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N.J.'s Urban Districts Fall Short On Preschool, Report Says

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By Linda Jacobson

The number of children attending New Jersey's court-mandated universal preschool program has almost doubled since 1999, and the number of slots approved for children continues to increase, says a report released last week.

But the 30 districts involved in the *Abbott v. Burke* education equity case still have a long way to go to fulfill the requirement that 90 percent of all 3- and 4-year-olds in each of those communities be in preschool programs by the 2005-06 school year, says the report from the Education Law Center. The Newark, N.J.-based group represents the plaintiffs in the long-standing case.

"While considerable progress has been made since 1999, the [New Jersey Department of Education] and *Abbott* districts have important work that lies ahead," the report says.

While the Education Law Center has closely monitored the state's compliance with the court's requirements, this latest report is part of a new initiative, called the Abbott Indicators Project, that will more closely follow data at the state and local levels.

The law center filed the lawsuit in 1981, alleging that urban schoolchildren in the state were not receiving a "thorough and efficient education." Rulings issued by the New Jersey Supreme Court ordered the state to implement a package of reforms, including universal preschool in the *Abbott* districts.

Many Not Served

The report's authors found that even though preschool enrollment in the *Abbott* districts has increased from 19,179 in

For More Information

["The Abbott Preschool Program: Fifth Year Report on Enrollment and Budget"](#) is available from the [Education Law Center](#). (Requires [Adobe's Acrobat Reader](#).)

1999 to 36,465 in 2003, 34 percent of the eligible children were still not being served during the 2002-03 school year.

This school year, the state education department approved a 7 percent increase in slots for the program, bringing the number from about 39,400 to more than 42,100. But even with that increase, the total number of spaces will reach just 80 percent of the estimated preschool population in the districts.

In addition, the districts have been unable to fill the slots they already have, which suggests that there is either a lack of classroom space or that the districts aren't doing enough to enroll "hard-to-reach families," the authors write.

The report shows that more than twice as many *Abbott* children are being served in classrooms run by private providers and Head Start programs than in classrooms run by school districts. While all providers are expected to meet the same standards, Lesley Hirsch, a co-director of the indicators project, said the community-based programs often don't have any resources to upgrade their facilities.

Ellen Frede, an assistant to the commissioner in the state's office of early-childhood programs, said she believes the state and the districts will meet their target in two years. "I think it's pretty remarkable what has already been accomplished," she said.

'Disturbing Trend'

Progress has been made, the report says, in upgrading federally financed Head Start classrooms to meet *Abbott* preschool standards, which include a certified teacher and a maximum of 15 children per classroom.

Still, fewer than 40 percent of the 8,000 *Abbott* children in Head Start are in classes that meet those requirements.

The authors describe "a disturbing trend"—the fact that most *Abbott* preschool children with disabilities, 66 percent, are taught in self-contained classrooms instead of being included with other children. "It is imperative that NJDOE and districts assess the causes of segregation in the program and develop corrective action plans to address this serious deficiency," the report says.

Ms. Frede said the districts where youngsters are not in inclusion classes are those where children predominantly attend community-based programs.

"They're reluctant to put children with disabilities in other agencies," she said. "But the fact that there are districts [with inclusion classes] means it ought to be done everywhere."

The state, she said, has made several moves to help districts blend children in the classroom, such as making sure all master teachers have special education training, and forming "pre-referral and intervention teams" to help teachers learn how they can accommodate children with special needs in their classes.

Ms. Frede added that the Education Law Center's report also doesn't capture situations in which children with disabilities are "shared" between a regular class and a self-contained class.

W. Steven Barnett, the director of the National Center for Early Education Research, a think tank in New Brunswick, N.J., said that it would be helpful to find out where parents of children with disabilities really want their children to be served.

ON THE WEB

The [Education Law Center](#) provides extensive information on *Abbott v. Burke*, including a [brief history](#) and the text of [decisions](#).

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