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## A promise to schools that must be upheld

By Pablo Clausell

For years, poverty, inadequate and unsafe facilities, and lack of preschool and kindergarten readiness have led to student illiteracy, poor test scores, and high dropout rates in urban school districts.

Meanwhile, students in suburban districts have flourished. Recognizing a severe problem, the state Supreme Court took action to level the playing field.

The landmark 1990 *Abbott v. Burke* ruling authorized funds to provide remedial programs and services for disadvantaged students in 30 school districts, most of them urban, and to equalize learning opportunities for all New Jersey children. South Jersey has four of the so-called Abbott districts: Camden, Burlington City, Pemberton Township and Gloucester City.

But some say critical supplemental programs and increased aid for Abbott programs should be cut to plug shortfalls in the state budget this year.

This would come at the expense of our young learners and threaten Abbott initiatives in their infancy. Many negative newspaper articles and statements claim that Abbott programs use state funds without achieving significant results, pointing specifically to poor test scores at higher grade levels.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

While much of the negative press in recent weeks has focused on raw scores, we must compare how Abbott schools stack up against non-Abbott schools (and one another) to understand the true value of the Abbott programs. Recent test scores indicate a remarkable improvement in narrowing the gap between Abbott and non-Abbott districts and steady progress when compared with prior Abbott results.

In 1999, Abbott districts scored an average of 24 points lower than non-Abbott districts on the state's Elementary School Proficiency Assessment, according to extensive research by Bari Anhalt Erlichson, assistant professor of political science at Rutgers University's Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy. In 2002, with the help of Abbott funding, the gap had narrowed to 15 points.

Perhaps even more striking, 66.2 percent of Abbott students in 1999 scored in the lowest category in the language-arts section of the ESPA. In 2002, that percentage dropped to 37.2 percent, reducing the gap between Abbott and non-Abbott districts from 36.6 percentage points in 1999 to 20.7 points in 2002.

It takes several consecutive years of evaluating standardized tests before progress is evident. We have been implementing the state-mandated Abbott programs, such as whole school reform, only since 1998. The new programs are designed to significantly help our youngest learners. Therefore, basing judgment solely on tests at higher grade levels is not useful.

Most educators think early-childhood education is the most important change in the Abbott decision. The state began to fund this program about two years ago; its implementation has been sporadic.

If the Abbott districts are to succeed, they must be provided with the same resources, opportunities and patience afforded to all students in the Garden State. The challenges facing Abbott districts, their students and parents are often complex. That's why Abbott districts require services such as extended school days and years, health services, parental training and upgraded facilities.

Abbott districts and students have been neglected for decades. These are special students who live through extraordinarily tough circumstances. And now more than ever, we cannot compromise our mission to help them succeed.

These policies need time to work. Abbott districts' efforts, in less than four years, are already demonstrating success among fourth graders.

New Jersey government officials made a long-term promise to provide our children with opportunities that would enhance their education and instill a sense of hope. This is not the time for the state to renege on that promise.

We must deliver on this critical promise for a better education and life for our disadvantaged students, and adequate funding is more important now than ever.

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