse, Sheboygan, and Wauwatosa — offer four-year-old kindergarten. The rest are scattered throughout the state, primarily in small districts with less than 100 four-year-old kindergartners.)

Governor Scott McCallum sided with the advocates of junior kindergarten in approving the state budget. McCallum, who has frequently voiced more support for public education initiatives than some of his Republican colleagues in the Assembly leadership, vetoed GOP-backed plans to reduce state funding for four-year-old kindergarten. McCallum cited

the experience of his own daughter, who began school in Madison as a four-year-old kindergarten student. McCallum, who frequently cites education as the linchpin to Wisconsin's economic fortunes, said the state should support efforts to foster early childhood education.

Wisconsin's Kindergarten Tradition

Wisconsin has long been a pioneer in the education of the state's youngest children. The first kindergarten class in the nation was formed in Watertown in 1865. Within eight years, Manitowoc had authorized the first public kindergarten classes in the state. The state began providing money for local kindergarten classes way back in 1927.

The same holds true for junior kindergarten. Wisconsin's Constitution specifically mentions four-year-olds in its guarantee of an education for all children. According to the state Department of Public Instruction, Wisconsin is the only state in the country that provides state aid to local four-year-old kindergarten programs.

Yet parents in Wisconsin don't have to send their children to kindergarten. State law mandates that all school districts offer kindergarten for five-year-olds. But parents aren't required to begin educating their children until the first grade.

More than a decade ago, a state education commission appointed by former Governor Tommy Thompson called for mandating full-day kindergarten for five-year-olds and half-day junior kindergarten for four-year-olds. But state lawmakers have never adopted the commission's recommendations.

Still, the trend in Wisconsin has been for younger children to spend more time at school. A decade ago, full-day kindergarten programs weren't all that common in Wisconsin. Now,

some three-fourths of the state's 426 school districts offer kindergarten for the entire day. Most districts report experiences similar to McFarland's — once the full-day option is offered, parents accept it and few children sign up for half-day classes.

Currently, 133 of the state's districts offer junior kindergarten for four-year-olds, according to DPI figures. Nearly 13,000 children are enrolled in junior kindergarten programs. Between 120 and 150 school districts are currently studying whether to add a junior kindergarten program.

Districts with junior kindergarten programs, or considering them, say the early introduction to school will help children prepare for classroom work. Educators generally agree that kindergarten classes provide a more rigorous curriculum than a generation ago. With the drive toward more standardized testing — Wisconsin tests 4th, 8th, and 10th graders, plus 3rd graders in reading comprehension — districts say they are under increased pressure politically and from watchful parents to prepare children for school.

The McFarland Experience

Brittingham, the McFarland school superintendent, said preparing children for school drove the district's consideration of four-year-old kindergarten. He noted that President George W. Bush, among other politicians, has repeatedly stressed the importance of all children enrolling in school ready to learn and achieving reading competency by the third grade.

"What do we do about those students who are not successful?" Brittingham said. "We talk about prevention, but we're tired of talking about it. Let's do something about prevention."

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Let's try to do it in a family-friendly way. In our economy, a fair number of mothers and fathers work. Does the school district have an opportunity to provide some assistance?"

The district, like others throughout Wisconsin, offers early childhood programs to children before they start five-year-old kindergarten. The programs are aimed at low-income children and those who need help getting ready for school. But assessing which children need those programs can be difficult, Brittingham said, and can sometimes attach a stigma to those who take part.

"We do them a disservice by labeling them," he said.

He suggests some of the controversy that ensued in McFarland resulted from people's misperception about what the program would entail. Most people envision schools as children sitting attentively behind desks in a classroom — not the kind of setting appropriate for a four-year-old. Brittingham said the district wanted a program that mirrors what preschools offer — organized craft activities, an emphasis on reading and storytelling, physical education and music components, and emphasizing behaviors such as listening, following instructions, respecting classmates, and sharing.

But others in McFarland argue whether the school district needs a comprehensive, four-year-old kindergarten program. Among those that spoke out against the district's plans was the McFarland Lutheran Christian Preschool. The school educates 120 children annually, with 72 of those being four-year-olds.

McFarland Lutheran officials say the district's own surveys show that only a handful of children come into McFarland's five-year-old kindergarten program with no preschool experience. Besides McFarland Lutheran, McFarland is home to two other preschools. And many McFarland parents, who commute the short drive to Madison for work, enroll their children in Madison preschools or those in neighboring communities.

"We needed to look at our community to see if there were needs for this," said Deb Nygaard, program director for Child Life Ministries at the school. "A lot of people were saying, 'Is this what we need in McFarland?'"

School officials stress that they are not opposed to four-year-old kindergarten programs. In fact, they say the program may very well be needed in parts of the state with few preschools or educational opportunities for children before they enroll in five-year-old kindergarten. McFarland Lutheran offers discounts on tuition for students who might not otherwise be able to afford the preschool. And school officials add that they work closely with the McFarland district in making sure their preschool programs are up to date and provide a solid foundation for formal schooling.

"We have children of need in McFarland," said Connie Anderson, director of the McFarland Lutheran Christian Preschool. "I don't want that perception out there that we don't think that. We believe at this time that the needs of four-year-old McFarland children are being sufficiently met — more than sufficiently — and they are provided with a good preschool experience."

Indeed, the state Department of Public Instruction warns districts considering four-year-old kindergarten programs that they may run into opposition from local preschools. A quick survey of enrollments shows why. According to DPI, about 13,000 children are currently enrolled in four-year-old kindergarten programs in Wisconsin's public schools. About the same number are enrolled in private four-year-old kindergarten programs, and another 21,000 children are enrolled in other kinds of preschools, day-care centers, day care provided out of a person's home, or day care sponsored on site by employers. DPI estimates that 12,000 of the state's four-year-olds are cared for at home by a parent or relative.

Too Much School Too Soon?

Private preschools aren't alone in their opposition to school districts creating four-

year-old kindergarten programs. Parents have also raised objections.

Under Wisconsin's formula for funding schools, districts receive state aid for educating four-year-olds. Districts receive aid — equivalent to half the amount they receive for educating full-time students — if they offer a junior kindergarten program for two-and-a-half hours a day for a 175-day school year. Districts can receive additional aid (equivalent to one-tenth of the aid they receive for educating full-time students) if they offer outreach activities in conjunction with their four-year-old kindergarten program. The outreach activities could include parental meetings, home visits by teachers, parent education classes, and parent-child activities, according to the DPI.

However, the aid reimbursement for four-year-old kindergarten would be reduced to 30 percent of a full-time student starting in the fall of 2002, under the budget compromise reached between Democratic and Republican state lawmakers.

To Jodi Tarala of Sussex, sending her four-year-old child to school every day just seemed like too much. The Hamilton school district in suburban Milwaukee recently implemented a four-year-old kindergarten program.

"It's a five-day program," said Tarala, who opted to send her daughter to a private preschool for a few days a week. "That's a lot for a four-year-old — not all four-year-olds, but some four-year-olds."

Tarala, who is active in school committees in the Hamilton district and often volunteers at the schools, said local and state tax dollars would be better spent lowering class sizes in upper grades than creating a four-year-old kindergarten program.

But Tarala admits the program has been popular in the Hamilton district. Most parents with four-year-olds take advantage of the optional program, with some openly viewing it as a cheaper alternative to day care or private preschool.

"It's very popular," she said. "I'd say I'm in the minority for not taking it."

Financial Incentives

That popularity will likely drive some schools to consider adding a junior kindergarten program. Last year, under the state's open enrollment program, the Mequon-Thiensville school district had 12 students

request to leave the district because their parents wanted them enrolled in a four-year-old kindergarten program. In areas of the state where open enrollment pressures are keen — such as suburban Milwaukee and the Madison area — many districts have moved to expand their five-year-old kindergarten programs from half days to full days.

In Milwaukee, the embattled Milwaukee Public School system recently increased its number of full-day four-year-old kindergarten classes from 33 to 92. Studies by the district found parents choosing private day care and schools instead of MPS because the private centers provided care for longer hours of the day.

One result: more money for school districts who feel pinched under the state's spending caps for school districts. As a way to keep a lid on property taxes, Wisconsin in 1993 capped annual school spending increases. Unless its home community's property base declines precipitously, the only way for a school district to get more state aid is to boost enrollment. Districts can easily accomplish that by turning their half-day kindergarten students into full-

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time students (thus doubling their state kindergarten aid) and offering half-day programs for four-year-olds.

School board officials in Erin, in suburban Milwaukee, acknowledged they were under pressure to increase enrollment, and net \$175,000 in state aid, when they decided in 1997 to begin offering four-year-old kindergarten. Officials in Slinger this year complained of a \$171,000 cut in their state aid if funding for four-year-old kindergarten was zeroed out by the Legislature.

To Representative John Gard, R-Peshtigo, the push for four-year-old kindergarten reeks more of money-grabbing than sound educational philosophy by school districts. Gard, co-chairman of the Legislature's budget-writing Joint Finance Committee, argued local districts ought to pick up the tab for junior kindergarten programs rather than look to the state to fund it.

"There clearly are schools who are putting kids in kindergarten at four years old because they make money off it, and in some cases, it has very little to do with the kids," Gard told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* in the wake of the budget compromise.

A Perennial Political Issue

Don't look for the debate over four-year-old kindergarten to die down anytime soon. Educational trends have a habit of jumping from state to state; Maryland, Massachusetts, California and Colorado, among others, have had healthy debates in recent years about the need for four-year-old kindergarten.

The education establishment seems convinced of its merits; witness, for example, the statements of Colorado public school officials during debate over funding for four-year-old kindergarten in their state.

"I'm sure there are pockets of misunderstanding of people who feel it's still the parents' responsibility and the family's responsibility to get children ready for school, but I truly believe the majority of our population is

seeing the benefits of early intervention," Pamela Jacobsen, director of early childhood programs for the Pueblo school district, told the *Denver Post* earlier this year.

Added Jane Amundson, who works on early childhood programs for Colorado's Education Department: "Hopefully in my lifetime we will not see a K-12 system, but a system for all children, birth through 21."

Thinking like that feeds into cynics who view the push for four-year-old kindergarten as little more than an effort to expand the power, and political base, of teachers and their supporters. After all, districts that add four-year-old kindergarten and expand their half-day kindergarten programs to full day have to add to their teaching corps. And WEAC, Wisconsin's powerful teachers' union, stood four-square behind its Democratic allies in the push for increased state funding for four-year-old kindergarten.

Yet the drive to enroll four-year-olds into Wisconsin's public classrooms will almost certainly bump up against the stresses already apparent in the state's current method of funding schools. Teachers, administrators, and school boards all seem unhappy about state funding of education, complaining constantly about under-funding for their schools. Yet many nonpartisan observers of Wisconsin's budget wars, such as the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance's Todd Berry, worry that the state's commitment to pay for two out of every three local education dollars will soon implode. Governor McCallum has even hinted at the need for a broad reassessment of Wisconsin's school funding formula.

Still, the debate over four-year-old kindergarten may never fully be resolved, as long as parents of the children targeted for junior kindergarten disagree on its merits.

"That's a lot of time away from Mom," said Tarala of the Hamilton school district's popular five-day-a-week junior kindergarten program. "But working parents use it as day care."