



To: The Honorable Ronald Rice and Mila Jasey, Co-Chairs  
Members, Joint Committee on the Public Schools

From: Cecilia Zalkind, President and CEO  
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Advocates for Children of New Jersey

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RE: **Preschool and Kindergarten School Facilities**

The research is clear that a high quality preschool experience followed by a strong, developmentally appropriate year of kindergarten can provide our young children with the foundations necessary for short- and long-term academic success.

During the last two decades, New Jersey has seen both at the state and local level, that those research findings has been at the heart of our preschool early learning policies. From the beginning of the implementation of Abbott preschool in 1999 to the inclusion of additional funds for preschool expansion in the proposed FY 2019 budget, our state has embraced the importance of these years of learning and growth. This year, close to 60,000 preschoolers are enrolled in a high quality program.

For our kindergartners, in the 2015-16 school year, there were nearly 92,000 of them enrolled in school and almost 80,000 or 87 percent were in full-day programs, according to ACNJ's 2017 New Jersey Kids Count. This additional classroom time from half-day to full-day provides a greater opportunity for children to experience and learn the multiple components critical for a strong education foundation.

Besides the data, ACNJ has learned that facilities—or lack thereof-- are often driving district decisions on how best to provide programs for preschoolers and kindergartners. If the goal of our state and local districts is to ensure that the maximum number of our young students have the academic and social/emotional skills to be successful in school and in life, it is time to think differently about facilities.

**PRESCHOOL:** The majority of the state's former Abbott school districts implement preschool through a mixed delivery system of public preschool, private provider and Head Start classrooms. While the locations may vary in any given Abbott community, the standards do not. Every preschool teacher has a Bachelor's Degree with specialized training in early childhood education and there are a maximum of 15 preschoolers in every class. In fact, the majority of preschoolers continue to attend preschool outside the public school settings. This approach has allowed districts to provide for a greater number of children without having to build facilities to meet their entire preschool universe.

New Jersey's approach to educating our 3- and 4-year olds is viewed throughout the country as a national model, as it innovatively addresses the need for quality early learning while saving on the cost of new construction.

The problem is that too few New Jersey educators know of the success of our model. This lack of knowledge regarding the mixed delivery system has had consequences on how school districts move forward with preschool planning and implementation, once funding becomes available. The majority of districts that received either federal or state preschool expansion dollars appeared to make their enrollment decisions based on their own classroom availability, rather than student need. In too many districts, with too many young children who would benefit from quality preschool, implementing the program through a mixed delivery system was not chosen as an option so that more children could be served. Because the DOE did not require districts to work with those provider programs that met the high quality preschool standards, there was no impetus for relationships to develop between the school districts and qualifying community programs. As a result, fewer eligible children were served.

The following are three examples of enrollment data from the 2017-18 school year for districts that received either federal or state expansion dollars.

Districts	Universe of 3- & 4-year olds	Number of preschoolers being served	Percentage being served
1	210	61	29
2	1472	205	14
3	1280	415	33

All three districts solely used their in-district available classroom space and did not engage community programs in order to provide a higher number of their preschoolers with a quality program.

Similarly, while the majority of New Jersey kindergartners attend full-day programs, 12,000 young students continue to attend school for only half the day. Like the compelling preschool research, full-day kindergarten can provide young students with the academic learning time needed to prepare for the skill mastery of primary-grade reading and math, reducing the chances for the necessity of future remediation or retention. From past conversations with district superintendents, the primary reason for not offering full-day kindergarten is the lack of facilities.

This has a detrimental impact on both kindergarten teachers and their young students. Teachers have described that it is extremely difficult to fully implement the multiple components of New Jersey's comprehensive Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines in just 2 ½ or 3 hours. Similarly, kindergartners in these abbreviated programs cannot experience the maximum benefits of the guidelines' full implementation.

In order to maximize the number of preschool and kindergarten students benefiting from full-day, quality programs, it is time for our state and local school districts to think "outside-the-box" when it comes to facilities. The following is a list of recommendations that will increase the number of young children who will have access to quality full-day preschool and kindergarten:

For Preschool:

1. *Require districts eligible for preschool expansion funds to assess facility availability of eligible community provider programs to determine whether they are an option in providing additional classroom space.* Assuming funding availability, the DOE should send the message to districts that they should explore every facility option so that more 3- and 4-year-olds can have access to and benefit from quality preschool.
  - *Provide scholarship funds for teachers in community programs to return to school.* Provider teachers may need to return to school to meet the required standard of having a Bachelor's Degree and specialized training in early childhood education. During the early years of the implementation of the Abbott preschool program, scholarships were available to teachers in community-based and Head Start programs so that they could meet the standard during the time that the program was being implemented incrementally. These dollars proved to be money well-spent. Between 2000 and December 2007, \$21.7 million of scholarship dollars were awarded to more than 6,600 preschool teachers, according to figures from the former Professional Impact New Jersey. While the focus of the funding was to ensure qualified teachers in community programs, it also resulted in the professionalization of an entire group of individuals, the majority of whom were women from the community in which they worked. **This minimal investment over seven years in our state's early education workforce was cheaper than the construction of even one educational facility.**
  - *Provide funds for renovations of child care programs so that they can meet preschool standards.* While all child care programs are required to meet state licensing standards, they may need funding assistance to meet the higher preschool standards.
  - *Educate eligible school districts on the benefits of the mixed delivery system.* The benefits of our state's mixed delivery system for preschool implementation should be shared with school districts so that they will be less concerned about the effectiveness of implementing a program with community partners.

For Kindergarten:

- *Require full-day kindergarten.* The educational foundation necessary for young children to be successful in school is significant, and difficult to achieve in just a half-day of preschool. Providing young students with the tools necessary to achieve that end requires more time each day in our kindergarten classrooms.
- *Allow school districts with limited facilities space to implement full-day kindergarten in community settings.* If the goal is to ensure that all children have access to full-day kindergarten, using the successful preschool mixed delivery model will allow districts an additional option in achieving that end. Like in the preschool model, kindergarten teachers located in community-based settings, would have to meet all the educational and curriculum standards as their colleagues in public kindergarten classrooms.