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Student scores show progress, but critics question price

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This is a school that Abbott built.

Sure, the building was here prior to the Abbott vs. Burke court case that forced New Jersey to begin spending billions of dollars on its poorest schools. So was the name - School 17 in Paterson.

But that was a different school, where field trips were a fiction, and the library was non-existent.

This School 17 has a social worker, a nurse, and a corps of reading and math teachers. It takes parents and kids on trips to the Amish country and Washington, D.C.

And it gets more state money than many middle-class schools could ever dream of.

But at a time when state aid has been nearly flat for two years and property taxes are rising, the questions that have long swirled around Abbott and its massive expenditures are becoming more urgent in some quarters.

Is it worth it? Is it working?

An analysis by The Record has found that fourth-graders in the state's 30 Abbott districts leapt forward in reading and writing between 1999 and 2002, narrowing the gap between them and the rest of New Jersey schoolchildren. Fourth-grade math scores showed slight gains, while middle- and high school results were flat - possibly reflecting the state's focus on reforms in the early grades.

"These schools are making significant gains, especially in early literacy," said David Sciarra, executive director of the Education Law Center, which has led the funding fight on behalf of Abbott schoolchildren.

But the results fail to satisfy critics.

"We've been pumping millions and millions of dollars into those districts - punishing everyone else - and not getting the results," said state Sen. Henry McNamara, R-Wyckoff. "There's less and less aid available for towns like Wyckoff, Ridgewood, Wayne."

Even the McGreevey administration, which pledges support for the Abbott initiative, has challenged certain mandates by the state Supreme Court. Any day now, the justices are expected to rule on the state's bid to relax some of those mandates.

In Abbott vs. Burke, the court held that New Jersey's system of funding schools through property taxes consigns poor, urban children to a shoddy education, violating their constitutional rights. It ordered the state to bring spending in these schools up to the level of the wealthiest districts - a ruling New Jersey began to fully comply with six years ago.



Photo by: DANIELLE P. RICHARDS

▲ An excited Lillian Otero taking part in a role-playing exercise this month as part of the advanced reading class at School 17 in Paterson.

This year alone, the state spent \$3.5 billion in the 30 Abbott districts. That's half the state's school aid going to a quarter of its students.

Hardscrabble Passaic now spends as much per student as tony Tenafly. Working-class Paterson spends more per student than affluent Ridgewood.

In the courts

In the court case, state education officials said they want to begin focusing on programs known to be effective, such as preschool, and less on initiatives that may not work in every school.

Abbott advocates said the motive is money.

If the state wins, it could save \$200 million next year - the amount Abbott schools insist they will need just to cover increased costs. But it could save much more in the long run if the court relaxes mandates that lead the schools to hire larger staffs.

But Abbott supporters say such a move would dismantle one of the key programs that has helped to significantly improve reading test scores.

"It's like you're building a new house, and just as you finish the first floor and the framing, someone comes along and burns it down," said Anthony Campisi, a Paterson district administrator.

That house, for 9-year-old Matthew Irizarry, is School 17.

The school's 19th century brick building - so old it has a bell tower from which a rope hangs down to the principal's office - sits amid a north Paterson neighborhood pockmarked with boarded-up homes.

Matthew has no computer or even a phone at his mother's apartment.

But he has fallen so in love with his school's technology that he sometimes rushes through lunch to do math and reading problems on a class computer, his mother, Diana Villeda, said.

He's a math whiz, she said, but has struggled with reading.

During his three years at School 17, the fourth-grader has received one-on-one help from specialists in speech and reading. Every day, he - like all School 17 kids - brings a reading book home. Every day, his mother, like all School 17 parents, must sign a sheet certifying she listened to Matthew read for 20 minutes.

"I spend like an hour with him," she said. "When he has difficulty with a word, that's when I help him."

A school that works

Parental involvement, math and reading specialists, small-group reading instruction are all part of a curricular model that School 17 adopted in response to a 1998 court order.

The court said bringing Abbott districts up to par financially was not enough. It ordered that every Abbott school adopt a curricular blueprint, developed by educational researchers, to follow in transforming themselves. The court also told the state to pay for whatever services schools need to cope with the corrosive effects of poverty - from social workers to security guards to dropout prevention officers.

At School 17, the reforms are working: Six years ago, three-quarters of School 17's fourth-graders failed reading and writing on state tests. Last year, close to three-quarters passed.

But the state argues that success is coming too slow at many other Abbott schools.

In Newark, Asbury Park, and a few other districts, many schools still have a high proportion of students failing statewide exams, officials said.

What's more, curricular models can be costly, requiring schools to hire a set number of staff, such as math tutors, beyond classroom teachers.

State officials want the flexibility to get rid of models at still-failing schools, and try something else, said Gordon MacInnes, assistant education commissioner.

They also want to be able to decide which schools need non-instructional staff such as social workers.

"We need to be extremely conscious of the fact that these are very scarce dollars," MacInnes said. "'Effectiveness' and 'efficiency' are words that people need to automatically associate with Abbott, [not] 'high-spending,' 'no results,' or 'low results.'"

But advocates said the state has, since the days of the Whitman administration, failed to give Abbott districts enough guidance or oversight.

State officials are also not giving the reforms enough time to work, said Sciarra of the law center. New Jersey wants to "turn back the clock" to the days when poor districts had to fend for themselves, he said.

"The momentum for reform is building in urban schools," Sciarra said. "To dismantle Abbott now would be a tragedy."

Hard-pressed districts

Sciarra said he recognizes that some working- and middle-class districts are hard-pressed. But he, like a growing number of local school officials, blames New Jersey's system of funding schools primarily through property taxes. He supports proposals to boost school funding by hiking the state income tax - a notion Governor McGreevey rejects.

One Bergen County school official agrees the state must change how it funds education.

Charles Smith was a top administrator in Jersey City, an Abbott district, before becoming schools chief in Palisades Park seven years ago.

His district can't even afford a guidance counselor at its elementary school, Smith said.

Palisades Park can afford to spend \$8,390 per pupil a year. Compare that with the \$11,645 and \$11,002 spent in Abbott districts Passaic and Paterson, respectively. In Tenafly and Ridgewood, the amounts are \$11,502 and \$10,197.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not denying the Abbott districts what they need," Smith said. But, "we're getting squeezed big-time."

As for Villeda, Matthew's mother, she can't see why the state would risk undoing reforms that, in her school, work.

"They should just give us the funding for the kids," Villeda said. "They need everything they can get."

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