



Education Law Center
Standing Up for Public School Children

Policy Brief:

Strengthening and Expanding High-Quality Preschool in New Jersey

High-Quality Preschool: A National Movement, A State Imperative

Nationwide, states are taking steps to expand access to voluntary, high-quality preschool programs. The time has come for New Jersey to make this same commitment to all three and four year olds across the state. The Abbott Preschool Program is one of the nation's highest-quality preschool programs¹ and is producing the measurable gains for participating children that research shows translate into strong educational, personal, and fiscal returns. We know that the Abbott Preschool Program works; research now tells us what it costs and that it is a wise investment. The moment is right to increase state investment in the Abbott program and to commit to an incremental expansion plan to bring high-quality preschool to all New Jersey children whose parents want them enrolled.

In the short term, new dollars are required to ensure that the Abbott program continues to be of the highest quality and that all eligible children are served.² Paired with well-crafted legislation, increased funding would

also support incremental growth of the program, making this crucial educational opportunity available first to additional at-risk children outside the Abbott districts and finally to all children statewide. Only when high-quality preschool programs are available to all three and four year olds can New Jersey expect to maximize the educational and economic potential of our nationally recognized preschool program.

New Jersey can learn from other states that have undertaken expansion of voluntary, high-quality preschool programs. For example, in Illinois, Iowa, New York, and West Virginia, legislators have developed practical plans for program expansion, beginning with the most at-risk children and then growing programs incrementally over a designated number of years to ultimately serve all children. These policymakers have made strategic decisions that allow departments of education, local districts, and state budgets to manage the process effectively and grow at a reasonable pace, without diluting funding for the most at-risk children or sacrificing educational quality.

The Case for Expansion: Lasting Gains for Children, Economic Returns for States

The History of the Abbott Preschool Program

The Abbott Preschool Program is a national model of high quality and of collaboration and strong leadership at every level of government. The program grew out of the New Jersey Supreme Court's 1998 decree in *Abbott v. Burke*, the state's education equity lawsuit.³ The court found that the constitutional duty to provide all children with a "thorough and efficient" education requires the state to provide a "high quality" preschool program for all three and four year olds residing in the state's poorest urban school districts.⁴

In the years since the court's mandate, local and state leaders have overseen the implementation of the Abbott program, which employs a mixed-delivery system that includes public schools, private providers, and Head Start to maximize access. The New Jersey Department of Education has expanded the Abbott program requirements across these settings to reflect the latest research on effective early childhood programs,⁵ and the state legislature has amply funded the program to ensure the level of quality necessary to obtain significant educational gains for children.⁶ In local Abbott school districts, public educators and community childcare and Head Start partners have implemented excellent programs that are reaping tremendous benefits for three and four year olds in these lowest-income districts. The Abbott system currently serves 39,000 children, about 75 percent of eligible children in the Abbott districts.⁷

The National Research on Preschool

Rigorous educational research consistently shows that at-risk children who attend high-quality preschool demonstrate gains in early learning skills and throughout their K-12 years, including improved literacy, reduced need for special and remedial education, and higher rates of high school graduation.⁸ Further, these academic gains consistently translate into greater success in adulthood, such as increased rates of college attendance, higher median income, and less involvement in the criminal justice and welfare systems.⁹ Moreover, short-term early learning gains have been documented in all participating children, regardless of socioeconomic, ethnic, or linguistic background.¹⁰ The evidence demonstrates that high-quality voluntary preschool should be the first step in a modern public education system.

In recent years, another important line of research has documented impressive, long-term, micro- and macroeconomic returns on public preschool investments.¹¹ According to one highly respected study, high-quality state preschool programs open to all children would return, on average, \$8 for each \$1 invested. These returns are realized as savings to a variety of agencies, including education and criminal justice, as well as increased tax revenues from improved earnings by both participating children and their parents.¹²

Several of these studies also show that preschool programs must be of high quality in order to deliver the academic, developmental, and economic benefits.¹³ This increasingly comprehensive body of research clearly indicates that high-quality preschool is among the most educationally and fiscally responsible investments a state can make. In New Jersey, the research is equally compelling.

Academic Gains for Children in the Abbott Preschool Program

New Jersey's Abbott Preschool Program is the subject of a recent comprehensive assessment of program quality and child outcomes, the Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES).¹⁴

APPLES found that the quality of Abbott programs has improved measurably across both public and private settings since the program's inception in 2000. Specifically:

- Between 2000 and 2006, overall classroom quality increased by 14.3 percent based on a respected seven-point assessment scale;¹⁵
- Over 40 percent of the classrooms scored five or better on the seven-point scale, placing them in the good to excellent quality range; 86 percent scored above the midpoint of four; and only 1 percent scored "minimal" or below (less than three);
- Measures of classroom quality related to language and reasoning were consistently good to excellent; and
- Importantly, public schools and private centers scored nearly the same on quality assessments of teacher interactions with children.

APPLES also documents significant, positive gains for children participating in Abbott preschool and shows that gains were sustained through kindergarten. Once again, these positive findings were largely consistent across public and private settings. In particular:

- Four year olds who attended for one year experienced 35 percent more growth in *receptive vocabulary* skills, 96 percent more growth in *print awareness*, a key measure of early literacy, and 41 percent more growth in *math* skills than children who did not attend preschool.
- Children attending for two years showed significantly greater gains in *receptive vocabulary*, *print awareness*, and *math* skills than those who attended only one year and even greater gains when compared to children who did not attend preschool at all.

In addition to the APPLES findings, both Governor Jon Corzine and Education Commissioner Lucille Davy have attributed urban students' improvement on state and national third and fourth grade assessments to state investments in high-quality preschool.¹⁶

The Cost of High-Quality Preschool in New Jersey

In a new study, “The Cost of High-Quality Preschool in New Jersey,”¹⁷ Dr. Clive Belfield, assistant professor of economics at Queens College, CUNY, and Heather Schwartz¹⁸ estimate the per-pupil costs of providing the high-quality Abbott Preschool Program in currently served districts, as well as the cost of expanding the program to reach more children within and beyond the Abbott districts. Belfield and Schwartz find that current expenditures for Abbott preschool are only slightly less than what would be needed to raise quality across Abbott classrooms to a consistently high level. The current average state expenditure for the Abbott programs is \$11,982 per pupil, with private providers requiring somewhat more.¹⁹ Importantly, the authors note that higher per-pupil costs in private programs are attributable to overhead costs such as administration and facilities, which public school programs can support through separate funding streams. Other key findings include:

- *Improving quality in Abbott districts.* Bringing all Abbott classrooms up to a high level of quality (an average quality rating of 6 out of 7 on the classroom quality assessment scale used in APPLES) would increase costs by an estimated 2.5 percent, for a total of \$12,276 per pupil.
- *Increasing enrollment in Abbott districts.* Expanding enrollment in Abbott districts by 4 percent²⁰ more three and four year olds — at the improved quality level — would increase total program costs to an estimated \$528 million (\$59 million above current state Abbott program expenditures).
- *Improved quality in non-Abbott districts.* New Jersey funds a preschool program in 101 non-Abbott, low-income communities through Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA). The cost to raise quality in non-Abbott ECPA-funded districts to Abbott quality standards for the 7,270 children currently enrolled is estimated at \$90.79 million.²¹
- *Statewide preschool expansion.* A hypothetical program expansion to reach 50,000 more children²² statewide at Abbott quality standards is estimated to cost an additional \$653 million.

Belfield and Schwartz identify several reasons to expect Abbott preschool program costs to be higher than those for other states’ preschool programs. One major cause of these greater costs is Abbott’s strong quality standards, which are higher than most other state programs. They require fairly stringent accountability measures, safe and adequate facilities, and teachers who are highly educated and certified, and thus command a higher rate of pay. Another factor influencing preschool costs is that, due to the high cost of living in New Jersey, the price of educational services is 25 percent higher than the national average.²³

Belfield and Schwartz do not suggest methods for funding preschool expansion within the school finance system; nor do the authors determine the cost of expanding New Jersey’s preschool infrastructure. Serving additional preschoolers within and beyond the Abbott districts will require not just additional per pupil funding, but also significant state investments in preschool facilities and workforce development, i.e., bringing additional qualified preschool teachers and administrators into the labor market.

Methodology

Belfield and Schwartz's study employs two widely accepted methodologies to estimate the cost of providing preschool that meets Abbott standards of quality. The first uses actual Abbott program budget and classroom quality data to determine what a program would need to spend to achieve a specified level of quality, taking into account program and student characteristics.²⁴ The second method, which involves itemizing the resources needed to implement the Abbott model, allows the authors to reaffirm their initial findings.²⁵ The results are further validated by a comparison with information about the cost of other national preschool models.

When it comes to preschool education, New Jersey is on the right track. The state has undertaken significant investments in a high-quality preschool program serving the most vulnerable children living in the poorest urban school districts. The Abbott Preschool Program is garnering educational gains for participating children, as documented in the APPLES assessment. With the new study by Belfield and Schwartz, the costs of maintaining and expanding this superb program are now known. According to the authors, current state expenditures are close to the true cost of providing the current Abbott Preschool Program at the standards of quality set by the state, but funding will need to increase to ensure that *every* classroom in the Abbott districts is of high quality and that *all* eligible preschoolers whose parents choose to participate have a program available. For purposes of planning for expansion, Belfield and Schwartz estimate the cost to make high-quality preschool available on a voluntary basis to 50,000 additional three and four year olds outside the Abbott school districts. This expansion should be phased in over time in order to maintain adequate funding and preserve quality as the program grows. The state will also need to commit significant resources to the development of preschool facilities and the preschool teacher workforce.

The research is clear: making Abbott-quality preschool available in all New Jersey school districts is a responsible educational initiative and a sound fiscal policy that will return significant benefits to participants, their families, and taxpayers. With estimates of the costs and assessments of the efficacy now available, policymakers can make informed decisions to expand high-quality preschool opportunities to all New Jersey three and four year olds, using the incremental approach already proving successful in other states.

Endnotes

1 The Abbott Preschool Program meets nine of 10 benchmarks for quality as outlined by the National Institute for Early Education Research. See: W. Steven Barnett, Hustedt, Jason T., Robin, Kenneth B., and Schulman, Karen L., "The State of Preschool: 2006 State Preschool Yearbook," (New Brunswick: National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2007).

2 There are approximately 52,000 three and four year olds in the Abbott districts. The Abbott Preschool Program currently serves 75 percent of the eligible population, which is far short of the 90 percent enrollment benchmark set by the state. The program is voluntary for families of preschoolers, but the fact that many Abbott districts enroll well over 90 percent of eligible children raises questions about lack of available programs in some communities.

3 *Abbott v. Burke*, 153 N.J. 480, 492, 710 A.2d 450, 456 (1998) (Abbott V).

4 The court defined "high quality" preschool based on the research evidence presented in the *Abbott* case: a lead teacher with a bachelor's degree and certification in early childhood education in every classroom; class size of fifteen; a developmentally appropriate curriculum; safe and adequate facilities; and transportation and other essential services. See *Abbott v. Burke*, 163 N.J. 95, 748 A.2d 82 (2000) (Abbott VI).

5 N.J.A.C. 6A:10A-2 et seq.

6 Barnett, "The State of Preschool: 2006 State Preschool Yearbook."

7 See endnote 2.

8 See for example: W. Steven Barnett, Cynthia Lamy, and Kwanghee Jung, "The Effects of State Prekindergarten Programs on Young Children's School Readiness in Five States," (New Brunswick: National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2005), William Gormley, Jr. et al., "The Effects of Oklahoma's Universal Pre-K Program on School Readiness: An Executive Summary," (Washington, DC: Center for Research on Children in the United States, Georgetown University, 2004).

9 L.N. Masse and W. Steven Barnett, "A Benefit-Cost Analysis of the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention," in *Cost-*

Effectiveness and Educational Policy, ed. H.M. Levin and P.J. McEwan (Larchmont, NJ: Eye on Education, 2002), A. J. Reynolds et al., "Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Centers," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 24 (2002), Lawrence J. Schweinhart, "The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through Age 40," (Ypsilanti, Michigan: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2004).

10 Barnett, Lamy, and Jung, "The Effects of State Prekindergarten Programs on Young Children's School Readiness in Five States.", Gormley et al., "The Effects of Oklahoma's Universal Pre-K Program on School Readiness: An Executive Summary."

11 See for example: "The Economic Promise of Investing in High-Quality Preschool: Using Early Education to Improve Economic Growth and the Fiscal Sustainability of States and the Nation," (Washington, DC: Committee for Economic Development, 2006), William T. Dickens, Isabel Sawhill, and Jeffrey Tebbs, "The Effects of Investing in Early Education on Economic Growth," (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2006), Lynn A. Karoly and James H. Bigelow, "The Economics of Investing in Universal Preschool Education in California," (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2005), Albert Wat, "Dollars and Sense: A Review of Economic Analyses of Pre-K," (Washington, DC: Pre-K Now, 2007).

12 Robert Lynch, *Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation: Public Investment in High-Quality Prekindergarten* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2007).

13 See for example: J. Currie, "Early Childhood Programs," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 15 (2001), Masse and Barnett, "A Benefit-Cost Analysis of the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention.", Arthur Reynolds, *Success in Early Intervention: The Chicago Child-Parent Centers* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

14 Ellen Frede et al., "The Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (Apples) Interim Report," (New Brunswick: National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2007). The APPLES study analyzed Abbott preschool data collected by the New Jersey Early Learning Improvement Consortium, which includes the state Department of Education, the National Institute for Early Education Research, and other New Jersey university partners.

15 Early Childhood Education Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R) is a widely used quality rating scale for preschool classrooms that was developed by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill.

16 See for example: “New Jersey Fourth-Graders Among Top Readers in the Nation.” NJDOE Press Release, September 25, 2007 (Gov. Corzine stated, “We equate our increases [in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)] to sound preschool and early childhood education programs in New Jersey. They are providing our youngest students with a solid foundation of basic fundamentals, and the efforts are achieving positive results.”); “\$8.5 Million in Governor’s Preschool Quality Enhancement Award Grants Available to Strengthen Early Learning for Disadvantaged Children.” NJDOE Press Release, November 9, 2007 (Commissioner Davy stated, “students in the Abbott school districts who were exposed to quality preschool experiences beginning at the age of three several years ago, are showing encouraging gains of performance in the third and fourth grades, as measured by the NJ ASK exam.”)

17 Clive Belfield and Heather Schwartz, “The Cost of High-Quality Pre-School in New Jersey,” (New York: Queens College, City University of New York and Teachers College, Columbia University, 2007).

18 Dr. Clive Belfield is Assistant Professor of Economics, Queens College, City University of New York, and Co-Director of the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Professor Belfield’s research field is the economics of education, with specific focus on early education. Heather Schwartz is a graduate student at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is the author of the UNESCO 2006 review of the costs of early education programs across the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and she has co-authored published work evaluating the Georgia Universal Prekindergarten Program.

19 Average state expenditures are: \$12,585 for private provider programs, \$10,900 for public school programs, and \$7241 for Head Start programs. Belfield and Schwartz point out that state expenditure for Head Start is lowest because these programs receive a large federal supplement; state expenditure for private programs is highest because they face higher costs respecting teacher hiring, location, and facilities.

20 The figure of 4 percent was picked by the authors as a hypothetical baseline figure and does not represent an estimate of three and four year olds in Abbott districts without access to high-quality preschool programs. Approximately 25 percent of eligible preschoolers in the Abbott districts currently are not served in the program; therefore, it is likely that there are considerably more than 4 percent additional children in need of a preschool program.

21 According to New Jersey Department of Education estimates, non-Abbott ECPA districts currently enroll approximately 22 percent of three and four year olds. This indicates that the state would need to invest considerably more than \$90.79 million in order to serve all eligible preschoolers in these low-income school districts.

22 The figure of 50,000 new children was picked by the authors as a hypothetical baseline figure and does not represent an estimate of three and four year olds in New Jersey without access to high-quality preschool programs.

23 Lori L. Taylor and William J. Fowler Jr., “A Comparable Wage Approach to Geographic Cost Adjustment,” ed. U.S. Department of Education (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2006).

24 This method is known as the “econometric (or cost-function) method.”

25 This method is known as the “evidence based (EB) approach.”

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