A study undertaken by the Center for Persons with Disabilities will allow schools in four districts to participate in an extended school year program in New Mexico—and generate data on whether more days in school is a good investment of public money. The project will examine the effects of a longer school year on all children, regardless of their background or academic standing. The StartSmart K-3 Plus project will compare the performance of students who had an extended school year to those who did not. For Judith Touloumis, administrator of Carlos Rey Elementary School in Albuquerque, the project is another tool to bolster a good trend. “This is a school that they claim is failing,” she said. She disagrees. Over the past few years at Carlos Rey, scores have risen. The percentage of Carlos Rey students who met the annual measurable objective climbed from 44 percent in 2008 to 57 percent in 2010. Despite the improvements, though, one identifiable group lags behind: English language learners. Touloumis hopes a chance to go to school longer will help them close the gap.

She plans to start sending notes home to parents in January, letting them know about the opportunity to participate in the study. (Some families will be chosen to send their children to school for a longer school year. Other students will serve as a control group, who will go to school for the regular number of days. The control group’s performance will also be measured to help the researchers understand whether a longer school year will make a difference.) “We’re excited because it’s good for the kids,” said Touloumis. “This community needs it.”

The StartSmart project is a $19 million Investing in Innovation grant led by researchers at the Center for Persons with Disabilities. It builds on previous work by Dr. Linda Goetze, an economist and an investigator for the project at the CPD. She secured the grant.

The validation study involves a team of four USU co-investigators including Goetze, CPD Associate Director Cyndi Rowland, the CPD’s Margaret Lubke and Damon Cann, an assistant professor in USU’s political science department. Additional researchers from New Mexico State University are also involved.