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National City Schools prepare for kindergarten change

By Tawny Maya McCray

NATIONAL CITY — The National School District is gearing up for a change that will take place throughout the state in the next school year — transitional kindergarten.

A state law passed last year changes the requirements for kindergarten entry from 5 years old by Dec. 2 to 5 by Sept. 1, so that all children enter kindergarten at age 5. Because of this change, transitional kindergarten, the first year of a two-year kindergarten experience, is being created for students born between September and December. This gives 4-year-olds with fall birthdays an additional year of preparation before entering kindergarten.

“What we’ve heard from kindergarten teachers, and now we’re hearing from the state, is that the standards in kindergarten are so rigorous that it is really difficult for a 4-year-old ... to maybe reach those standards,” said Katie Filzenger, assistant superintendent of educational services.

Filzenger said the district is forming a task force of administrators, kindergarten teachers, principals, curriculum specialists, community preschool partners and board members to help plan how the program will play out. They’re looking into the number of students who will be eligible for the program, where the program will be held, and transportation issues, she said. They’re also looking at the possibility of having teachers who are already working in the district teach the transitional program.

Filzenger said the curriculum for transitional kindergarten is not going to be the same as kindergarten curriculum. Instead, it will be a bridge between preschool and kindergarten.

“We want to build those readiness skills for our young five so they’re ready for kindergarten,” she said.

Those skills include language development and fine motor skills. Year two will be the traditional kindergarten curriculum, she said.

Students won’t be able to go from transitional kindergarten to first grade, Filzenger added. Parents will have to commit to having their kids in a two-year program.

The transitional kindergarten program will be phased in over three years, beginning in 2012, and will be fully implemented by 2014. For the first year, children who have their fifth birthday between Nov. 2 and Dec. 2 will be admitted to a transitional kindergarten program. The second year will be for kids with birthdays between Oct. 2 and Dec. 2, and for the final year and every year thereafter it will be for kids with birthdays between Sept. 2 and Dec. 2.

At a recent school board meeting, Cindy Frazee, assistant superintendent of human resources, said she remembers talk of moving the birthday forward 30 years ago. She said she and her husband decided to hold their son back a year from kindergarten, a decision they see as paying off.

“He’s going to get his MBA in December so it works,” she said. “He had the gift of time.”

Board members agreed the change is necessary, and some said they have grandchildren who weren’t quite ready for kindergarten who would have benefited.