



To: Members, Joint Committee on the Public Schools
From: Cecilia Zalkind, Executive Director
Cynthia Rice, Senior Policy Analyst
Date: February 27, 2013
Re: **Preschool Expansion and School Breakfast**

Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) urge the members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools to consider two important issues affecting children in our state: the need to expand high-quality preschool for 3- and 4- year-olds and the need for school breakfasts to be more accessible to students.

Preschool Expansion

ACNJ urges the Legislature to make good on a promise and begin funding expansion of high-quality, full-day preschool to 3- and 4- year-olds from low-income families, as mandated in our state school funding formula.

There are volumes of research and data demonstrating that high -quality preschool can have a dramatic effect on not only the children who participate, but on society as a whole. When children are prepared on their first day of kindergarten, they will experience early successes, and those successes will lead to more successes. When they are not prepared, however, their chances of realizing such successes are greatly diminished.

Research has also shown that quality and duration matter when young children attend programs outside the home. When a preschooler attends an early learning program that is both high-quality and full-day, the lasting effects on his/her development can be significant, particularly if that child is from a low-income family.

By providing children with quality programs that prepare them to be ready for school, we are taking steps to both close our persistent achievement gap and increase equity in our public schools. No new education reform initiative will ever be meaningful if children have not acquired the necessary skills to be successful on their first day of kindergarten and beyond.

This is a very timely topic, as preschool has turned into a national conversation in the last few weeks. This however, is not a new concept in our state. In New Jersey, we have long recognized the importance of preschool especially for low-income families. For nearly 20 years, the state has provided funding to support preschool and the school funding law mandates high-quality, full-day preschool to be fully funded by state dollars for all low-income children.

While New Jersey has led the nation in providing high quality preschool to low-income children, thousands of children are still denied this early education because of where they live. It is time to make good on the promise of preschool.

To measure the need and the will to expand preschool to all eligible children, ACNJ surveyed the 100 districts that currently receive limited preschool state aid. The majority of these districts have high concentrations of children living in low-income families. These children would most benefit from full-day, high-quality preschool. Administrators in 46 of these districts completed the survey.

There were four key survey findings:

1. *The districts are ready and willing to expand their preschools so that more children can benefit.* Approximately 82% surveyed said they had a strong interest in expansion. When asked why they were interested in expanding their programs, nearly all the respondents said that expansion would better prepare their students for kindergarten. Moreover, 75% said that preschool would help children develop critical social and emotional skills at an earlier age.

2. *Parents want their children participating in preschool.* 85% of the respondents said that parent demand for preschool is very high. More than 41% of those surveyed stated that their district had a waiting list for 4-year-olds.

3. *The lack of funding is the barrier for providing preschool.* Overwhelmingly, the respondents indicated that what is missing is the additional support promised in the funding formula. They further stated that they cannot meet the needs of young children without adequate state funding. The responses stated that:

- About half are unable to serve all their 4-year-olds
- More than 41% have a waiting list for their 4- year-olds
- More than 68% provide only ½ day preschool for their 4- year olds
- Only 1/3 offer preschool to their 3- year olds

4. *Districts are committed to provide preschool.* Approximately 70% of the responses indicated that they were using local funds to supplement their state funds for preschool. However, with rising district costs, and the existing spending cap, local funds were inadequate to provide full access and quality to all eligible preschoolers.

Besides the survey, ACNJ also assessed whether full-day, high quality preschool was having a positive effect on children in the four districts, Fairfield, Little Egg Harbor, Red Bank and Woodbine, that have received state expansion funds since the funding formula became law. All four districts have high concentrations of low-income children.

ACNJ interviewed administrators in these districts and the overarching message was the same: *preschool was making a huge difference in the lives of their students.*

All four districts identified the following benefits for expanding preschool:

1. *Children are better prepared for kindergarten.* All four districts said that before preschool, most of their students were entering kindergarten without the necessary skills to be successful, particularly in language and reading. They all said that starting earlier—at 3 years-old is making a measurable difference in preparing children to be ready on their first day of school.
2. *Fewer children are requiring special education.* They also saw the link between preschool and a reduction in the number of children requiring special education. For example, before preschool was implemented in Little Egg Harbor the kindergarten referral rate for special education was approximately 11%. In 2011-12, the referral rate was less than 3%, clearly indicating that having the ability to address children's issues earlier, is not only benefiting students but is a cost-saving measure for districts. Similarly, Red Bank acknowledged that when they looked at their special education numbers, they now know they are identifying the right children and they are getting the services they need.
3. *Children's social and emotional skills are better developed.* The result of strengthening these critical skills at an earlier age has meant that all four districts are currently seeing fewer behavioral problems in their kindergarten classes. This was a much bigger kindergarten issue prior to the implementation of preschool.
4. *More opportunities for professional development have raised overall quality.* The support has also increased the opportunities for teachers to hone their skills in teaching young children. In Fairfield, these increased opportunities for professional development have allowed staff to think more broadly about early learning and have provided them with collaborative opportunities they did not have in the past.

While the research on the benefits of preschool remains indisputable, the information collected by ACNJ confirms that the benefits, the demand, and the need for preschool require New Jersey to keep its promise to young children. ACNJ urges the legislature to make a down-payment to expand access to preschool for low-income children.

Fortunately, there is already a base to build-upon. By supplementing existing state support for districts that already have half-day preschool, more children can reap the benefits enjoyed by those 3- and 4- year olds currently attending high quality, full-day PK.

By providing an additional \$10 million in preschool aid, the state can maximize its existing commitment to preschool in several different ways:

- Expand existing preschools from half- to full-day for nearly 1500 youngsters
- Provide full-day PK for nearly 800 children who currently do not attend h-q PK

- Provide preschool through a combination of these two options

In NJ, we have long recognized the importance of preschool especially for children from low-income families. We understand that dollars are tight. By investing in a strong educational foundation for young children, however, we are ensuring more proficient readers in 3rd grade and eventually more students leaving our schools with the skills necessary to compete in the 21st century.

Making this investment pays enormous dividends for children, families, communities and taxpayers. As budget discussions move forward, ACNJ urges you to view this down-payment as a critical investment in our children's education—one we can no longer afford to delay.

School Breakfast

Research shows that when students have eaten a good breakfast it is a “win-win” situation for both them and their schools. In general, students who have had breakfast perform better academically and have fewer visits to the school nurse. Schools experience less disruptive student behavior and increased attendance and reduced tardiness.

While nearly all school districts have a school breakfast program when they have 20% or more of their students eligible for free- and reduced-lunch, only 41% of those who are eligible actually take advantage of the breakfast, placing New Jersey a dismal 46th out of 51, according to the Food Research and Action Center's *2011-2012 School Breakfast Scorecard*.

The main barrier is that many schools only offer breakfast before school starts and thus not addressing the realities of family life. Bus and family schedules often prevent children from arriving at school with enough time to eat breakfast before that first school bell, leaving many with having nothing to eat before they begin their school day. With nearly one in three New Jersey children living in families that earn too little to meet their basic needs (2010 data), ensuring that every eligible child has access to breakfast is more important than ever.

For the past few years, ACNJ and its partners in the *NJ Food For Thought School Breakfast Campaign* have worked to ensure that more children are eating a healthy breakfast at school. The Campaign's goal is to boost participation in the federal School Breakfast Program by 30 percent by June 2013. If achieved, about 40,000 more children will get a healthy breakfast each school day.

The steering committee is working to build statewide support for school breakfast expansion, as well as assisting local efforts to expand school breakfast participation. Since the *Campaign* began, there has been good news, as the state saw a 21% increase in the number of children from low-income families receiving breakfast at school during the period between October 2010 and March 2012.

Although there remains plenty of work to be done, part of the reason for this increase is because schools are beginning to think differently on how best to have more students participating in their breakfast program. Districts are finding that serving “breakfast after the bell” is a more effective way of ensuring that children get a healthy meal at the start of every school day.

For example, providing breakfast in the classroom often dramatically increases student participation in the breakfast program. Typically, food services staff members pack meals into insulated containers for each classroom and deliver them before the first bell rings. Students come into their classroom, grab their meal and sit down and eat. Normally, this is the time that attendance is being taken, announcements are made and desk work is taking place. When the students have completed their breakfast, they dispose their trash for the custodial staff to remove.

Districts with high concentrations of eligible children are usually able to cover the full cost of providing breakfast to more students because of the increase of federal meal reimbursement rates and the relative stability of program operating costs.

In order to learn how well individual school districts are doing in providing school breakfasts, ACNJ urges the legislators to review the district participation data in the September 2012 *Food For Thought: Expanding School Breakfast to NJ Students*. If particular schools in legislators’ legislative districts have high concentrations of eligible children and low participation rates, ACNJ urges legislators to contact these districts and advocate for increased participation.