

The Abbott Districts in 2005-06 | Progress and Challenges

Abbott Indicators Project

**Education Law Center
Spring 2006**



Overview

After decades of disinvestment and underfunding, many American urban school systems do not provide an education that prepares all students for full civic and economic participation in society. Through the Abbott framework for urban school reform, New Jersey has an unprecedented opportunity to ensure that the children in our poorest cities receive the same high-quality education as children in more affluent suburbs. We must recognize, however, that urban school reform is a complex undertaking that will take time and sustained local and state effort and support.

Abbott provides the means by which New Jersey's urban school systems can improve. In 1997-98, the state equalized school funding between the most successful suburbs and the poorest cities. In 1998-99, local planning for state-financed school facilities construction started. In 1999-00, Abbott elementary schools started implementing Whole School Reform, including intensive early literacy instruction; Abbott districts first applied to the state for funding to support supplemental programs; and high-quality preschool for all three- and four-year-olds first became available. The only remaining reform that was envisioned and is not yet fully implemented is secondary education reform. That effort is now beginning. By 2008, all Abbott schools serving students in grades six through twelve will undergo a series of reforms to make the curriculum more rigorous and provide a more personalized learning environment.

Abbott v. Burke: New Jersey's Framework for Urban School Reform



Our state's challenge is to ensure that children in the Abbott districts receive the education to which they are constitutionally entitled. To ensure that all students achieve at high levels, and that resources are directed with the children's educational needs as the top priority, it is essential – for policy makers, parents, community members and the public at large – to gauge the progress of reform.

To date, however, the state Department of Education has not successfully communicated what is happening inside the Abbott districts and

how it is affecting the more than 300,000 school-age children in those communities.

This report attempts to fill that gap by:

- Presenting findings of selected leading indicators and student outcomes to date;
- Identifying progress made and challenges that we still face; and
- Offering recommended actions that the Governor and Legislature can take to ensure policy stability, increase accountability, and sustain and deepen educational reform in New Jersey's Abbott districts.

As would be expected in an undertaking of this magnitude, the findings show that progress has been made *and* that challenges remain. Substantial gains have been made in preschool and early elementary education. However, urgent work remains in middle and high school student performance.

When looking at the Abbott average of any educational indicator, it is important to remember that there is a great deal of variation between districts. Performance measures suggest that some districts have shown substantial improvement, even exceeding state averages. Other districts lag across grade levels and content areas.

We need more information to understand what accounts for this variation and for variation between schools; how successes have been achieved; what has hindered progress; and to identify and disseminate promising solutions to address the most serious obstacles.

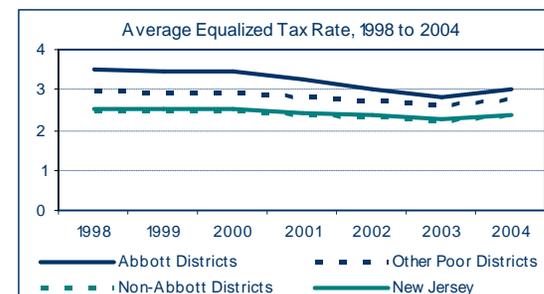
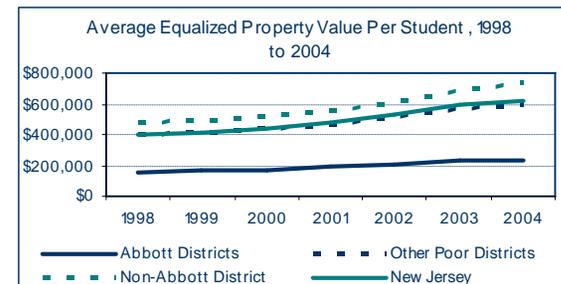
Findings

The community context. Research shows that living in concentrated poverty negatively affects the well-being and academic performance of children and youth. If our schools are to help all students meet the state's academic standards and grow up to take meaningful roles in their communities, these effects must be countered with appropriate practices, programs, and services.

➤ **Poverty.** By definition, Abbott districts encompass the highest concentrations of poverty in our state. In the Abbott cities, 28 percent of the children live in households earning below the poverty level compared to seven percent in the non-Abbott cities and 11 percent statewide.

➤ **Property wealth and taxes.** The average property value per student – the base from which local taxes can be drawn – is disproportionately low in the Abbott cities at \$232,227 compared to about \$600,00 in the other poor districts and \$734,003 in non-Abbott districts.¹ Abbott cities continue to experience municipal overburden. In 2004, the average equalized property tax rate was 3.04 in the Abbott cities, much higher than the non-Abbott average of 2.35. (Total tax rates have declined somewhat since 1998 across the board.)

▪ **Adult educational attainment.** Research indicates that schools and parents need to



work in partnership to support student learning. Adults who did not succeed in school themselves have a more difficult time forming trusting relationships with their children's schools and may be less capable of supporting their children's learning. In the Abbott cities, 36 percent of adults ages 25 and older have *not* attained a high school diploma or GED, double the statewide average of 18 percent.

Progress Has Been Made

The following results show that children in New Jersey's poorest urban areas are beginning to reap benefits from Abbott reforms. Progress can be seen especially in preschool and the early elementary grades, where the Abbott reforms have primarily focused to date.

Preschool. The Abbott preschool program is based on research showing that intensive, high-quality preschool can help children perform better in school and participate more productively in the life of their communities as adults. The major features of the mandate are a six-hour school day, 182 days a year; full-day, full-year services; a certified teacher and assistant in each class; maximum class size of 15 students; adequate facilities; transportation, health and other related services, as needed; developmentally appropriate curricula that meet the state's Early Childhood Education Program Expectations Standards of Quality and are linked with New Jersey's Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS); adequate state funding; and availability to all three- and four-

year-olds in the school district, with enrollment on demand.

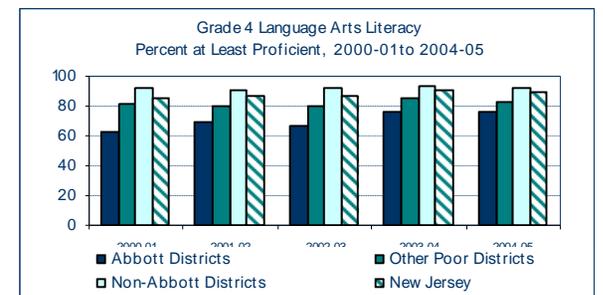
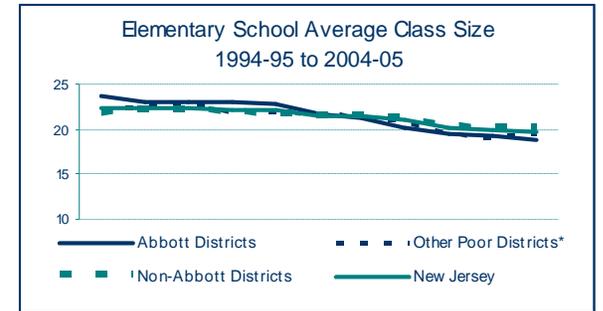
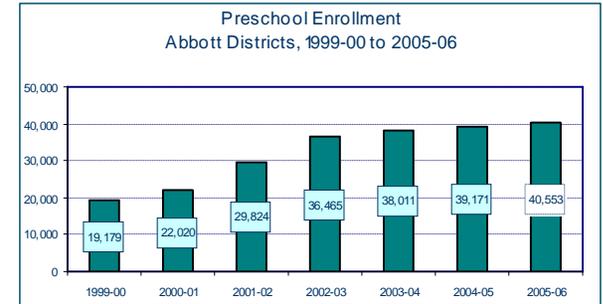
➤ **Enrollment.** Preschool enrollment has expanded rapidly, from 19,000 children served in the 1999-2000 school year to a peak enrollment of over 39,000 in 2004-05 when 76 percent of the estimated eligible population of three- and four-year-olds were being served. Early estimates suggest that 2005-06 enrollment is over 40,000 or 78 percent of the estimated eligible population.

➤ **Teacher qualifications.** Almost all Abbott preschool teachers have their college degrees and early childhood certification as required under Abbott.

➤ **Classroom quality.** According to a study commissioned by the New Jersey Department of Education, preschool classroom quality ratings rose by 20 percent between 2003 and 2005 across the original 30 Abbott districts.ⁱⁱ

➤ **Impact.** A recent study provides strong evidence that the Abbott preschool program has had a positive impact on children's language, literacy and math skills development, effects that lead to increased school success and later improvements in children's reading and math skills.ⁱⁱⁱ

Class size. Research shows that smaller class sizes have large, positive effects on student learning in the elementary grades. Abbott elementary school class sizes decreased from 24 students per class in 1994-95 to 19 in 2004-05. There were smaller class size reductions



across the state and in the other poor school districts during the same time period.

Grade 4 achievement. The achievement gap between children in the Abbott and non-Abbott districts is closing at Grade 4.

➤ The percentage of general education students in Abbott elementary schools scoring at least proficient on the language arts literacy test rose from 63 percent in 1998-99 to 77 percent in 2004-05.^{iv} During the same time period, proficiency levels barely changed in the other poor districts as and in all non-Abbott districts as a whole.^v

➤ Abbott elementary students' math skills also substantially improved: 36 percent scored at least proficient in 1998-99 compared to 72 percent in 2004-05. During the same time period, proficiency levels improved from 56 to 80 percent in the other poor districts and from 66 to 86 percent in the state as a whole.

Challenges Still Remain

Additional findings reveal areas where work remains to ensure that all children receive the "thorough and efficient education" to which they are entitled.

Preschool enrollment. Preschool enrollment has grown tremendously, but growth has slowed in the past two years. Early estimates indicate that over 40,000 students are in the Abbott program this year. At 78 percent of the eligible

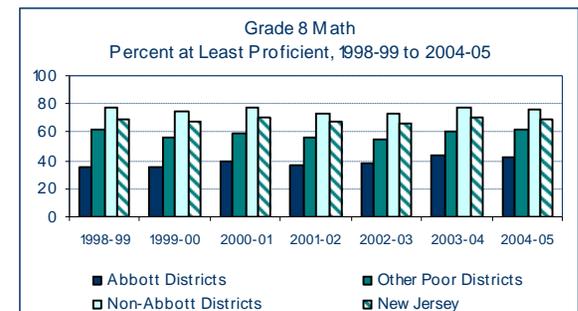
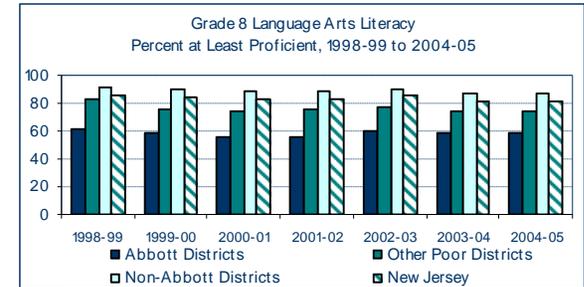
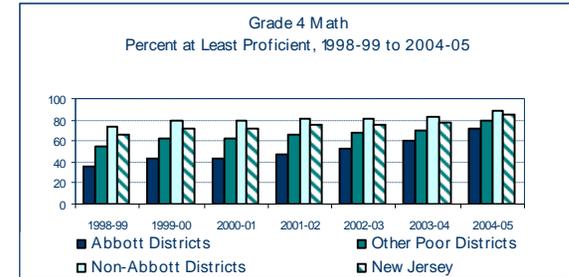
population, enrollment falls short of the 90 percent enrollment target set by the state.

Secondary achievement. Across the nation, reading and math achievement results for middle and high school students have lagged behind those of younger students and there has been little to no improvement since the early 1990s in national reading and math scores.^{vi} This lack of progress is likely the result of a relative lack of attention to middle and high schools compared to elementary schools.

In this way, the Abbott reforms do not differ from standard educational practice across the state or indeed, nationally. Until very recently, the Abbott remedies have provided less in the way of real instructional reform at the middle or high school levels compared to what has been available for younger children.

➤ **Grade 8.** Grade 8 language arts literacy results have stagnated or slightly worsened statewide. In 1999, 61 percent of general education students in the Abbott districts scored at least proficient compared to 58 percent in 2004-05. During the same time period proficiency levels went from 83 to 75 percent in the other poor districts, 86 to 81 percent statewide, and 92 to 87percent in the non-Abbott districts overall.

Statewide, about 70 percent of general education eighth graders achieved proficiency in 1999 and 2005. Forty-two percent of Abbott eighth graders scored at least proficient in 2005, an improvement over 36 percent proficiency in 1999.



➤ **Grade 11.** In the Abbott districts, 72 percent of the general education students who were tested scored proficient or better in 2002 compared to 79 percent in 2005. In the non-Abbotts, more than 90 percent scored at least proficient on the language arts portion of the HSPA in every year since 2002.

During the same time period, math proficiency rose from 46 percent to 59 percent among general education students in the Abbott districts, from 69 to 81 percent in the other poor districts, and from 83 to 90 percent in the non-Abbotts.

Required staffing. Under Abbott, the State is required to fund and implement a number of supplemental programs in the Abbott districts. The purpose of these programs is to address the disadvantages experienced by young people who grow up in poor cities.

There are two kinds of supplemental programs: some are required, and others may be provided if the districts can demonstrate that students need them. Required programs include full-day Kindergarten, intensive early literacy, health and social service referral, alternative education and dropout prevention, early math instruction, violence prevention and school security, and school-to-work and college transition. Programs that are available, if needed include: on-site social and health services, after-school instructional programs, summer instructional programs, and nutrition programs.

Although there is a real need to know if students are receiving these needed programs and services, this information is not directly available from existing records.

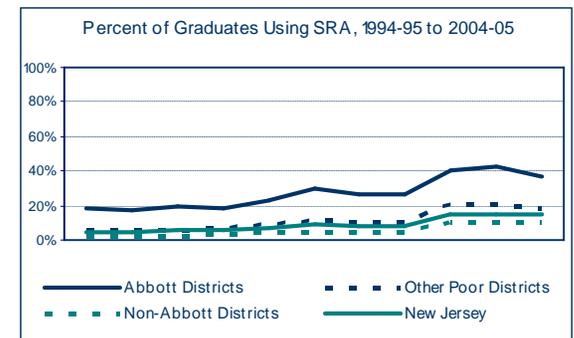
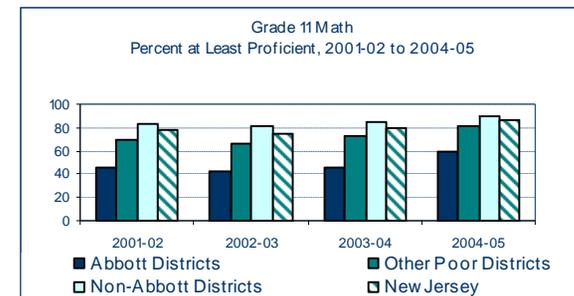
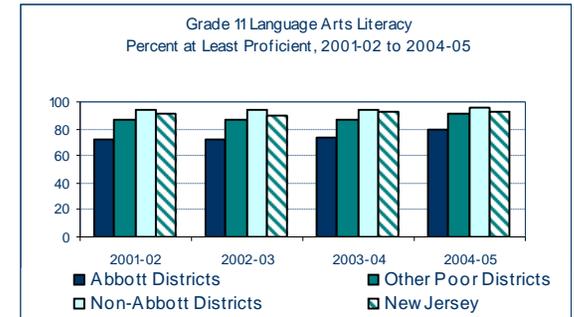
Abbott schools *are* required to report their staffing patterns to the state each year, however. Below, we examine the percent of schools employing selected positions that are critical to provision of Abbott supplemental programs. The data suggest that these positions are not uniformly employed:

➤ **Parent liaison.** Thirty-one percent of the Abbott schools had no parent liaison in 2004-05 to support parent engagement in their child's education.

➤ **Teacher tutor.** More than two thirds of the elementary schools (68%) did *not* employ a teacher tutor in 2004-05. Each student in Grades 1 through 3 who is not reading at grade level is entitled to 20 minutes of one-on-one tutoring. Older elementary grades students who are not reading on grade level are entitled to small-group tutoring.

➤ **Attendance/dropout prevention officer.** Only 25 percent of the high schools in the Abbott districts employed dropout prevention officers in 2004-05; five percent employed a part-time staff person in this role. This means that 70 percent of the Abbott high schools did *not* have a dropout officer.

Routes to graduation. In New Jersey, students who fail one or more portions of the traditional Grade 11 exam have been able to earn a



standard academic diploma by completing an alternative assessment known as the Special Review Assessment (SRA).

➤ Students in Abbott districts are much more likely to graduate via SRA than their peers in the non-Abbott districts. In 2004-05, 36 percent of Abbott graduates took the SRA versus 10 percent of non-Abbott graduates. SRA use has also increased over the years across the state. In 1994-95 only two percent of students in non-Abbott districts and 18 percent in the Abbott districts graduated by taking the SRA.

Graduation rate. Using the graduation estimate issued by the New Jersey Department of Education, about 90 percent of students graduate from high school statewide, a rate which has remained somewhat stable since 2000-01. By this same measure 80 percent graduated in 2004-05 from the Abbott districts, up from 73 percent four years earlier.

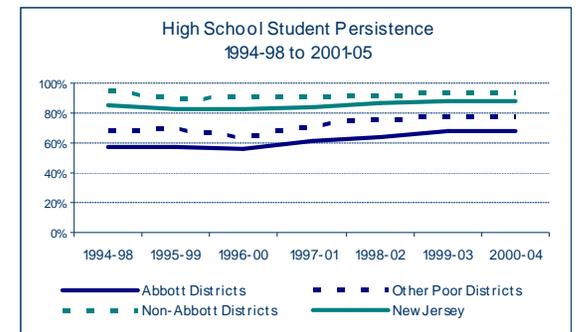
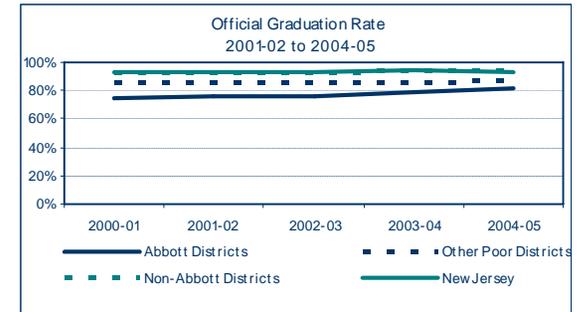
High school student persistence.^{vii} Analysis of enrollment patterns over time suggests that the state’s report card measure overestimates the true graduation rate. In 2000-01, 19,485 students entered the ninth grade in the Abbott districts and 13,232 (68%) graduated four years later. According to this measure too, Abbott districts have improved over the years. The graduating class of 1998 was just 57 percent of the size of the ninth grade class four years earlier.

Improved student retention appears to be associated with the increased reliance on the SRA as an alternate route to graduation.

A Note about Variation

Averages often conceal important variation. Population characteristics and educational practices vary – from school to school and from district to district – as do achievement and other student outcomes. There is a great deal of variation around many of the Abbott averages reported in this report. Math test results from 2004-05 provide an excellent example:

- **Grade 4.** Fifty-one percent of Asbury Park’s general education students scored at least proficient compared to 90 percent in West New York, 91 percent in Garfield, and 93 percent in Union City.
- **Grade 8.** Fifteen percent scored at least proficient among Trenton general education students compared to 81 percent in Union City and 85 percent in West New York.
- **Grade 11.** As few as 29 percent of Irvington eleventh graders scored proficient or better on the 2005 HSPA math exam, compared to 82 percent in Burlington and Keansburg and 84 percent in Phillipsburg.



Next Steps

1. Sustain and Deepen Reform

Preschool. Preschool program quality has improved substantially in the six years since Abbott preschool began and the results show that the children are reaping the benefits with real improvement in language, literacy, and math skills. The New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) should continue its efforts to track classroom quality and assess program impact.

The DOE also must develop a corrective action plan to increase preschool enrollment in the 24 Abbott districts that have *not* met the state's standard of 90 percent enrollment.

Early literacy. Intensive efforts to implement early literacy programs in the Abbott elementary schools have begun to pay off. The gap between Abbott and non-Abbott fourth graders is closing. To ensure that this success is continued, the DOE must continue to support early literacy programs and investigate how to extend this success into the later elementary and middle grades. DOE also must work to ensure that *all* students who need tutoring receive it.

Secondary reform. Test score and graduation results show that there is room for a great deal of improvement in the Abbott middle and high schools. This year, the DOE has launched an impressive reform initiative in Abbott middle and high schools, designed to improve academic rigor and increase personalization through small

learning communities. There are no assurances, however, that DOE will continue to fully support the initiative over the next five years, and the DOE lacks a strategic plan and budget to guide implementation. The Legislature should direct the DOE to continue the reform plan, and provide a detailed five-year plan and budget.

2. Ensure Policy and Program Stability

Regulatory stability. Educational progress in the Abbott districts has been hampered by the Legislature's exemption through language in the preceding four state budgets of the regulations governing the Abbott remedial programs and reforms from the Administrative Procedure Act (APA). In addition to the disruption of reform efforts caused by changes in program standards and procedures from year to year, parents, educators and other stakeholders in the Abbott communities have been disenfranchised from the process of developing those regulations, since the Commissioner has been authorized to adopt the rules with no public notice or opportunity for comment. The Abbott Regulation Exemption – as it has come to be known – should be removed from the fiscal year 2007 budget, so that the Commissioner can proceed to adopt new rules under the process and for the five-year period required by the APA.

Special Review Assessment (SRA). A great deal more care must be taken before the state considers phasing out the SRA. Currently more than one-third of the students who graduate from Abbott high schools do so by taking this alternative exam. DOE should conduct or commission research to assess how well these

students do in college and the working world compared to their peers who graduate using the HSPA and the young people who drop out entirely. The DOE should carefully assess the potentially harmful effects of phasing out this exam before moving forward.

3. Increase Accountability

Abbott management plan. This year \$17 million dollars in Abbott parity funds were transferred to the DOE to manage urban education reform. The DOE has not yet issued a coherent, detailed strategy to demonstrate how it will use state funds to ensure educational improvement in the Abbott districts. The Legislature should direct the Commissioner of Education to provide the public with an annual *Abbott Management Plan* delineating strategic priorities, budget, and staffing for leading urban education reform, and clear benchmarks to assess the DOE's own performance.

District remediation. In its public statements, the Abbott Division has identified key deficiencies that exist in Abbott districts in certain practices, and within content areas at selected grade levels. Performance data suggest, however, that certain districts lag across grade levels and content areas: for example, Asbury Park, Camden, Irvington, and Trenton. The Abbott Division's management plan should identify: 1) the district-specific efforts the department will undertake to remediate these problems; 2) performance benchmarks by which to gauge progress; and 3) mechanisms for the meaningful engagement of local stakeholders in improvement.

Abbott evaluation. In 1998, the NJ Supreme Court ordered the State to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the Abbott reforms. The evaluation is our best hope for identifying the practices that contribute to student learning in our high-poverty schools. In 2003, ELC and the DOE agreed to fast-track this critical element of urban education reform. After specifications for the evaluation were developed, the process was aborted by the state due to cost considerations. Progress has been further delayed in recent months. The Legislature should direct the DOE to issue another RFQ, select a bidder, and move forward with the evaluation in a timely manner.

Student-level database. The DOE still lacks a statewide student-level database, an essential precondition to providing support to districts and schools, informing the public, and guiding ongoing policy decisions. The Legislature should appropriate needed funding and expedite statewide implementation.

Assess Abbott supplemental programs. In fiscal year 2006, about \$225 million in state funds were budgeted to support critical programs and services such as intensive early literacy, health and social service coordination, and school safety and security. The Legislature should direct the DOE to assess the implementation of K-12 "supplemental" programs and services required under the Abbott framework, along with a detailed district-by-district analysis of how the supplemental funds awarded to each district since 1999 are being utilized programmatically.

Data

Community characteristics: 2000 Census, SF 3. **Local finance:** Department of Community Affairs, 1998-2003. **Achievement:** New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Assessment and Evaluation, 1998-99 to 2004-05. **Other data:** New Jersey School Report Card, 1994-95 to 2004-05. Results of student-level measures are weighted by the appropriate student enrollment.

Acknowledgments

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About Education Law Center

ELC was established in 1973 to advocate on behalf of New Jersey's public schoolchildren for an equal and adequate education under state and federal laws through litigation, policy initiatives, constituent-building, and research.

ELC serves as counsel to the plaintiffs in the *Abbott v. Burke* case – more than 350,000 preschool and school-age children in 30 urban school districts across the state. The *NY Times* (2002) said that *Abbott* “may be the most

significant education case” since *Brown v. Board of Education*. *Abbott* has also been called the most important NJ court ruling in the 20th century (*NJ Lawyer*, 2000).

The landmark *Abbott IV* (1997) and *Abbott V* (1998) rulings directed the State to implement a comprehensive set of remedies to improve education in the Abbott districts, including universal preschool, standards-based education, adequate foundational funding and facilities, whole school reform, and supplemental or “at risk” programs. ELC is now working to hold the State and districts accountable for effective and timely implementation of these remedies.

The objectives of the Abbott Indicators Project are to: 1) issue indicators to assess the progress of urban school reform and student outcomes at the local and state levels; 2) develop an informed and engaged local and statewide constituency to understand the indicators and use them to advocate for needed school improvements in the Abbott districts; and 3) sustain these accountability practices in years to come. Currently, ELC works with partners in several Abbott cities to develop local engagement and accountability.

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Endnotes

ⁱOther poor districts include public school districts that are classified by the DOE as belonging to District Factor Group (DFG) A or B and are not designated as Abbott districts.

ⁱⁱLamy, C., E. Frede, H. Sepolcha, S. Jambunathan, and E. Wolock, 2005. Giant steps for the littlest children: Progress in the sixth year of the Abbott preschool program. Early Learning Improvement Consortium.

ⁱⁱⁱLamy, C., W. S. Barnett, and K. Jung, 2005. The effects of New Jersey's Abbott preschool program on young children's school readiness. National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers University.

^{iv}Changes made to the Grade 4 language arts literacy test in 2000-01 render earlier results effectively incomparable.

^vThe figures presented here and below include general education students only. Test enrollments and results are not available for all years for the total student population (general education *and* special education) or for demographic subgroups.

^{vi}United States Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1990-2003.

^{vii}Student persistence compares the number of high school graduates to the number of students in Grade 9 four years earlier. It is adapted from "promoting power," developed by researchers at the Center for the Social Organization of Schools. See: Balfanz, R. and N. Legters, Locating the dropout crisis: Which high schools produce the nation's dropouts? Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, September 2004.

<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/techReports/Report70.pdf>