



59 Tindall Road
Middletown, NJ 07748
Phone (732) 671-3850
Fax: (732) 615-9351
www.middletownk12.org

Contact: Karen L. Bilbao, Superintendent
Phone: 732-671-3850; ext. 1002
bilbaok@middletownk2.org

Marianne Kligman
Media Relations, klig30662@aol.com
732-758-9089; 732-586-1232 (cell)

Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Middletown to Offer Full-Day Kindergarten in Fall of 2009 At All Its Elementary Schools

Middletown: The Middletown School District plans to implement full day kindergarten for the 2009-2010 school year for all its elementary schools. This accomplishes a long-standing strategic plan priority and satisfies a recognized district need to continue its improvement of early childhood literacy. Middletown is one of only 13 school districts of 42 in Monmouth County which still does not offer full-day kindergarten. Research clearly shows that early intervention at the preschool and kindergarten levels improves overall literacy abilities and higher thinking levels.

This final plan reflects a major change to an initial proposal made at a public meeting on June 2. That proposal recommended full day kindergarten phased in over a two-year period, with six schools offered the program in 2009 and the other six in the fall 2010.

Superintendent Karen Bilbao states, "Following the June 2nd meeting, we carefully considered all the input from the public as well as comments communicated via our website. We then engaged in intensive communications with the Monmouth County Superintendent's office and the New Jersey Department of Education on the allowable usage of ARRA funds (the federal government's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009) so we could implement full day kindergarten for all our schools this coming year."

While the major cost of implementation will be met primarily by reassignment of staff positions within the district, key to the realization of full-day kindergarten is the infusion of ARRA funds, which will free up additional funds in the existing budget to ultimately hire the remaining positions. Middletown's allocation of ARRA funding is a net amount of approximately \$2.6 million over the next two years. ARRA funds will also be utilized to hire additional paraprofessionals for the kindergarten classrooms. (See related press release—*Middletown to Receive \$2.6 million in ARRA Funding*.) The implementation of the full-day kindergarten should not represent an increase to the school budget, and therefore property taxes, going forward.

Superintendent Bilbao explains, "Over the past two years we have implemented a new way to deliver Special Education services enabling us to shift positions from the high school to the elementary school for our co-teacher positions employed in the new LEADS and IDEAL literacy model. For the 2009-2010 school year, we have identified 10 additional positions from

intra-level transitioning. With seven teachers employed in several current early learning programs (multi-age, and inclusion kindergarten- both replaced by full-day kindergarten) we only required an additional five positions to institute full-day kindergarten in all 12 elementary schools this year. The ARRA funds bridge the gap over the next two years, after which we anticipate further transition savings to keep the staff cost of full-day kindergarten neutral to our budget.”

While the district’s long-term strategic plan proposed the construction of a new early childhood center to house pre-school and kindergarten, economic realities do not foresee this occurring in the near future. To seize this opportunity of providing full-day kindergarten on a revenue neutral basis, the district conducted a thorough analysis of all available space within each of the twelve elementary schools in order to locate additional kindergarten classrooms which require bathroom or nearby bathroom facilities. A priority conversion program will be conducted throughout the summer by in-house Facilities Department personnel to ready the spaces by September. Administration is confident they can meet that goal. Many special subject classes like art, music and computers will be appropriated for additional space, and the specials will take place in the students’ regular classroom. In some instances, libraries may have to be relocated. The district commits that every elementary school will have an official library space for students to peruse and select reading materials.

While losing special classroom space for the implementation of full-day kindergarten is not ideal, it is important to note that many of our elementary schools have not enjoyed separate spaces for special classes for many years. Additionally, delivering these special subjects in the classroom works well with the new integrated curriculum literacy model where art projects are often part of the program’s project based learning and the computer is utilized as an aid in researching projects.

Projected attendance for kindergarten is based on current first-grade enrollment, anticipating a higher than average kindergarten attendance due to desirability of full-day program. Classroom size is anticipated to be around 20 and each teacher will have the assistance of a paraprofessional. As in all other elementary classes, and mandated by law, each kindergarten class will include eligible special education students. Some may bring an additional paraprofessional into the classroom. (Inclusion is also the primary priority of the use of ARRA funds as stipulated by the New Jersey Department of Education.) Many kindergarten teachers are duly certified for regular and special education instruction; it is the district’s current practice to hire teachers with dual certification. Special Education services are delivered by a mandated IEP—Individual Education Plan. If a student’s IEP recommends a self-contained classroom, the student will still be educated in that setting.

A sample full-day kindergarten schedule is posted on the district website at www.middletonk12.org. Parents concerned about the transition from a half-day pre-school to full-day kindergarten should take solace that all kindergarten teachers are cognizant that a full-day of school may represent a major change to these young children’s lives. The kindergarten teachers have collectively expressed their strong intention to operate their classrooms with the utmost sensitivity, understanding and compassion.

Superintendent Bilbao comments, “The Implementation of full day kindergarten represents the biggest initiative we have undertaken since I have been superintendent. Whenever I walk into a kindergarten classroom, the teacher has inquired when we would be offering full-day kindergarten as there has never been enough time to deliver the existing curriculum. What I am most excited about, is that we found a way to provide full day kindergarten for all eligible students at their home schools next year because this community deserves to have equal opportunity for all of its students.”

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