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Full-day kindergarten possible for a price

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The School Committee this week supported Superintendent Bill Allen's proposal that the district offer full-day kindergarten at a cost to families of \$3,700 per student.

Allen said the money generated from full-day kindergarten will help supplement the strained school budget, and by keeping the kids in class, will save one teaching position.

However, some have suggested that offering educational opportunities only to those who can afford to pay for it is not the way a public education system is supposed to work. They believe the tuition-based kindergarten sends a message that the town values its wealthier residents.

"Until you can provide the same education to every student equally, you don't go down that road," said resident Eric Kfoury. "Public schools, in my opinion should never set up a two-tier system."

Kfoury said that to do so would be to move in a way that disregards the principles established by President Bush's 'No Child Left Behind' program, meant to assure equal educational opportunities to all.

"What about parents who can not afford it, but might want to give their children a step up into the first grade so they will be on even ground with other children?" he asked. "Would we deny children an educational opportunity based on gender, on race, on religion? How can we deny it based on economic status?"

Dr. Allen responded that, like every program in the school district, full-day kindergarten would be offered to families with lower incomes on a sliding scale, based on what they can afford. He compared it to the free-lunch program in the schools.

"Yes, you have to prove that you can not afford it, but you have to tell us," said Allen. "We have never excluded anyone who wants to participate in a school program but can't afford it."

Kfoury was not satisfied.

"What about someone who can not afford to pay a single dollar? What about the decisions they will have to make to try to pay to send their kids to kindergarten ... It's a slippery slope," he said.

"I am suggesting this community hold firm, look for other sources to fund this," said Kfoury. "If we do this, we

are being told in this community people with money are better."

Kathy Callagy, Principal of the Bradstreet School, has been asked by Allen to head up the all-day kindergarten program. "That is not the intent," she said. "We will certainly try to provide (all-day kindergarten) to all who want it. I don't think this is going to be as discriminatory as you think."

"This is the only way we as a public city, or town can offer this opportunity," said Allen. The district will receive state and federal funding to supplement the program.

The schools will send out a letter to solicit interest to all parents who will have kindergarten-age children in the coming school year next week. Allen said the school system should be able to accommodate everyone who expressed interest.

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