

Preschool enrollment nearing goal

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Passaic opened nearly three dozen trailer classrooms on a vacant lot last month in a scramble to start educating thousands of 3- and 4-year-olds.

A half-mile away, the district is finishing a school wing for 23 new preschool classrooms. And, it has begun expanding another school to add even more.

Five years after the state Supreme Court ordered New Jersey to provide free preschool in 30 poor districts, tens of thousands of youngsters are getting a earlier start to their education, according a report released Wednesday.

But the state still has a way to go.

The so-called Abbott districts enrolled 36,465 preschoolers in the last school year, two-thirds of the eligible children. That number is expected to rise this year.

But many districts, such as Passaic, are hustling to build and expand schools fast enough to meet the court's 2005 deadline for enrolling 90 percent of the preschool population, the report from the Education Law Center said.

The report also raised alarms about the high number of preschool special-needs children in Abbott districts who are isolated from their non-disabled peers, in possible violation of federal education law.

And it questioned whether New Jersey is adequately tracking how districts are using the \$380 million that the state is spending on the program this year.

But the report's authors and state officials agreed that the program is off to a good start, considering its ambitious aims.

"We're going from no required preschool to universal required preschool" in the 30 districts, said Lesley Hirsch, one of two grant-funded researchers who did the study. "It's a huge jump in five years."

New Jersey's preschool mandate grew out of the Abbott vs. Burke school-funding case, and was based on studies showing that early formal education could help poor children catch up to affluent peers.

Research shows that the ages of 3 and 4 are important to brain development, said Ellen Frede, who oversees the Abbott preschool program for the state. Learning social skills and academics in those early years increases children's chances of success in school and reduces the likelihood of their being placed in special education or dropping out, she said.

"There's a benefit to the taxpayer and to society by investing in preschool for low-income children," she said.

Wednesday's report did not address the quality of preschool programs that have mushroomed since 1999 in Abbott districts, which include Garfield, Paterson, and Passaic.

Most districts send some of their preschoolers to private programs. Paterson, for example, has 98 percent of its enrolled youngsters in 44 private preschools. Statewide, private operators accounted for more than two-thirds of the children enrolled last year.

But, private programs must meet the same standards as those run by districts.

Frede said the state is doing well at maintaining standards despite the program's fast growth. About 85 percent of the preschool teachers are certified in early childhood education. Every child is in a class of no more than 15, with a teacher and an aide. And each school must follow state curriculum guidelines.

The report said nearly two-thirds of the 2,000 special-needs youngsters in Abbott preschools last year were segregated from non-disabled peers. That's potentially a violation of the federal law requiring that the disabled be educated in the "least restrictive environment," the authors said.

Frede said the state is training district staffs on the federal law and has started other initiatives so that more disabled preschoolers will spend at least part of their days in regular classrooms.

The report also called for a better accounting of the \$73 million in Abbott preschool money that is not going directly to classrooms. It said the state should track whether the money is going to administrative positions, special education, busing, or other programs.

But Frede said the state already keeps close tabs and is tracking expenses more closely in all Abbott districts this year.

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