

Teachers object to schedule Extended kindergarten hours raise hackles

By CHRISTIAN KALLEN FOR THE ARGUS-COURIER

Fifteen months ago, at the start of the 2013-14 school year, the Petaluma City Schools District began a new policy of holding extended hours for kindergarten students.

Today, as local schools delve into their second year with the new policy, district leaders say it's the best way to give Petaluma children a leg up educationally. But many teachers are unhappy, saying the change raises concerns about student well-being, teacher effectiveness and the district's treatment of its teachers.

Jenny Hlebakos, a kindergarten teacher at Penngrove Elementary, joined several others in saying the extended hours have led to stressed-out children and overburdened educators. She also said the policy was implemented in a heavy-handed way by Superintendent Steve Bolman and district staff.

"I know there are pros and cons to every situation," Hlebakos said. "And I did see some pros. But I think the biggest con was there was no shared decision-making with the kindergarten teachers and the district about it even happening. It was just a directive and it was thrown at us without any kind of communication."

That was in mid-July of last year, just days before school started at Penngrove and other local elementary schools. Before then, Petaluma's kindergarten classes traditionally ran from 8:40 to 11:40 a.m., according to Hlebakos. The new policy extended those classes to 1:40 p.m., adding 88 minutes of class time plus the lunch period, for a full five-hour day.

That wasn't too big a change for those 5 year olds who were already used to long day-care hours. But for others, it was a definite shock.

For example, "It created a lot more poop issues," said Hlebakos. "They can hold it until 11:40 a.m., and then they go 'number two.' We had a lot of potty issues with the afternoon time."

Meanwhile, the new schedule leaves teachers themselves unable to take a bathroom break, or any other break, for hours on end. Several teachers said the longer hours, combined with limited staffing, have severely hampered their ability to do their job.

"When you're a kindergarten teacher, you are on all the time," said Carrie Caudel, a K-1 teacher at Mary Collins School at Cherry Valley. "You don't get a break, you don't get a lunch break, you don't get a bathroom break. There's no breaks. You are on."

Added Hlebakos, "If anybody has ever experienced the world of kindergarten, it is the most challenging grade."

The move to a longer school day for kindergarteners is not unique to Petaluma. According to the Children's Defense Fund, an average of 77 percent of kindergarteners nationwide attend a full-day program; 45 years ago, that number was only 10 percent.

"Petaluma City Schools was one of the last districts not to implement extended-day K," wrote Superintendent Bolman in an email. "There is no financial advantage to the district for operating an extended day; the state does not pay us more. It was done because research shows that it is educationally advantageous for kids."

"There's research on both sides," responded Mary Beth Cohen, now a first-grade teacher at McNear Elementary who taught kindergarten for the previous eight years. "But the teachers have never really been part of the planning process. And what's lacking right now for our kindergarteners is the proper support for an all-

day program.”

Cohen cited the National Education Association as a proponent of extended-day kindergarten. But she noted, “They recommend a class size of 15 to 1. They also recommend a full-time aide for every kindergarten teacher. So we are far from having that kind of support.”

Teachers speaking with the Argus-Courier said that for them, the issue was not about total workload or pay, but rather the impact that their longer workdays is having on other duties. For Cohen, that used to mean helping slow readers in first grade after her kindergarteners went home.

“Us being able to provide that service has disappeared,” she said. “That has an impact on the firstgrade students.” The student-teacher ratio in Petaluma City Schools is capped at 27 to 1, though many kindergarten classes come in at about 24 students, depending on each year’s enrollment.

“One of the things that had been touted about allday kindergarten is how much one-on-one support and small-group support can happen for kids,” said Cohen. “Well, that’s not going to happen with one teacher and 27 kids.”

Caudel agreed, asking, “What happened to the things that kindergarteners actually need, like aides? Kindergarten teachers need another adult in the classroom far more than you need a bunch of Chromebooks. I do not want 25 Chromebooks. I want an aide.”

Repeatedly, teachers complained about how Bolman handled the new kindergarten policy.

“We tried to be part of the process,” said Cohen. “The kindergarten teachers approached our superintendent. And we said, ‘Let’s plan, and make this a good program.’ He didn’t want to meet with us.”

On Feb. 7, 2013, several kindergarten teachers – at their insistence, said Cohen – met with Bolman in his office, voicing their concerns and proposing several alternative extended- hour programs for kindergarteners. Five days later, at a Feb. 12Sonoma County Board of Education public hearing, a number of teachers – including Cohen, Caudel and six others – appeared with a slide presentation outlining alternative proposals for extended hours, such as allowing each school to develop its own plan.

Superintendent Bolman said he had heard from parents on both sides of the issue, and said the issue was “going to negotiations as a part of the District Contract Reopeners.” Regarding the alternate proposals for extended hours, Bolman wrote, “Under the (Education Code), K teachers were already required to teach until the end of the instructional day. The only change the district implemented was for them to teach their own students longer as opposed to assisting their colleagues. Both sides agreed that the district could do this without negotiating a change in the contract.”

For Caudel, “The common thread is the issue of communication. That’s the biggest issue of this whole kindergarten thing. The school board is related to that too – they’re the overseers and the policymakers for the entire district. I think the school board has an additional responsibility to hold the district administrators accountable, because they’re the only ones who really can.”

Jason Yamashiro, superintendent of the Old Adobe School District, said there are educational benefits with longer kindergarten hours. “I’m sure teachers would like to have the aides, but the students seem to do very well, and I think it’s important for the kids to be there,” he said. “To me, schools are where we raise our kids together. Parents from preschool-age on, the vast majority of them, are selecting full days.”

While the kindergarten issue was settled last year, Petaluma City Schools District teachers remain at odds with the administration over the terms of their contract negotiations this year, which has sparked several protests in recent months.

(Contact Christian Kallen at argus@arguscourier.com)