

The ABCs of Preschool: Lessons Learned from New Jersey

By Cecilia Zalkind
Executive Director



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The federal proposal to expand preschool is a bold investment in the future of children and of our country. As a strong and dedicated advocate for preschool, Advocates for Children of New Jersey has witnessed first-hand the impact that high-quality preschool has on future school success, especially for low-income children.

Each year, about 50,000 low-income New Jersey children benefit from high-quality preschool. It has been 15 years since New Jersey first started this successful preschool initiative. As the federal proposal evolves, New Jersey's lessons learned can inform the debate on how to implement quality preschool on a national level.



1. **Quality really matters.** New Jersey is seeing great gains for children attending state-funded preschool because of the high quality of our program. That quality is built on qualified early learning teachers, small class sizes and a strong curriculum. This winning combination should be the foundation of the federal expansion of preschool.
2. **Highly-qualified teachers are essential.** All teachers, whether in public schools or community-based preschools, must possess strong early childhood education skills and training. Young children learn differently than older students. New Jersey's experience is living proof that when provided with appropriate supports, such as scholarships, assistance with school fees, books and tuition, teachers can become successful early childhood educators. They need a reasonable period of time to earn both their bachelor's degree and early childhood credential.
3. **Equity is key.** Preschool teachers, whether working for a school district or community-based preschool, must earn comparable salaries and have health benefits. Without equitable compensation, preschools will be unable to sustain a stable workforce, which lowers the quality of these classrooms.

NJ PRESCHOOLS BOOST STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

The Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES) tracks students in New Jersey's poorest communities who attended high-quality, state-funded preschool. The 2013 findings show that by 4th or 5th grade, these children are, on average:

- Three-quarters of an academic year ahead of students who did not attend a quality preschool;
- Made significant academic gains in language arts, literacy, math and science;
- Were less likely to be retained a grade or require special education.

This clearly shows that New Jersey's preschools are closing our state's pervasive achievement gap and helping children acquire the necessary academic and social skills.

Source: National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER)



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KIDS WHO ATTEND HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL...



**HAVE HIGHER
ACADEMIC
ACHIEVEMENT**

20-40% increase in elementary test scores for preschool grads

**STRUGGLE LESS IN
SCHOOL**



40% less likely to struggle back a grade

**OVERCOME BARRIERS
TO LEARNING**



31% drop in need for special education services

View data source @ acnj.org

- Good preschool requires partnership.** In New Jersey, school districts team up with child care centers, community-based preschools and Head Start to deliver high-quality preschool. This improves access and gives parents choice. It solves the problem of limited space in schools. It engages the expertise of the entire early education community. And, it is cost-effective.
- Parents must be engaged.** Parents are an important part of their children's school success. In New Jersey, "family workers" provide a critical connection between school and home, making sure that all of a child's needs are met.
- Two years are better than one.** New Jersey high-quality preschools start for children at age 3. Research in New Jersey shows that the gains from two years of high-quality preschool are even greater than one, helping to further close the achievement between disadvantaged children and their wealthier peers.
- All is better than some.** New Jersey determines preschool eligibility by the income level of the community, not the family. All children are eligible for preschool in school districts with high percentages of low-income families, regardless of individual family income. This creates a more diverse learning environment for young children.
- Connections are important.** Preschool is the linchpin to early education. We must think about how preschool connects to kindergarten and beyond. The early grades must be ready for children coming out of high-quality preschools to sustain the gains they make in those first two years of early learning.
- Quality takes time.** It took time to build the preschool structure in New Jersey. Partnerships had to be forged. Child care programs needed time to meet new, higher preschool standards. Teachers needed the chance to go back to school. Colleges and universities had to develop early childhood teaching programs. The investment in time and money was essential in creating the foundation to build – and sustain – New Jersey's effective, high-quality preschool.
- Investments can pay off quickly.** The long-term benefits of preschool are well-known -- improved graduation rates, more students going on to higher education, less crime. But studies show New Jersey is also seeing its preschool investment result in fewer students being held back a grade and fewer children needing special education. The key is quality and meeting the unique developmental needs of young children.

The road to high-quality preschool is not easy. It takes leadership, time and a long-term commitment to investing in young learners. It requires a recognition that the needs of the child must drive the development of quality preschools. It is possible to achieve this. New Jersey provides a recipe for success and is proof that preschool is a smart investment that pays off for children now and in the future.

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