

Keeping the Promise of Preschool for New Jersey's Children



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The research is clear that full-day, high-quality preschool benefits young children most by preparing them for kindergarten and providing them with a solid foundation for future success in school and in life.

While all 3- and 4- year-olds can benefit from such an experience, children from low-income families have the most to gain. For years, New Jersey has recognized the critical importance of this early learning experience by providing many young children with quality preschool.

Yet today, far too many children are missing out on the promise of preschool, simply because of where they live. While the 2008 school funding law mandated expansion of high-quality, full-day preschool beyond the handful of districts that now receive full state funding for this, five years later, only four districts have received those expansion funds.

The research shows that quality and duration matter. When a program is both high-quality and full-day, the lasting effects on children's development of knowledge and skills can be significant and help children read on target by 3rd grade, improving their chances for long-term academic success.

To measure the need and the will to expand preschool to all eligible children, Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) surveyed more than 100 districts that currently receive limited preschool state aid. The majority of these districts have high concentrations of children living in low-income families who would most benefit from high-quality, full-day preschool, leveraging the substantial investment that New Jersey makes in public education. Current state funding is inadequate to support that high quality. Administrators in 46 of these districts completed the survey.



High Demand for Preschool Expansion

The survey found that these districts are ready and willing to expand their preschools so that more children reap the proven benefits of preschool and to meet the high parent demand for this quality early learning. What is missing, school officials said, is the state's additional support promised in the 2008 school funding law to these children, their families and these schools.

Because of funding, the survey found that most districts are unable to serve all eligible children and can provide only half-day preschools, which are less effective at giving children a quality early start to education. In addition, 85 percent of respondents said parent demand for preschool is high.

School officials also said they want to provide a quality preschool for all of their 3- and 4- year- olds.



of respondents said parent demand for quality preschool is high.

About 82 percent indicated a strong interest in expanding preschool.

Their primary reason for wanting to expand preschool is compelling. Nearly all respondents said preschool expansion would better prepare children for kindergarten. Seventy-five percent said preschool expansion would help address social/emotional issues.

Unfortunately, most districts cannot meet these needs without adequate funding. The survey found:

- About half of the respondents are unable to serve all 4-year-olds in the district.
- More than 41 percent have a waiting list for their 4-year-olds.
- More than 68 percent provide only half-day preschools for 4-year-olds.
- Only one-third offer preschool to 3-year-olds.

Districts Face Preschool Challenges

While the benefits of preschool are not in question, survey responses indicated that districts are unable to maximize the potential of every young child in their districts because:

State funding for preschool is inadequate	64%
Preschool is not full-day	55%
Districts cannot provide preschool to all 4-year-olds	50%
Districts cannot provide preschool to 3-year-olds	48%

Comments from School Officials

“Our district is extremely thankful for the state support we have been given for preschool. It is our hope with additional state funds that we will soon be able to expand our preschool classrooms.”

--Grace Burch, Early Childhood Supervisor, Atlantic City Public Schools

“We had a waiting list of 93 3-year-olds and 48 4-year-olds in 2011-12. Those are students who could have received a high-quality preschool experience...We are unable to prepare our at-risk learners for kindergarten if (we) do not have funding...”

--Dr. Karen Andre, Director, Child Study Team, Morris School District



“In surveying our parents, full day is preferred and we can accommodate this with more funding. Research

indicates full-day preschool is most beneficial and, given the economic disadvantage of our population (54% eligible for free- and reduced-price lunch), we could better serve the needs of more preschool children in the district with a full-day program.”

--Dr. Peter Koza, Superintendent/Principal, Upper Deerfield Township



Districts Remain Committed

The districts' commitment to the value of preschool is evident in the high number of respondents – 70 percent – that use local funds to supplement the state's funding of their preschools. However, with rising costs in other areas and a 2 percent spending cap, local funds can only go so far in providing access and ensuring quality to young children.

Clear Benefits to Preschool Expansion

Since 2008, four districts have been receiving the expansion funds mandated in the school funding law to provide high-quality, full-day preschool to all 3- and 4-year olds. These districts -- Fairfield, Little Egg Harbor, Red Bank and Woodbine -- all have high concentrations of low-income children who are benefiting from preschool. ACNJ interviewed administrators in all four districts to learn more about how their preschools are preparing young learners for school success.

Children are Better Prepared for Kindergarten

Ensuring that children have the skills necessary to succeed in school is no easy feat. In the past, children in these districts were entering kindergarten without the necessary skills to be successful, particularly in language and reading, school officials said. All four districts, however, say that starting earlier—at 3 years old-- is making a measurable difference in preparing children for kindergarten.

In Woodbine, children are given an assessment upon entering kindergarten that measures early literacy skills. Prior to implementing preschool in 2008, about 70 percent of Woodbine's incoming kindergarteners needed intensive intervention in phonics, a critical skill for reading and writing. After one year of implementing preschool, only 35 percent of Woodbine's incoming kindergarten students needed that remediation.

The other districts reported similar results.

"Early childhood has been the lynchpin of our education and has propelled us," said Little Egg Harbor Superintendent Frank Kasyan.

Fewer children require special education

The research is clear that children who attend high-quality preschool are less likely to need costly special education services, which can lead to significant taxpayer savings.ⁱ

Each New Jersey school district receiving full preschool funding is required to have one preschool intervention and referral team (PIRT) for every 750 enrolled students. These teams provide supports and recommendations to help teachers address the needs of children with challenging behaviors or potential learning difficulties.ⁱⁱ Because these services are offered at the beginning of a child's educational experience, they are usually successful in addressing issues early on and have resulted in fewer children needing special education later on, school officials said.

In Little Egg Harbor, the kindergarten referral rate for special education dropped from 11 percent before preschool and the PIRT teams were available to less than 3 percent in 2011-12. School administrators credit this to the PIRT teams and said the district is realizing significant savings on special education.

"These additional supports help stop the fires," said a Little Egg Harbor administrator.

Red Bank has seen the same results. "When we look at our special education numbers, we know we are identifying the right children and they are getting the services they need. We have become better at meeting the needs of those children who really need the services," said Red Bank Superintendent Laura Morana.

In Woodbine, early literacy skills improved tremendously after one year of preschool.

70%

of incoming kindergarteners needed intensive intervention in phonics prior to pre-k implementation.

2008-2009

35%

of incoming kindergarteners needed intensive intervention in phonics after pre-k implementation.

2009-2010

Before

After

Children's social and emotional skills are better developed

The development of social and emotional abilities is also critically important in preparing young children for school success. To learn in school, children must be able to pay attention, follow instructions and demonstrate self-control and cooperation. High-quality preschool can help young children develop these important skills, which can also produce a significant economic pay-off in preventing crime and juvenile delinquency.ⁱⁱⁱ

Because of high-quality preschool in the expansion districts, children are acquiring these skills as early as 3 years old, school officials said. Little Egg Harbor Superintendent Kasyan said preschool at age 3 has had a "profound effect" on young children's social and emotional development. While initially not a preschool advocate, over the last five years, Kasyan said he has witnessed great emotional growth and maturity in the children attending preschool. Early on, the children "know what to do, and know the routine," he explained.

Nicole Bethea, an assistant principal in Fairfield, said strengthening children's social and emotional skills,

particularly in the area of self-regulation, has resulted in fewer behavioral problems and less severe issues than before preschool was provided.

"Thanks to our preschool program, children are exposed early to self-regulation strategies that help them as they move forward in their educational careers," she said.

More opportunities for professional development have raised quality

Because of the state support for preschool, teachers now have access to more meaningful early learning professional development, school officials said. They are able to acquire new or strengthened skills in teaching young learners, thus improving the quality of their teaching. "We are getting teachers better ready to receive young children," Kasyan said.

In Fairfield, the increased opportunities for professional development have allowed staff to think more broadly about early learning, Bethea said. This has led to the district linking preschool education with kindergarten and the first years of elementary school. Staff is now working more collaboratively to address early learning issues between preschool and 1st grade.

Time to Keep the Promise of Preschool

While the benefits of high-quality preschool are clear, thousands of New Jersey 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families are not reaping the benefits promised to them in the school funding formula. Many continue to enter kindergarten ill-prepared for school. From that first day of kindergarten, these children are fighting an uphill battle to catch up.

It is time to make a down-payment to expand existing state-funded preschools, as promised in the 2008 school funding law. Full-day preschools should be instituted and made available to all 3- and 4- year-olds. This will give more children the foundation necessary to be successful in school and in life, while leveraging the considerable investment that New Jersey makes in public education.

Fortunately, there is already a base to build-upon. By providing an additional \$10 million of preschool aid, the state can maximize its existing commitment to preschool in several different ways.

The funds can be used to:

- Expand existing preschools from half to full-day for nearly 1,500 youngsters.
- Provide full-day preschool for close to 800 children who currently do not attend high-quality preschool.
- Provide preschool through a combination of the above options.

With renewed interest from Washington in quality preschool, the nation is starting to catch up with what New Jersey has known all along: high-quality preschool does make a difference in the educational success of young children. Beginning to expand our state's investment is long-overdue.

An additional
\$10 million in
preschool aid
would provide
close to 1,500
needy kids with
full-day preschool.



Preschool in New Jersey

While more than 53,000 primarily low-income 3- and 4-year-olds attend state-funded preschool in New Jersey, the type and length of the preschool varies, depending on where a child lives.

The majority of these children—about 45,000 attend a 6-hour, high-quality preschool with 15 children in a class, a teacher with a Bachelor's Degree and specialized training in early childhood education and an aide. All the 3- and 4- year-olds in these 35 districts have access to the program.

The remaining youngsters, also low-income and scattered throughout the state, attend preschools that receive much less state funding. Both access and quality look very different for them. Most districts can only offer half-day preschool and often cannot serve all children. There are more children in each class and the level of quality is not the same as those children who reap the benefits of a full-day preschool.

In 2008, New Jersey's school funding formula attempted to remedy this disparity. Recognizing the benefits of quality preschool on long-term outcomes, the formula mandated funding for high-quality, full-day preschool to all low-income 3- and 4- year-olds, regardless of where they live. Under the law, all low-income preschoolers should be reaping the benefits of quality preschool by this coming school year. Full funding, however, has never been provided and so these thousands of New Jersey children continue to miss out on value of this early education.

Right from the Start:

Building the Foundation for School Success

This policy brief is part of Advocates for Children of New Jersey's Right from the Start Campaign and is aimed at strengthening the state's early learning system by enacting stronger public policies for young children and increasing investments in programs and services that pay strong dividends over the course of a child's life.



End Notes:

- i. Early Education: The Power to Reduce Future Crime Victimization. (2011) Preschool Matters. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved January 26, 2013 from <http://preschoolmatters.org/2011/07/29/early-education-the-power-to-reduce-future-crime-victimization/>
- ii. N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-4.4
- iii. Boyd, J., Barnett, W.S., Bodrova, E., Leong, D., Gomby, D. (2005) Promoting Children's Social and Emotional Development Through Preschool Education. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved January 25, 2013 from <http://nieer.org/resources/policyreports/report7.pdf>.

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