

The start of a full day

Pittsford

Pittsford Central School District kindergarten students enter into full-day status with the remaining student body

Georgie Silvarole Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Hundreds of wide-eyed children hopped off school buses at Allen Creek Elementary School on Wednesday morning, sporting colorful backpacks that — more often than not — were bigger than the kids themselves.

The kids navigated the school's crowded front lawn to find their classmates, some holding hands with one another or stopping to hug a teacher they hadn't seen for months. They had arrived for the first day of school, and for the first time, every student had a full day ahead of them — including kindergartners.

Wednesday marked the beginning of full-day kindergarten for students at Pittsford Central School District. The district previously offered half-day programming for kindergartners, and voters shot down a proposal last year that would have funded full-day kindergarten by increasing residents' property taxes.

A “full-blown advocacy effort” followed,

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Kindergarten teacher Lori Lusk helps get some of her students off the bus, at top, and walks with them into Allen Creek Elementary School, above. She says a longer school day will give them the chance to really master reading, writing and other skills.

JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



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Pittsford Superintendent Mike Pero said, and with support from parents as well as legislators in Albany, the state offered up three years of conversion aid in April. The aid will cover the full cost of full-day kindergarten for the first year, 65 percent of the cost the second year and 35 percent of the cost in the third year.

When that funding runs out, Pero said officials will reassess the district's budget and see how they can continue offering full-day kindergarten.

"We look at things like our use of reserves, for example," Pero said. "What we do know is we feel really comfortable. Full-day kindergarten was less than 1 percent of our budget, so it's not a monumental gap that we have to close."

Lori Lusk, a kindergarten teacher at Allen Creek Elementary, shepherded students off the bus on Wednesday morning, taking them by the hand and crouching down low to offer a warm welcome. One student, now a firstgrader, ran up to her and promptly insisted on a big hug.

Lusk has been a teacher at Allen Creek for 26 years, and said full-day kindergarten is something the district's been lacking. Residents who voted against it might not have understood the value in extended hours of early education, Lusk said.

"There was definitely this feeling like, 'My kids had half day and they were fine,' " Lusk said. "And then of course when it comes to money, like everything else, they thought kindergarten was a great idea until it meant it was going to actually raise our taxes."

The benefits of full-day kindergarten are vast: Longer hours will give students more time for instruction, and even more time with their teachers and classmates. Students who spend more time in school have also shown greater success in mastering reading and writing skills at a quicker pace, Lusk said.

The extended hours also allow for kindergarten students to have art class for the first time, as well as more time for music and physical education.

The district hasn't changed the expectations of kindergartners moving on to first grade, Lusk said. She and other kindergarten teachers are more focused on slowing the pace of the curriculum down so students really get to master the topics they'll cover.

Amber Orlando, who has three children enrolled in PCSD, said the full-day kindergarten would help her youngest child's social and academic growth. It'll also alleviate the significant burden of affording supplemental programming and shuffling her child from one place to another each day.

"I've felt a little like we were trying to squish everything in," Orlando said. "It definitely was financially more difficult."

Minimal updates were needed to get the full-day kindergarten program up and running across the district, Pero said. Parking lots were expanded at Allen Creek, Mendon Center Elementary School and Park Road Elementary School to accommodate more traffic in the mornings, he said, and all kindergarten classrooms have been equipped with iPads and laptops.

The district also saw a jump in enrollment — there are about 100 more kindergartners this year than last year — and hired eight new kindergarten teachers prior to the start of the 2018-19 school year.

Kindergarten is an important and formative part of a child's education, Lusk said. It's when they learn what it means to be a student and how they should interact with others in a school setting — and, hopefully, it's when they begin to bond with their teachers and develop a love for learning.

"To me, that is the whole reason," Lusk said. "That makes this a very special year. I absolutely love that I am a part of beginning their school journey."

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Holly Markson takes a selfie with her daughter, first-grader Gia Markson, on the first day of classes at Allen Creek Elementary School in Pittsford. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE