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A TOUGH CALL



Students sit in Barbara Mazzone's TK-1 class at Meadowlane Elementary School in West Melbourne. MALCOLM DENEMARK/FLORIDA TODAY

Brevard's
prices,
climate
woo the
wealth

Areas most losing
their residents to us?
New York, S. Florida

By Wayne T. Price
FLORIDA TODAY

Tommy and Mary Beth Cor-
rigan and their three children
recently moved to Brevard
County from Queens, N.Y.

The retired firefighter and
his photographer wife — who
both had lived in Florida for a
short period years ago — are
building a
3,000-square-
foot home in
Viera that
dwarfs any-
thing they
could have af-
forded where
they lived in
New York.

They say
they will miss
New York's
pizza, its ba-
gels and its
delicatessens,
but not the Em-
pire State's cost of living. And
their children will grow up with
sunshine, beaches and more.

"This is a nicer area for the
kids to grow up, and it's not as
congested as New York," said
Tommy Corrigan, 44, who joked
he might take up surfing. "Plus,
the schools here in Brevard
County have a really good rep-
utation, and that was the big
thing that attracted us to this
area."

Thousands of others appar-
ently feel the same, flocking to
Florida and Brevard because of



VIDEO

Money goes
further in
Florida? See
more at **florida
today.com**.

From parents to researchers, transitional kindergarten has share of fans and critics

By Mackenzie Ryan
FLORIDA TODAY

At the nine-week mark
last school year, when
Lisa Zahner received
her son's first report
card, Jesse's teacher men-
tioned the 5-year-old's "young-
ness." On the second report
card, "youngness" came up
again. Soon, his teacher was
asking for permission to per-
form a developmental test.

Jesse was doing fine aca-
demically. But at a meeting this
spring, Zahner was told Jesse
was developmentally around
5½. That made sense, his mom

INSIDE

Teachers see new year as a fresh
start. Column, Page 1B

thought. His sixth birthday
wasn't until May.

The teacher's recommenda-
tion, however, was staggering:
To voluntarily hold Jesse back
a year and enroll him in the
school's TK1 class, which
serves students who are aca-
demically on par with their
peers but not emotionally
ready or mature enough to pro-
gress to first grade.

See TK1, Page 3A



Mary Jo Walters of Palm Bay reads "Green Eggs and Ham" with her daughter Olivia Halliday, 8. Walters said she wishes Olivia would not have been enrolled in a TK1 class. CRAIG RUBADOUX/FLORIDA TODAY

BY THE NUMBERS

Brevard holds back a large number of kindergarten students; many attend a
separate class called transitional kindergarten-first grade, or TK1. According to the most recent data available, during the 2011-12 school year:

663 KINDERGARTNERS

or 12 percent of the kindergarten class were retained, including both
TK1 students and kindergarten repeaters.

8,364 KINDERGARTNERS

or 4.1 percent, were held back across Florida.

Source: Florida Department of Education

INSIDE

See the five counties that
brought the most people to
Brevard, and the five that the
most Brevardians moved to
when they left. Page 8A.

PUBLIC INTEREST

Is Obamacare
worth the costs?

Florida premiums to
rise, but they offer
something in return,
Public Interest Edi-
tor Matt Reed
writes. Page 20A



SPACE COAST

Happy Birthday,
Coast Guard

Rain doesn't deter
hundreds from at-
tending the 223rd
anniversary event at
Port Canaveral.
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SPORTS

Love of sport
fuels coach

Strategy board game
inspired Palm Bay
High coach Dan
Burke to coach foot-
ball. Page 1C



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FROM PAGE ONE

TK1

Continued from Page 1A

It would mean leaving friends behind. Sporting '26, not '25, on his high school letter jacket. Turning 19 the May of his senior year.

TK1, or transitional kindergarten-first grade, is a much relied on — and sometimes controversial — part of Brevard Public Schools' teaching arsenal. Educators believe it gives the "gift of time," and will often recommend placement for students with spring or summer birthdays.

According to the most recent data available, Brevard held 663 kindergartners back during the 2011-12 school year. A large number attended TK1 classes; some repeated kindergarten.

That amounts to 12 percent of the kindergarten class, almost three times the state average of 4.1 percent. Some believe it's wiser to hold children back earlier rather than later; with Florida's strict retention law, third-graders are required to repeat the grade if they do not score well enough on the FCAT.

The strategy appears to be paying off. About 4.2 percent of Brevard's third-graders were held back that year. Statewide, 7.4 percent of third-graders were retained.

For a parent, a TK1 recommendation can be heartbreaking — and a terrifying decision. Because TK1 is a voluntary program, placement is up to them.

One mother cried when a teacher suggested it. Another teared up when asking a friend for advice. What would others think? How would her child feel? Did I, as a parent, fail?

Educators say the program is not for everyone; last year, it was offered at 17 schools, a number that fluctuates based on interest. This year, 13 out of Brevard's 55 elementary schools plan on offering a class.

"Children cut their teeth when they're ready," said Teresa Wright, Brevard's director of early childhood education. "Nobody says: You're six months old, where is your first tooth? You're 6 years old, when is your first tooth going to fall out? School is the only place where we say: This is your birthday and you should be ready."

Wright said the No. 1 result she's seen from TK1: satisfied parents.

"I don't have any hard data, but what I experienced as a principal and as a teacher, children who have TK1 are typically above grade level when they go on to first grade," she said. It's difficult to say how students would have performed without the program; but last year, third-graders who previously attended TK1 scored, as a group, at or slightly above Brevard's average FCAT score in reading and math.

Education research, however, doesn't show positive results, said M. Elizabeth Graue, an early childhood education professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"People do this because they want the best for kids, but the empirical evidence isn't a good match with what people think is going to happen," she said.

Retention — even through a parallel class like TK1 — can have negative consequences. Children are more likely to drop out if they're overage for their grade. And studies have found retention can be as traumatic as the death of a parent, Graue said.

"The best outcomes have been found when kids having problems in kindergarten are identified and provided with really good intervention support in the grade with their peers," she said.

Transitional kindergarten programs were popular in the 1980s and are experiencing a bit of a resurgence across the

country. Some communities dropped the programs after initial academic research questioned the results; in other places, like Brevard, it never left.

"Over the years, the TK1 program has been a valuable option when parents and teachers believe that a child needs additional time and support to be successful in the critical first years schooling," said Superintendent Brian Binggeli.

'Another year'

In a TK1 classroom the last week of school, students reflected on the year — and what incoming students should expect. "We do fun stuff and play," said Maddie Steger, who especially loved pumpkin day, when she got to ride on a tractor.

Plus, the rising first-grader added: "It's special to have Mrs. Mazzone. She's a good teacher."

Meadowlane Primary School Teacher Barbara Mazzone sees TK1 as temporarily putting off the pressure of first grade — and allowing children time to mature. The class doesn't repeat material and moves at a slower pace than first grade. It keeps alive a child's love for learning.

"I wish every child had a chance to have this year," she said.

During her 10 years as a TK1 teacher, Mazzone has seen a difference. Students not quite ready for first grade have trouble holding a pencil. They might move their head, instead of just their eyes, to look left or right. And often, they're physically smaller.

"These guys will be leaders," Mazzone said of her students. "They're just that much older (when they enter first grade). ... They might have been successful, but not able to work up to their potential."

At any given time, 20 kindergartners are on Meadowlane's waiting list for TK1. Educators believe the program's popularity alleviates any stigma that may be attached. Last year, the school had 14 kindergarten and two TK1 classes.

"No one considers it retention. We just consider it another year for them," Principal Karen Kise said.

Longtime program

The program has been a long-standing tradition in Brevard. Some schools have offered it for more than 25 years; some educators, when asked about the program, reflect on the experience of their now-grown children.

FLORIDA TODAY interviewed parents about their experiences; some loved the class or were upset when it was not available, others regretted putting their child into it or decided against the placement.

"It was the best choice we could have made for him," said Brandy Mammy of her son Braden, who blossomed in the program at Meadowlane. "It was so, so worth it. We haven't had a moment of regret."

In kindergarten, Braden seemed timid and shy. Before the holiday performance, he was so nervous that, for a moment, Brandy feared he might have a stroke.

"He loved every day of kindergarten and I was really afraid of him losing that," she said. "I didn't want (first grade) to become such a stress on him that it stopped being a positive."

The following year, in TK1, he started coming out of his shell. He was more confident, more independent. He had a chance to shine.

Others differ. MaryJo Walters' daughter Olivia was academically ready for first grade, yet disruptive in her kindergarten class. Reluctantly, Walters agreed to TK1, a decision she came to regret.

Her daughter was bored. The books were too easy. Often, Walters has thought about testing Olivia and having her skip ahead to rejoin her peers.

"Because the child is



At any given time, 20 kindergartners are on Meadowlane Elementary's waiting list for TK1. Sadie Ballard is seen in one of last year's classes. MALCOLM DENEMARK/FLORIDA TODAY

not mature, they want her to take a TK1 program?" Walters said. "I don't think that's right."

Then there are parents like Kirsten Larson. A volunteer at Sea Park Elementary, she saw her daughter struggle, but resisted the idea of TK1.

It wasn't until she spoke with another mom, who teared up as she explained her child's story: the once-struggling student was now academically ahead of others in the class.

"I don't want her to get lost in the shuffle in first grade," Larson said. "I

don't want to be responsible for holding her back (by not holding her back) if it's going to be good for her."

But this fall, the class is no longer an option. According to Sea Park Elementary Principal Ena Leiba, 14 students were recommended for TK1. A number of families moved away, and others didn't want a retention on their child's record. There was talk of partnering with another school or offering a blended kindergarten/TK1 class, but to no avail.

"It's a numbers game,"

Leiba said. "We've found that it's very beneficial, the students who went through the program before are doing great in first grade. I'm still hoping to convince more parents about the program."

This month, despite her willingness and belief in the TK1 program, Larson's daughter Kelsey will attend first grade at Sea Park. There just isn't enough interest at the school.

Zahner's son Jesse will also attend first grade at his school, but for different reasons.

Unlike Larson, Zahner



SCAN IT TO SEE IT Watch a video on Brevard Public Schools'

TK1 program at **florida today.com**.

questioned the motives behind the recommendation — and what she describes as undue pressure. While district leaders say they do not target or pressure families, Zahner disagrees.

"You shouldn't be given a guilt trip, that you're doing something wrong by having your child advance to first grade," she said.

A journalist in Indian River County who worked at FLORIDA TODAY in the late 1990s, Zahner shared her frustrations after digging into the research and statewide numbers on TK1.

"Our attitude was that he should go to first grade and then we will work on the specific things that he's having a problem with," she said. "We don't want him to be bored."

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