

**2006
SPECIAL SESSION
JOINT LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE**

PUBLIC SCHOOL FUNDING REFORM

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Early Childhood Education

- *Recommendation 27:* Provide State support for high-quality preschool for all children in A & B district factor group (DFG) school districts and for children who qualify for free and reduced price meals in all other districts.
- *Recommendation 28:* Provide State support for full-day kindergarten programs in nonAbbott districts.

Early Childhood Education

RECOMMENDATION 27: PROVIDE STATE SUPPORT FOR HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL FOR ALL CHILDREN IN A & B DISTRICT FACTOR GROUP (DFG) SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND FOR CHILDREN WHO QUALIFY FOR FREE AND REDUCED PRICE MEALS IN ALL OTHER DISTRICTS

- **DISCUSSION**

Presently, the State supports early childhood education through a variety of programs and resources.

As a result of a series of landmark rulings by the New Jersey State Supreme Court beginning with the 1998 Abbott v. Burke V decision, New Jersey's 31 Abbott school districts are required to operate "high-quality, well-planned" preschool and kindergarten programs. Furthermore, the State is required to fully fund the effort and prioritize the construction of preschool facilities. The foundation for the preschool rulings was laid in 1990 with the Abbott II decision, where the Court found that "many poor children start school with an approximately two-year disadvantage compared to many suburban youngsters."

The Court ordered the State to provide high-quality preschool in Abbott districts to improve children's academic and social skills. All 3- and 4-year olds in Abbott districts are eligible for the program and transportation at no charge. The State provides the financial support for six hours of educational preschool every day. Through additional financial support from the Department of Human Services, programs may provide extended-day services for up to four additional hours per day. This "wrap-around" component is also available during the summer and on holidays. Each school district is responsible for ensuring its programs meet State educational and child care standards. Districts may provide early childhood services through the public schools or via contracts with private providers or Head Start programs.

In Abbott VIII (2002) the Court directed the State to coordinate more effectively with Head Start programs. Head Start programs, which are federally funded, must adhere to U.S. Department of Education standards. The federal Head Start preschool requirements regarding teacher certification, class size, and day length are less stringent than New Jersey's Abbott guidelines. Consequently, it has been challenging to transition Head Start children into Abbott preschool programs.

The State funds district preschool programs in a variety of ways. Abbott Preschool Expansion Aid was established in 2001 for the purpose of funding the projected expansion of preschool programs in Abbott districts. Payments of Expansion Aid are based on documented growth in preschool programs' enrollment, attendance, and/or necessary expenditures. Expansion Aid has increased from \$95.5 million in FY 2003 to \$243 million for FY 2007.

The State supports preschool education in other districts through Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA). This funding tool provides resources to offer half-day high-quality preschool primarily to 4-year-olds in districts in which 20 to 40% of the children qualify for free or reduced lunch. These districts must provide half-day preschool to all eligible children. ECPA funding began at about \$287.5 million in FY 1998, rose gradually until FY 2002, and then stabilized at about \$330.6 million.

In 2005, the Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI) began serving children in nonAbbott districts as part of a State effort to offer high-quality preschool for all children by 2010. ELLI programs must meet teacher credential requirements, use tested curricula, and include special education, low-income, and middle- or upper-income students. A district's relative level of State support is based on the number of low-income children. Districts that provide preschool through other funding sources are eligible to apply for funding to expand the program to all income-eligible students in the district, or lengthen a half-day program to full-day. ELLI was originally funded at \$15 million, but its appropriation was cut to \$4 million in FY 2006 and \$3 million in FY 2007 to reflect actual expenditures.

In both its reach and results, New Jersey's preschool program is succeeding in low-income districts. A study completed in 2005 by the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University showed that the Abbott Preschool Program positively impacts preschoolers' academic development. Research found that attending Abbott preschool programs at age four leads to "statistically significant and meaningful impacts on children's language, literacy, and math development." Specifically, the Abbott preschool program increased growth in receptive vocabulary – a key indicator of cognitive development – by 26% (a 10% average increase in scores), growth in math skills by 24% (also a 10% average increase), and growth in print (i.e. letter and word) awareness by 61% (a 28% average increase). The study's authors asserted that it would be reasonable to expect the results of the desired and typical two-year Abbott preschool attendance to be even more impressive. (Cynthia Lamy, W. Steven Barnett, and Kwanghee Jung, "The Effects of New Jersey's Abbott Preschool Program on Young Children's School Readiness", p. 3.)

The Joint Committee contends that the expansion of New Jersey's high-quality preschool program will have considerable long-term benefits for all New Jersey children, regardless of income. Studies of children who attended high-quality preschools show that investing in these programs reaps a myriad of benefits: alleviating the need for special and remedial education, boosting overall academic achievement, increasing incomes and employment rate (and consequently taxes paid), lowering the frequency of welfare receipt, and making criminal activities less likely.

The Joint Committee also supports the Governor and Department of Education's effort to expeditiously resolve the Head Start policy conflict with the New Jersey Supreme Court preschool ruling. Capturing available federal revenue to support New Jersey's preschool programs and expansion is a high priority of the Joint Committee.

Because the Joint Committee contends that the long-term social benefits of high-quality preschool programs, when converted into monetary values, far outweigh the costs, the

Joint Committee recommends this expansion of pre-school funding to all A & B districts and low-income students in all other districts. Access to high-quality preschool will provide these children with essential tools for improving outcomes.

Finally, in order to ensure that preschool capacity that may be developed in the non-A & B, nonAbbott districts is fully utilized, the Joint Committee would recommend permitting these districts to charge tuition on either a sliding scale or flat rate basis for students who are not eligible for State-funded pre-school. The Joint Committee also would encourage districts to look toward cooperative agreements.

- **RECOMMENDED ACTION**

The Joint Committee recommends that the State provide support for high-quality preschool for all children in A & B district factor group (DFG) school districts and for children who qualify for free and reduced price meals in all districts.

RECOMMENDATION 28: PROVIDE STATE SUPPORT FOR FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN PROGRAMS IN NONABBOTT DISTRICTS

- **DISCUSSION**

The Supreme Court through the Abbott decisions requires the State to provide full-day kindergarten in all Abbott districts, while nonAbbott districts may provide either part- or full-day programs. Abbott kindergarten funding is included in Education Opportunity Aid (EOA). EOA is a categorical allocation that provides supplementary funds for grade K-12 education in Abbott districts. NonAbbott districts are able to use ECPA funds to support full-day kindergarten and improve a variety of services for children up to grade three. Those districts receiving ECPA funds are statutorily required to provide for full-day kindergarten.

As noted in the pre-school recommendation, data shows that early childhood education is vital to later educational success. Therefore, the Joint Committee believes funding existing full-day kindergarten programs will serve as an incentive for all districts to operate full-day programs and eventually every child will have access to full-day kindergarten.

As with pre-school, the Joint Committee believes support of full-day kindergarten will have considerable long-term benefits not only for New Jersey's children, but for the entire State. A competent, productive, workforce is essential to the continued economic viability of our State. Therefore, the Joint Committee recommends State support for full-day kindergarten.

- **RECOMMENDED ACTION**

The Joint Committee recommends support for full-day kindergarten programs in nonAbbott districts.