



Abbott at 25: Celebrating Successes, Looking to the Future

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This September marks the 25th anniversary of the opening of the first classrooms of what was initially known in New Jersey as the Abbott Preschool program. The program was established following the historic fifth ruling in the landmark Abbott v. Burke school funding case, in which the New Jersey Supreme Court mandated high-quality public preschool education for all 3- and 4-year-old children in 28 of the state's highest-poverty school districts. This number later expanded to 31 school districts.

Critical Components of the Abbott Preschool Program

- Offered to all three and four-year-olds in the Abbott School District
- Full 6-hour school day
- All Classroom teachers must hold a BA degree with state certification for early learning
- Class size a maximum of 15 students per one state-certified teacher and assistant paid at K-12 parity
- Developmentally appropriate standards-based curriculum
- A mixed delivery approach that included both community-based child care centers and public school facilities
- Comprehensive Professional Development Coaching
- Social and health services



The Abbott Preschool Program was launched with these words from the New Jersey Supreme Court Justices:

“This Court is convinced that preschool for three- and four-year-olds will have a significant and substantial positive impact on academic achievement in both early and later school years.”

[Abbott v. Burke, 153 N.J. 480, 508, 710 A.2d 450 \(1998\)¹²](#).

In response to the Court's decision, New Jersey developed a nationally recognized public preschool model, which included an age-appropriate curriculum aligned with state educational standards, small class sizes, and state-certified teachers. An innovative feature of New Jersey's model was the use of a mixed delivery approach. Mixed delivery is the use of community-based child care centers and Head Start programs, and public school facilities

together to provide the preschool services. This approach offers many benefits including the ability to reach more children, support families that need full-day and full-year services, and stabilize the child care system. The mixed delivery approach also allows parents more choices in selecting a program that best meets their needs, including language and cultural preferences.

With the combination of experience, a college degree, Preschool-3rd grade teaching certification, and pay parity, the quality of education for our youngest learners was greatly improved, as was the quality of life for early childhood teachers. Additionally, paraprofessionals, or assistant teachers in these programs, were also paid salaries comparable to those of their district counterparts, further enhancing their quality of life.

A [2021 study by the National Institute for Early Education Research \(NIEER\)](#) found that by 10th grade, students who attended preschool in the original 31 state-funded programs continued to excel, particularly in math, language arts, and literacy. The study also showed a 15% reduction in grade retention and a 7% decrease in special education placements. Thanks to the thousands of dedicated early learning professionals, along with advocates, administrators, funders, researchers, and parents, countless children's lives have been positively impacted by the Abbott Preschool program.

The Abbott decision also had an impact on New Jersey early childhood education policy and practice, laying the foundation for expanding public preschool beyond New Jersey's original 31 high-poverty districts and underscored the critical importance of high-quality early education. In 2008, the State Legislature approved the

expansion of high-quality preschools statewide under the School Funding Reform Act. However, it was not until 2018 that annual investments in Preschool Expansion Aid began. Since the first public preschool classrooms opened 25 years ago, more than 400,000 students in over 291 school districts have benefited from a high-quality public preschool education, with over \$550 million invested.

However, despite the overall positive impacts of NJ's public preschool system as outlined above, the expansion of preschool to additional school districts has resulted in unintended consequences for community-based child care centers. Since utilizing a mixed delivery approach is encouraged but not mandatory, the financial viability of child care programs in the expansion districts has been threatened. Child care businesses rely on a robust preschool population to help offset the high costs of providing care and education to infants and toddlers. Without this preschool population, many small business owners struggle to stay in business. This not only impacts care and education for infants and toddlers but also affects the availability of care for preschool-aged children during before- and after-school hours, school breaks, and the summer months when schools are closed.

Data from the [Education Law Center](#) shows declining and limited participation of private providers in public preschools:

- In Abbott Districts: Enrollment in private providers and Head Start programs decreased by 25% from fall 2009 to fall 2022, dropping from 25,121 to 18,704 students. In fall 2010, 51% of Abbott preschoolers were enrolled in private providers or Head Start programs; by 2022, this had declined to only 38%.

- In Preschool Expansion Districts: In fall 2022, of the nearly 20,000 preschool students in districts funded through PreK Expansion, only 3,300 (or 17%) were enrolled in private providers or Head Start programs.

Looking Ahead

This historic anniversary provides an opportunity to both renew our commitment to the promise of high-quality public preschool for all children in New Jersey as well as to join together to find solutions that will serve to strengthen the broader early care and education system. To sustain New Jersey’s commitment to high-quality public preschool education with a focus on parental choice, ACNJ, along with our early learning partners, recommends the following:

1. Create a task force that includes individuals that represent all stakeholders, including community-based centers, family child care programs, public school districts and parents, along with policy- and decision-makers . This task force should use the Abbott preschool program framework to build a public program that addresses today's evolving environment and provides parents with access to a broad range of public preschool location options.
2. Mandate a mixed delivery system and establish a dedicated position within the Department of Education's Office of Early Childhood to support community providers in collaboration with their local preschool expansion school districts.
3. Adjust the square footage requirements for community providers partnering with preschool expansion school districts from 950 to 525 square feet, in line with the New Jersey Department of Children and Families' child care licensing standards, similar to requirements in all other states offering public preschool, except New Hampshire.
4. Provide financial incentives to community-based providers to stabilize the supply of Infant Toddler care and education in preschool expansion districts and surrounding communities.

Visit [ACNJ.org](https://acnj.org) to read Senate testimony from [ACNJ](https://acnj.org) and our [early learning partners](https://acnj.org) regarding Preschool expansion. (<https://acnj.org/issues/early-learning/preschool/>)

