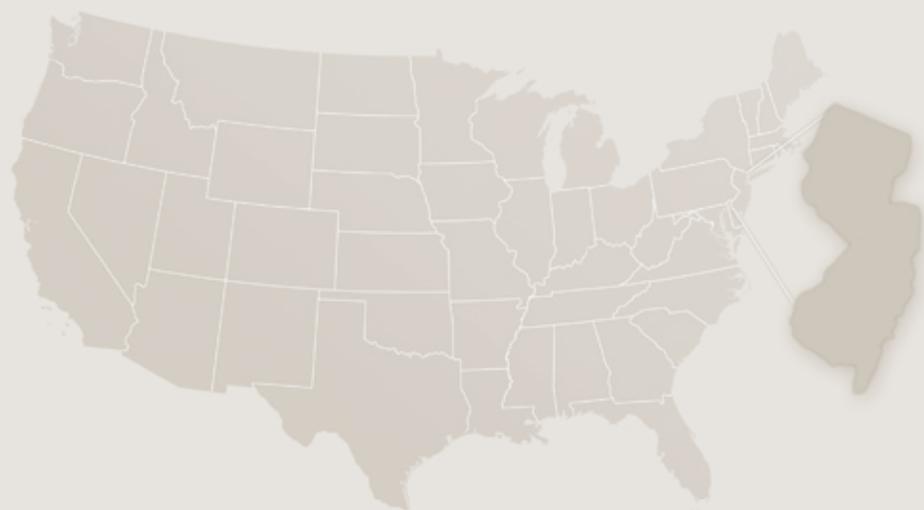


DECEMBER 2009

# EDUCATION REFORM STARTS EARLY

Lessons from New Jersey's PreK-3rd  
Reform Efforts

SARA MEAD



EDUCATION POLICY PROGRAM

*Early Education Initiative*

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In 1998, the New Jersey Supreme Court took a then-unprecedented step. It ordered the state to provide high-quality pre-kindergarten programs to all 3- and 4-year-old children in 31<sup>1</sup> of the state's highest poverty districts, also known as *Abbott* districts after the long-running *Abbott v. Burke* school finance case. Universal pre-K is only one of numerous mandates the court placed on the state and the *Abbott* districts in its 1998 ruling, but that requirement has had a far-reaching effect on the state's early education system.

Today, New Jersey has built a robust, diverse provider system to deliver high-quality universal pre-K in the *Abbott* districts, has taken steps to expand pre-K services for at-risk children in the state's other 560 districts, and has done more than perhaps any other state in the country to link these early learning investments with early literacy reforms in the K-12 system, creating a seamless, high-quality PreK-3rd early learning experience for the state's most disadvantaged youngsters.

These efforts have yielded real rewards. Pre-K programs in New Jersey have made dramatic quality improvements over the past decade. Research confirms that *Abbott* pre-K programs are producing significant learning gains for the state's children, and that children are sustaining them into the early elementary years.<sup>2</sup> A higher percentage of fourth-graders read at grade level in New Jersey than in any other state except for Massachusetts, as measured by the federally administered National Assessment of Educational Progress. Poor and minority fourth-graders in New Jersey are also more likely to read proficiently than their peers in all but a handful of states.<sup>3</sup> And the *Abbott* districts that have most aggressively implemented intensive literacy supports at the elementary level, while also aligning pre-K and the early grades, have closed the achievement gap for the disadvantaged and minority students they serve.<sup>4</sup>

Yet there are clear limits to this progress. Perhaps most important, children in the state's 560 non-*Abbott* school districts—which serve half of all poor children in New Jersey—still largely lack access to the benefits of high-quality pre-K, full-day kindergarten, and other early learning interventions provided in *Abbott* districts. A new school funding formula, passed in 2008, includes ambitious provisions to expand pre-K services to all at-risk children in the state. But a dire state fiscal crisis, brought on by the larger economy's woes, has stymied those efforts in the short term. And although

the state has put in place many statutory and structural elements supporting PreK-3rd—a P-3 teacher credential, a Division of Early Childhood Education with an explicit PreK-3rd mission, and language in the state code requiring districts to support alignment and transitions between pre-K and the early elementary grades—integration between pre-K and early elementary programs is often limited in practice.<sup>5</sup>

The next few years will be a critical time for education in New Jersey. The state can consolidate the gains it has made in educating young children in recent years: It can expand access to quality pre-K, strengthen existing infrastructure for quality, and move PreK-3rd alignment from rhetoric in code to reality on the ground in the state's school districts. Or it can struggle to maintain a status quo that—although still better than what exists in most of the country—falls short of providing all the state's disadvantaged youngsters the seamless, high-quality early learning experiences they really need to succeed.

This report seeks to describe how New Jersey became a national leader in early education and PreK-3rd, identify its successes and challenges, draw lessons from its experience for policymakers in other states and nationally, and provide recommendations for New Jersey policymakers to translate progress to date into sustained, large scale learning gains.

Specifically, we draw the following lessons from New Jersey's experience:

- Districts that focus on literacy, use data to inform instruction, and align standards, assessment, and curriculum in the PreK-3rd grades can produce significant learning gains and eliminate the achievement gap for disadvantaged youngsters.
- Strong state-level leadership is essential for implementing PreK-3rd reform and high-quality pre-K at scale.

Table 1. A Snapshot of New Jersey's Abbott School Districts

	Abbott Districts	New Jersey
No. of school districts	31	591
K-12 student enrollment	272,692	1,317,623
Preschool enrollment (3- and 4-year-olds) <i>Abbott Average: 1,284; Range: 144 (Salem) to 6,110 (Newark)</i>	39,808	47,004
Percentage of all New Jersey students enrolled in Abbott districts	20.6%	
<b>Student demographics</b>		
African American <i>Abbott Range: 1% (West New York) to 95% (East Orange)</i>	40.2%	16.7%
Latino(a) <i>Abbott Range: 5% (East Orange) to 96% (Union City)</i>	44.6%	18.4%
White <i>Abbott Range: 0% (3 districts) to 90% (Gloucester)</i>	12.2%	56.7%
Asian <i>Abbott Range: 0% (7 districts) to 15% (Jersey City)</i>	2.7%	7.8%
Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch <i>Abbott Range: 27% (Neptune) to 93% (Union City)</i>	68.3%	26.5%
Students with limited proficiency in English <i>Abbott Range: 0% (Millville) to 35% (Union City)</i>	13.4%	5.1%
Students with disabilities <i>Abbott Range: 9% (Irvington) to 20% (Millville)</i>	13.4%	12.9%
<b>Student Achievement</b>		
4th-graders proficient on NJ ASK Language Arts Exam <i>Abbott Range: 40% (Salem) to 77% (Garfield)</i>	60.8%	80.3%
4th-graders proficient on NJ ASK Math Exam <i>Abbott Range: 48% (Trenton) to 84% (Union City and West New York)</i>	65.8%	82.7%

Source: Education Law Center, Abbott Indicators District Profiles 2007. <http://www.edlawcenter.org/ELCPublic/AbbottProfile.htm>

- District leadership is essential to create high-quality, aligned PreK-3rd early learning experiences.
- There are real benefits to addressing pre-K expansion in conjunction with broader school reform agendas.
- States can build high-quality, universal pre-K systems that include both public schools and community-based preschool and child care providers—but it requires a great deal of systemic support for both school districts and providers.
- Diverse delivery systems for pre-K can utilize community providers while also maintaining a strong role for school districts in ensuring consistent quality standards and PreK-3rd alignment.
- Community-based providers carry many benefits, but policymakers should not view them as a cheaper alternative to public schools for providing high-quality pre-K.

- Targeting pre-K by geography, rather than family income, is an effective strategy for implementing quality programs on a smaller scale before moving toward universal pre-K.
- Translating PreK-3rd alignment from rhetoric to reality is difficult, requiring sustained commitment from educators and policymakers at all levels.

These lessons lead us to recommend that policymakers in other states and at the national level do the following:

- Integrate investments in pre-K and other early childhood programs within a broader education reform agenda that seeks to improve student learning outcomes from preschool through higher education (P-16).
- Invest in building state-level infrastructure for *quality* pre-K, not just the expansion of slots.
- Ensure that pre-K and PreK-3rd education systems

include systems of data collection, analysis, and accountability to drive ongoing quality improvement.

- Provide scholarships to help working early childhood educators raise their levels of knowledge and skills, and design these programs with the needs of early educators in mind.
- Support the development of high-quality traditional and alternative routes for teachers to earn PreK-3rd credentials.

We also recommend that policymakers in New Jersey take the following steps to consolidate early education gains and build a truly aligned and universal system of high-quality PreK-3rd education:

- Provide funding to maintain momentum for pre-K expansion.
- Continue to extend the *Abbott* preschool program's approach to quality upward into kindergarten and the early grades.
- Reaffirm and sustain the state's commitment to high-quality early literacy instruction.
- Link the state's new funding formula to PreK-3rd reform.
- Move toward full-day kindergarten in the roughly one-third of New Jersey districts that currently operate only half-day programs.
- Give the New Jersey Department of Education's Division of Early Childhood Education increased programmatic authority in grades K-3—and the resources to execute it.
- Identify and highlight examples of districts that are doing an exemplary job with PreK-3rd.
- Implement new observational measures to track and drive improvement in the quality of instruction in PreK-3rd classrooms.
- Strengthen New Jersey's P-3 teacher credential for early childhood educators, by improving quality and standards in P-3 teacher preparation programs and educating principals and administrators about the credential's value.
- Continue working to build a statewide longitudinal student data system that tracks students from pre-K through college.
- Establish a revolving loan fund to help community-based providers finance improvements to pre-K facilities. Recruit community development finance organizations and other outside sources to help finance pre-K facilities. ❏

## How School Finance Litigation Launched New Jersey on a Course Toward PreK-3rd

Any exploration of New Jersey's path to PreK-3rd must begin with *Abbott v. Burke*, the nation's longest-running school finance equity lawsuit, brought by the state's Education Law Center, a civil rights advocacy group, on behalf of children in 31 of the state's highest-poverty school districts. Raymond Arthur Abbott was a Camden child who in 1981 became the first named plaintiff on the original lawsuit. Fred G. Burke at the time was New Jersey's Commissioner of Education.

In the various iterations of *Abbott*—New Jersey courts have issued 20 *Abbott* decisions since 1985—the plaintiffs have argued that the state's system of school finance provides inadequate funding to ensure a “thorough and efficient education,” as required under the New Jersey constitution, for children in the state's poorest school districts.

Implementation of high-quality, universal pre-K programs in the *Abbott* districts is generally traced to the New Jersey Supreme Court's 1998 *Abbott V* decision, which mandated that the state provide high-quality pre-K, full-day kindergarten, small class sizes, and other “supplemental programs addressing special needs of students in poorer urban districts.”<sup>6</sup>

But in fact, the linkages between *Abbott* and early education reforms begin even earlier. A 1988 ruling by Administrative Law Judge Steven LeFelt specifically reviewed evidence on the need for and effectiveness of high-quality early education programs for low-income children, as well as examples of New Jersey school districts that had made efforts to implement pre-K programs for disadvantaged youngsters. Based on this evidence, LeFelt concluded, “I find irrefutable proof establishes that educationally disadvantaged children can benefit significantly from early intervention,” even though the state had not provided high-poverty school districts with the resources to implement such programs.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this finding, LeFelt did not then require the state to provide pre-K programs as a remedy for youngsters in *Abbott* districts. Subsequent rulings in 1990 and 1994 ordered the state to equalize funding between urban and suburban districts and to provide additional funding for “supplemental” programs designed to meet the special,

## Timeline of Key Events Related to *Abbott* and New Jersey's PreK-3rd Reform Efforts

**February 1981**—The Education Law Center files *Abbott v. Burke* on behalf of children in 28 high-poverty, urban New Jersey districts

**August 1988**—Administrative Law Judge Steven LeFelt's 600-page ruling highlights the importance of quality early childhood programs for disadvantaged children, but stops short of mandating provision of pre-K in *Abbott* districts. (*Abbott I*)

**December 1996**—Gov. Christine Todd Whitman signs into law the Comprehensive Education Improvement and Financing Act (CEIFA). CEIFA creates a new state pre-K program, Early Childhood Program Aid, which provides preschool funding to 132 of the state's highest-poverty districts.

**May 1997**—The New Jersey Supreme Court rules CEIFA unconstitutional as it relates to *Abbott* districts, saying it doesn't go far enough. (*Abbott IV*)

**May 1998**—The New Jersey Supreme Court mandates unprecedented state investment in additional resources for children in *Abbott* districts, including high-quality universal pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds, full-day kindergarten, and whole school reform (WSR) in *Abbott* elementary schools. (*Abbott V*)

**March 2000**—The New Jersey Supreme Court clarifies requirements for high-quality pre-K in *Abbott* school districts, mandating that *Abbott* pre-K programs must employ qualified teachers with a bachelor's degree and P-3 teacher certification, class sizes no larger than 15 students, and developmentally appropriate curriculum. (*Abbott VI*)

**November 2001**—James McGreevey elected Governor.

**January 2002**—Gov. McGreevey takes office, ushering in a new education team including Commissioner of Education William Librera, Assistant Commissioner

for *Abbott* Implementation Gordon MacInnes, Assistant to the Commissioner for Early Childhood Ellen Frede, Urban Literacy head Fred Carrigg, and Lucille Davy as the governor's education adviser. This team would play a critical role in implementing *Abbott* pre-K and Intensive Early Literacy, putting New Jersey on a course to PreK-3rd.

**2003**—New Jersey Supreme Court allows the Education Department to pursue a new approach to implementing *Abbott* at the elementary school level, focused heavily on Intensive Early Literacy. (*Abbott X*)

**2004**—New Jersey meets deadline for all *Abbott* pre-K teachers to have a bachelor's degree and P-3 certification.

**November 2005**—Jon Corzine elected Governor

**January 2008**—Legislature passes and Gov. Corzine signs into law the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA), creating a new state school funding formula designed to eliminate the need for *Abbott* remedies by expanding universal pre-K to 101 additional "A & B factor group" districts and providing targeted pre-K to all low-income children in other school districts. The legislation sets a 2013 deadline for full implementation of pre-K expansion.

**Spring 2009**—Facing a fiscal shortfall, state officials delay implementation of pre-K expansion scheduled for the 2009-10 school year. But state officials do maintain commitment to existing pre-K investments, increasing pre-K funding by \$52 million for fiscal year 2010.

**May 2009**—New Jersey Supreme Court upholds SFRA, contingent on continued state funding commitment to the new school finance formula.

**November 2009**—Chris Christie elected Governor.

additional needs of children living in high-poverty districts. But they did not specifically address preschool.<sup>8</sup>

### CEIFA and *Abbott V*: Establishing Pre-K as Part of New Jersey's Strategy for High-Poverty Districts

In 1996, New Jersey enacted the Comprehensive Education Improvement and Financing Act (CEIFA). Then-Gov. Christine Todd Whitman championed the school reform legislation, which sought to define, legislatively, the parameters of a “thorough and efficient education,” and to establish a system of education standards and funding that would satisfy constitutional requirements. In addition to a new funding formula for K-12 schools, CEIFA also established a new category of funding for pre-K programs—Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA), which provided funding for half-day pre-K in 132 of the state's neediest districts.<sup>9</sup>

CEIFA proved to disappoint Whitman's and the legislature's hopes, however. The new finance system allowed funding disparities between urban and suburban districts to persist, so the Education Law Center challenged it in court, and in 1997 the New Jersey Supreme Court declared CEIFA's funding mechanism for the *Abbott* districts unconstitutional. The Supreme Court ordered state officials to immediately equalize funding between urban and suburban school districts and remanded the case to the Superior Court to conduct hearings and make recommendations on the need for supplemental programs and services for students in the *Abbott* districts.<sup>10</sup> Nine months later, in a landmark decision known as *Abbott V*, the court ordered the state to provide a prescribed menu of “supplemental programs addressing special needs of students in poorer urban districts,” including universal pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds, full-day kindergarten, implementation of Whole School Reform models (WSR) in *Abbott* elementary schools, and health and social services.<sup>11</sup>

Stemming from their place in the court's ruling, New Jersey's *Abbott* pre-K programs have from their start been not merely a stand-alone early childhood initiative, but an integral component of a broader school reform strategy—on the part of advocates, the court, and the state itself—to improve achievement of youngsters in the state's most troubled districts and to narrow achievement gaps for disadvantaged and minority children. As a result, New Jersey's early education efforts have always been more integrated with elementary school reforms, such as full-

day kindergarten, whole school reform, and later intensive early literacy than those in many other states.

### *Abbott VI*: Defining Quality in *Abbott* Pre-K Programs

The court's *Abbott V* ruling required the state to implement universal, half-day pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds and full-day kindergarten in all *Abbott* districts no later than the 1999-2000 school year—a short timeline to implement such an ambitious initiative.

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Gov. Whitman's administration sought to comply with this mandate by using existing private and nonprofit child care centers to provide *Abbott* pre-K. These providers, many of whom received child care subsidies from the New Jersey Department of Human Services, were already serving many low-income young children in the *Abbott* districts. And most school districts lacked space in public school facilities to accommodate the tens of thousands of preschoolers now eligible for services. Whitman and her staff also regarded using community-based child care providers as a way to lower the bill for new pre-K programs. The problem, though, was quality. Community-based providers offering *Abbott* pre-K were subject to state child care regulations, but were not required to employ certified teachers with bachelor's degrees and training to work with young children, raising questions about the quality and educational value of the services they offered.

As a result, the state and the *Abbott* plaintiffs ended up back in court over pre-K programs. While the *Abbott V* decision had called for “well-planned, high-quality” pre-K programs,

it had not specified in detail the characteristics of such high-quality programs. In its 2000 *Abbott VI* decision, the court, drawing on a large body of expert testimony, laid out a much more detailed definition of high-quality pre-K. Specifically, the court mandated that *Abbott* pre-K programs:

- Employ certified teachers with a bachelor’s degree and state certification to teach in preschool through third grade;
- Have a maximum class size no larger than 15 students, with one certified teacher and teacher’s aide per classroom; and
- Utilize a developmentally appropriate preschool curriculum.<sup>12</sup>

The court’s decision upheld the use of community-based providers to deliver pre-K, but required that all pre-K providers—whether in community-based programs or public schools—meet the same high standards required by *Abbott VI*. It also required the state to develop new regulations and “substantive [curriculum] standards” for pre-K, to ensure the quality of all *Abbott*-funded pre-K programs.<sup>13</sup> The requirement that teachers obtain both a bachelor’s degree and certification to teach in grades PreK-3rd—a certification that didn’t exist in New Jersey at that time—recognized the importance of early childhood educators and the value of specialized training in working with young children.

The New Jersey Supreme Court in *Abbott VI* required New Jersey to build a then-unprecedented system of pre-K delivery. To begin with, very few states at that time had large-scale pre-K programs that met the same quality standards the court had mandated for the *Abbott* districts. Moreover, no state had yet built a large-scale, high-quality pre-K program that used both public schools and community-based providers and held both to the same high standards of pre-K quality. Nor were there obvious models for dramatically raising the skills and education levels of early childhood educators—many of whom had relatively little higher education—to meet court-ordered requirements. The court’s *Abbott VI* ruling would require New Jersey to build an entire state- and school district-level infrastructure to support pre-K implementation and quality, to a much greater extent than such infrastructure existed in any other state.

### New Leadership

Even after the court’s ruling in *Abbott VI*, the state continued to fall short of compliance with mandates to provide

high-quality, universal pre-K to all 3- and 4-year-olds in the *Abbott* districts. Advocates and the state also continued to litigate the implementation of other mandates designed to improve elementary and secondary education.

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The November 2001 election of Gov. James McGreevey brought about a change in leadership at the state level, including changes in the state’s response to *Abbott* mandates. The education policy team that McGreevey brought with him upon assuming the governorship in January 2002—including education adviser Lucille Davy, Commissioner of Education William Librera, Assistant Commissioner for *Abbott* Implementation Gordon MacInnes, and Assistant to the Commissioner for Early Childhood Ellen Frede—would provide critical leadership, building the state-level infrastructure to support and ensure high-quality across diverse pre-K providers in 31 *Abbott* districts, implementing new approaches to early grades literacy and data-based pedagogy in *Abbott* elementary schools, and treating both *Abbott* pre-K and early grades reforms as synergistic pieces of a larger PreK-3rd reform strategy. ■

### Inventing the *Abbotts*: Building a High-Quality Diverse Delivery System for Pre-K in New Jersey

Following the court’s *Abbott* mandates, the New Jersey Department of Education faced a daunting challenge: Build a system of preschool education capable of delivering high-quality pre-K to some 50,000 3- and 4-year-olds in 31 of the state’s poor urban districts. Make sure new *Abbott* preschools complied with court-mandated quality standards significantly higher than those in most existing pre-K settings. And do it quickly. “We had to go from zero to 90 overnight,” to implement pre-K in compliance with the court’s mandates, says Ellen Frede, who led *Abbott*

preschool implementation efforts as assistant to the commissioner for early childhood education.

### A Diverse Delivery Model...

The system that New Jersey built to deliver *Abbott* pre-K programs employs what's known as a "diverse delivery" model—meaning that pre-K services are delivered by a mix of providers, including public schools, community-based child care centers, and Head Start programs. About two-thirds of *Abbott* pre-Kindergartners attend pre-K in 431 centers operated by community-based providers. The rest are served in public schools.<sup>14</sup>

The decision to build a diverse delivery system for *Abbott* pre-K was driven by both principle and necessity. State officials recognized that the state's community-based providers could contribute value to *Abbott* pre-K efforts; they were already serving many preschool-aged children in *Abbott* districts and reflected the ethnic and linguistic diversity of *Abbott* preschoolers much better than the public school system did.

But New Jersey officials also didn't have much of a choice—the state had to tap community-based providers in order to provide enough pre-K slots in time to meet the court's deadline. Schools in *Abbott* districts didn't have space to house new pre-K classrooms, and the state didn't have funding to build new pre-K facilities. Even finding space to locate new pre-K buildings would have been a challenge in the denser *Abbott* districts. So New Jersey committed to working with existing community-based providers, helping them raise the quality of services they provided to meet *Abbott* standards.

### ...With a Strong Role for School Districts

While school districts directly operate only one-third of *Abbott* pre-K classrooms, they play a central role in implementing the *Abbott* pre-K program. Districts are responsible for ensuring that eligible children have access to pre-K, whether in public schools or community-based programs. Community-based providers delivering *Abbott* pre-K operate under contracts with local school districts, which monitor program implementation and ensure that providers meet *Abbott* standards. Each *Abbott* district also selects one developmentally appropriate pre-K curriculum—from a list approved by the state Department of Education—that all pre-K providers in the district must use. And districts provide common professional development opportunities

for pre-K teachers working in both schools and community-based settings.

Like the decision to use a diverse delivery model, the choice to give districts a central role in implementing that system was unavoidable. New Jersey has a long history of and commitment to local control in public education. Since the *Abbott* case focused on specific high-poverty school districts and the children living in them—rather than all poor children in the state—the remedies also had to be implemented at the district level. And the state Department of Education simply didn't have the capacity to directly oversee and monitor the quality of every single *Abbott* pre-K classroom—meaning districts would have to play that role, while the Department focused on providing them the support and training to do so effectively.

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**New Jersey's model taps the unique assets that community-based providers bring to the table while also establishing common standards across all pre-K providers in each district.**

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This model—which resembles the portfolio model that Paul Hill has proposed that urban school boards adopt for elementary and secondary schools<sup>15</sup>—allows New Jersey to tap the unique assets that community-based providers bring to the table while also establishing common standards across all pre-K providers in each district. Giving districts a central role also creates opportunities to connect community-based providers with district-wide initiatives and the elementary schools children will attend after pre-K. Some of the state's most forward-thinking districts, such as Orange and Union City, have used these opportunities to align curriculum and instruction in school- and community-based pre-K classrooms with the early elementary grades, providing children a seamless PreK-3rd early learning experience.

### Raising the Bar on Quality

Tapping community-based providers allowed New Jersey to rapidly enroll large numbers of children in *Abbott* pre-K programs—although some school districts continued to fall short of enrollment targets.<sup>16</sup> By the 1999-2000 school year, the first after the court's *Abbott V* ruling, 19,000 chil-

dren were enrolled in *Abbott* pre-K programs. By the time McGreevey assumed office in January 2002, nearly 30,000 children were enrolled.<sup>17</sup>

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Although community-based providers once trailed public school classrooms on quality indicators, community-based classrooms now achieve quality comparable to—and in some cases better than—that in public school settings.

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But while the state had made substantial progress in enrolling children in *Abbott* pre-K programs, many—including both community- and school-based programs—fell far short of the high-quality standards that the court had envisioned. In the 1999-2000 school year, one in four *Abbott* preschool classrooms received scores lower than 3 on the ECERS-R<sup>18</sup>, an observational tool used by researchers to measure quality in early childhood settings. Researchers generally regard a score of 3 or higher as the threshold for minimal quality in preschool classrooms. Only 19 percent of *Abbott* pre-K classrooms met or exceeded the threshold for “good” early childhood settings—an ECERS-R score of 5 or higher. Thus, at the time of the *Abbott V* decision, four out of five *Abbott* classrooms fell short of good quality, and a quarter did not meet even minimal standards.<sup>19</sup>

Today, the quality picture in *Abbott* pre-K classrooms is far different. Virtually no *Abbott* pre-K classrooms score below a 3 on the ECERS, and the average ECERS-R score for all *Abbott* pre-K classrooms is 5.2.<sup>20</sup> *Abbott* classrooms rate particularly well on the two components of the ECERS-R that are most related to educational quality—Program Structure and Language and Reasoning.<sup>21</sup> And although community-based providers once trailed public school classrooms on quality indicators, community-based classrooms now achieve quality comparable to—and in some cases better than—that in public school settings.<sup>22</sup>

How did New Jersey achieve such significant quality gains in its *Abbott* pre-K classrooms?

The court’s own mandates helped, because they set a few clear guidelines for pre-K quality: teachers must have bach-

elor’s degrees and certification to teach grades P-3, classes must include no more than 15 children, and the curriculum must be developmentally appropriate. The fact that the ongoing litigation obligated the state to meet the costs of providing high-quality pre-K also made a difference. At \$12,297 per child, New Jersey spends more on its *Abbott* preschools than any other state in the country, and adequate resource levels have enabled the state to avoid some of the obstacles that undermine quality in other states with less-generous pre-K funding.<sup>23</sup>

But while the mandates contributed urgency and resources to New Jersey’s efforts to raise *Abbott* pre-K quality, they still don’t explain how it got there. Under Frede’s leadership, the New Jersey Department of Education used a variety of strategies and tools to promote quality in *Abbott* pre-K programs.

### *Regulatory Code*

The court’s *Abbott VI* mandates aren’t the only requirements governing *Abbott* pre-K programs. To comply with the mandates, the state implemented regulatory code specifying numerous requirements for the operation of *Abbott* pre-K programs. This regulatory code provides the backbone for the state’s efforts to improve *Abbott* pre-K quality. It lays out the process by which districts must contract with and oversee private preschool providers. It requires school districts to implement a state-approved, developmentally appropriate curriculum and assessment in all school- and community-based pre-K programs in the district. It requires districts to hire certain staff—including Master Teachers, Fiscal Specialists, and Early Childhood Supervisors—to operate *Abbott* pre-K programs, and also sets qualifications requirements for those staff. It sets out requirements for family engagement, health, and social services for children in *Abbott* pre-K. And it establishes a self-assessment and validation process to hold districts accountable for quality in these pre-K programs.<sup>24</sup> In these provisions, New Jersey’s code goes much farther than most other states in spelling out detailed requirements for pre-K quality.

### *Early Learning Standards and Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines*

In 2000, the New Jersey Department of Education published *Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations: Standards of Quality*, a pre-K counterpart to the state’s *Core Curriculum Content Standards* for public elementary and

secondary schools. The *Expectations*, like both New Jersey's K-12 standards and early learning standards in other states, sets out expectations for what preschoolers should know and be able to do in a variety of domains, including literacy/language arts, math, social/emotional development, creative arts, science, social studies, and world languages.<sup>25</sup>

But New Jersey's *Expectations* (which were renamed *Preschool Teaching and Learning Standards* in 2009) is not just a list of things young children should know. Rather, it offers a comprehensive vision of what quality pre-K programs look like. These are standards concerned with program quality at least as much as child outcomes.

The *Preschool Standards* includes a section describing the features of supportive early learning environments. Each set of learning outcomes is accompanied by examples of developmentally appropriate teaching practices designed to help students reach those outcomes. Other sections address issues related to culture and diversity; inclusion of children with disabilities; and relationships between pre-K programs, community, and family. The *Standards* also deals extensively with issues related to the appropriate assessment of young children, and how effective teachers and programs observe and document children's learning.<sup>26</sup>

In 2007, the Department of Education began work to revise the state's entire system of *Core Curriculum Content Standards*. As part of this effort, the *Expectations* document was also revised, to ensure and strengthen its alignment with the state's new K-12 academic standards. The new name—*Preschool Teaching and Learning Standards*—reflects this focus on alignment. A new section on technology was also added. Despite these changes, the revised *Preschool Standards* maintains the *Expectations'* framework and focus on program quality as well as outcomes.

New Jersey's pre-K standards provide a useful framework from which to work toward raising quality in the state's pre-K classrooms. But the state didn't stop at pre-K standards. The Department of Education also developed a detailed set of *Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines*, which provides school districts with practical guidance in all aspects of implementing a high-quality pre-K program, including enrolling children and meeting enrollment targets, engaging families, implementing developmentally appropriate curriculum and assessments, serving English language learners, and supporting

children's transition to kindergarten. The state first established the *Guidelines* in early 2003 and revised it in 2008, to reflect lessons learned over the previous eight years of *Abbott* implementation. The 2008 revision also included new and expanded guidance related to administrative aspects of *Abbott* pre-K programs, such as fiscal oversight and contracting with providers.<sup>27</sup>

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**New Jersey's *Preschool Teaching and Learning Standards* is not just a list of things children should know. Rather it offers a comprehensive vision of what quality pre-K programs look like.**

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These *Guidelines* played a critical role in raising the quality of *Abbott* pre-K programs. The document provides a road map to quality for district officials charged with implementing and overseeing *Abbott* pre-K programs. The Department also uses it as a basis for the professional development it provides to district staff, and to hold districts accountable for *Abbott* pre-K quality.

### ***Building District Capacity***

In addition to regulations, standards, and guidelines, the Department of Education provided extensive professional development for district personnel responsible for implementing *Abbott* pre-K: district early childhood directors and specialists, who oversaw all early childhood programs in a district; fiscal specialists, charged with implementing pre-K provider contracts and monitoring their expenditures of public funding; and Master Teachers, experienced educators who worked with teachers in *Abbott* pre-K classrooms to help them improve the quality of instruction.

State officials realized that these district officials were the key to driving quality improvements in *Abbott* pre-K programs. With hundreds of schools and community-based providers delivering pre-K in 31 districts throughout the state, the Department of Education couldn't directly monitor and ensure the quality of each of these providers. The *Abbott* districts were ultimately responsible for ensuring the provision of high-quality pre-K to eligible children. But by providing professional development and support to dis-

trict officials, the state could both help and push them to raise quality in the pre-K classrooms they worked with.

Ellen Wolock, the Department's current director of preschool education, attributes much of New Jersey's success in raising quality to these efforts: "To have a sustainable model you've got to be focusing on people who work with teachers. We've focused on early childhood supervisors, community parent involvement specialists, intervention specialists. Basically, we went after the people who had big reach."

In addition to improving instructional quality, the state also needed to build districts' capacity to deal with fiscal and administrative aspects of *Abbott* pre-K. Most *Abbott* school districts had very little experience in contracting with outside organizations to operate educational programs, and school districts needed help learning how to oversee their new portfolios of community-based pre-K providers.

Many community-based providers, including smaller nonprofits and "mom-and-pop" businesses, also needed assistance in managing their programs' finances and properly accounting for their use of public funds. "They needed a lot of help on basic things, like how to do their budgets," says one district official who oversaw community-based providers during the early years of *Abbott* implementation.

To address these challenges, the state required *Abbott* districts to hire fiscal specialists to monitor district contracts with community-based providers, to work with providers on developing annual budgets and fiscal reporting, and to monitor expenditures to ensure that public dollars are being spent appropriately.<sup>28</sup> The state also developed a model contract for all districts in the state to use with private providers.

### *Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum*

To ensure that *Abbott* pre-K programs complied with the Court's requirements to utilize developmentally appropriate pre-K curricula, the state required all districts to select one curriculum, from a list approved by the Department of Education, for implementation in all pre-K classrooms in the district, including those operated by community-based providers.

The Department of Education approved five different curricula for use in *Abbott* pre-K programs: Bank Street, Creative Curriculum, Curiosity Corner, HighScope, and

Tools of the Mind. These programs represent a variety of philosophies and approaches to teaching young children, ranging "from highly scripted packages stressing pre-literacy skills to fully constructivist sets of classroom activities for young children."<sup>29</sup> Despite this variation they all meet the Department of Education's criteria for approved pre-K curricula: they are developmentally appropriate; aligned with New Jersey's *Preschool Teaching and Learning Standards* and the *Core Curriculum Content Standards*; include significant content taught with focus and integration; include clear, research-based content and teaching strategies; seek to maximize children's engagement and opportunities for child-initiated activities; and allow for the inclusion of English language learners and children with disabilities.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the state's approach ensures that providers use developmentally appropriate curricula, while also giving districts flexibility to choose a curriculum that fits with their approach to early childhood education and the curricula used in the district's elementary schools.

The use of state-approved curricula has helped community-based child care providers improve their quality and understand what it means to view their work as education, rather than child care. Before *Abbott*, there was substantial variation in the quality of community-based pre-K providers and their use of clearly defined curricula and developmentally appropriate practices. One district official recalls that, when she first asked providers about their curricula, they would often hand her a schedule of preschoolers' daily activities. "Understanding of early education has changed totally in New Jersey," as a result of *Abbott*, she says. To facilitate this shift in thinking, districts are required to provide preschool teachers, in both school and community-based settings, with professional development tied to the curriculum they use.

Using the same curriculum in all preschool classrooms throughout a district also helps ensure common expectations and learning experiences for all children, regardless of the type of provider they attend. This in turn helps kindergarten teachers understand what they can expect incoming kindergartners to know and facilitates better alignment between pre-K and kindergarten programs. Using a common curriculum also allows school districts to provide shared professional development for all pre-K teachers working in a district, creating a professional community that integrates teachers working in both community-based providers and school-based settings.

### Ongoing Quality Improvement

As important as any of New Jersey’s guidelines, standards, or professional development initiatives is the system of data-collection and accountability that Frede and her team put in place to drive ongoing improvement in the quality of *Abbott* pre-K programs. Even now, when most *Abbott* pre-K classrooms meet court-mandated quality requirements, this system is helping to drive them to achieve increasing levels of quality.

New Jersey has put in place multiple layers of monitoring and accountability. Data is collected at all levels—child, classroom or provider, district, and statewide—and used by educators to inform their work and drive improvement.

At the child level, *Abbott* pre-K teachers and district staff use performance-based assessments to collect, analyze, and act on information about individual children’s knowledge and development. In the context of daily classroom activities, teachers collect evidence—such as examples of children’s work, anecdotes, and conversations—of children’s learning across a variety of domains. Teachers use this information to track children’s progress, inform instruction, and communicate with families about children’s learning. Master Teachers also use child assessment data to inform the professional development they provide to teachers.

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To support teacher-administered, child-level assessments in *Abbott* preschool classrooms, Frede and the Department of Education developed the New Jersey Early Learning Assessment System (NJELAS), a “portfolio” assessment that guides teachers in observing, documenting, and evaluating children’s learning. The Department of Education provided extensive professional development to help teachers and district staff implement the NJELAS system. But recently, the Department of Education decided to shift away from NJELAS, which focused on language and literacy, and instead require districts and providers to imple-

ment comprehensive portfolio assessments aligned with the curriculum they use. (Most curricula approved for use in *Abbott* pre-K programs come with their own aligned assessments.)<sup>31</sup> This change does not, however, alter the state’s commitment to an authentic, performance-based approach to child assessment. Districts also use developmental screenings to identify children who may have developmental delays, vision, or hearing problems.

At the provider or classroom level, districts are required to use a reliable observation tool approved by the Department—typically the ECERS-R—to measure the quality of teaching in *Abbott* pre-K classrooms. Master Teachers, who have been trained in the use of these tools, typically conduct the observations, and use the results to support professional development for teachers. If a classroom’s or a provider’s observed quality falls below a minimum acceptable level, the district and the provider must develop and implement an action plan to improve the provider or classroom’s quality. If improvements do not occur, the district may eventually terminate the provider’s contract.<sup>32</sup>

To hold districts accountable for meeting *Abbott*’s high quality standards, the Department of Education developed a Self-Assessment and Validation System (SAVS). Districts are required to conduct an annual self-assessment, using a detailed checklist provided by the Department and including input from teachers, parents, and the community. SAVS examines all aspects of *Abbott* pre-K program implementation—such as curriculum, assessment, staff qualifications, professional development, inclusion of children with disabilities, support for English language learners, parent and community engagement, and how the district administers the program—as well as how these components work together to support *Abbott* preschoolers’ learning and development. Based on this self-assessment, the district must identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas in need of improvement, and submit to the Department a detailed improvement plan explaining the steps the district will take to improve its pre-K programs. Every three years, a team from the State Department of Education conducts a validation visit, in order to independently assess and confirm the district’s self-assessments.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, to hold itself accountable for the quality and effectiveness of *Abbott* pre-K programs statewide, the state has commissioned independent researchers to conduct regular evaluations of both pre-K classroom quality and children’s

learning outcomes as a result of their participation in *Abbott*. The Early Learning Improvement Consortium (ELIC), a collaborative of researchers from multiple universities in the state, annually conducts observational assessments of quality in a sample of *Abbott* pre-K classrooms, providing a view of statewide program quality. ELIC's research has documented significant and ongoing improvement in the quality of *Abbott* pre-K classrooms since 2000.<sup>34</sup>

The state has also commissioned the National Institute for Early Education Research to conduct the *Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study* (APPLES), an ongoing assessment that measures the effects of *Abbott* pre-K participation on learning outcomes. The first APPLES report, released in 2007, used a rigorous regression discontinuity design to assess the impacts of pre-K participation on children's skills at kindergarten entry. It found that children who participated in *Abbott* pre-K programs at age 4 made very large gains in cognitive skills—34.8 percent more growth over the course of a year in vocabulary scores and 41.4 percent more growth in math, compared to a control group. The research also suggested that children who participated in two years of *Abbott* pre-K made even greater gains.<sup>35</sup> A second study, published in June 2009, found that children's cognitive gains as a result of *Abbott* pre-K persist at least through the end of second grade.<sup>36</sup>

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New Jersey's approach to accountability in *Abbott* pre-K programs looks very different from the accountability model enshrined in No Child Left Behind for elementary and secondary schools and the way accountability is currently framed in public policy debates. Data is collected using authentic measures that take into account input and process measures of program quality along with student outcomes—not just standardized test scores. Individuals and entities at different levels of accountability—classroom teachers, providers,

Master Teachers, districts, and the state—are expected to work together collaboratively to use data to improve quality and child learning. The Division of Early Childhood Education's approach emphasizes using data to provide support where needed and facilitate improvement, rather than emphasizing sanctions for poor performance.

But the individuals and organizations at every level in the system are still very much accountable for the quality of pre-K services they provide and the results they generate for children. The accountability system is certainly data-driven, encouraging teachers and district and state officials to use data to inform instructional decisions and drive program improvement. And, judging from the quality improvements and child learning gains that researchers have documented, this approach is working.

As state and federal policymakers seek to build new systems to drive quality improvement in early childhood education settings, and to refine the federal No Child Left Behind Act's approach to accountability for public elementary and secondary schools, it's worth taking a closer look at New Jersey's approach to driving continuous quality improvement in *Abbott* pre-K programs.

### Building the Supply of Qualified Teachers

Raising teachers' educational credentials was one of the biggest challenges New Jersey faced in implementing *Abbott* pre-K. The court's *Abbott VI* ruling required all *Abbott* pre-K teachers to hold both a bachelor's degree with specialized training in early childhood and state certification to teach in grades PreK-3rd no later than 2004.<sup>37</sup> As of the 2002-03 school year, less than half of the teachers in *Abbott* pre-K programs had both a bachelor's degree and certification to teach young children.<sup>38</sup>

In fact, at the time of the Court's ruling, the preschool through third grade, or "P-3," credential it mandated for *Abbott* preschool teachers didn't even exist,<sup>39</sup> and only two four-year colleges in the state offered majors in early childhood education.<sup>40</sup> The state didn't just have to increase the supply of certified preschool teachers. It also had to create the credential in the first place and get institutions of higher education to create programs through which existing pre-K teachers could earn the newly required certification. Then it had to figure out how to help hundreds of mid-career pre-K teachers—who averaged nine years of teaching experience but often little higher education, and

for many of whom English was a second language—earn bachelor’s degrees on a tight timeline.<sup>41</sup>

Within months of the court’s *Abbott VI* ruling, most four-year colleges and universities in the state had established P-3 certification programs.<sup>42</sup> Today, 13 institutions have some sort of program leading to a P-3 credential, and many offer multiple options, including bachelor’s degree programs, master’s in teaching programs, and alternate routes to certification (expedited training programs for individuals who already hold a bachelor’s degree).<sup>43</sup> To encourage universities to develop programs to meet the needs of teachers who were already working in pre-K programs, the state also created two grant programs— Quality and Capacity grants, and Teacher Effectiveness and Teacher Preparation grants—that awarded funding to support innovative teacher training models, including weekend and distance learning programs and satellite campuses that were more accessible to working pre-K teachers.<sup>44</sup>

The New Jersey Department of Human Services provided scholarships of up to \$5,000 for pre-K teachers working toward an associate’s, bachelor’s, or master’s degree and teacher certification.<sup>45</sup> These scholarships continue to help current early childhood educators—for whom college might otherwise have been prohibitively expensive—pay the costs of coursework leading to certification. Unlike some scholarship programs for early childhood educators, New Jersey’s scholarships for pre-K teachers pay postsecondary institutions directly, when teachers enroll in courses and the tuition bill comes due, rather than requiring teachers to pay out of pocket and then seek tuition reimbursement once they complete a course. This may seem like a minor detail, but it is critically important for early childhood educators, who still earn very low salaries until they complete their bachelor’s degrees and often can’t afford to pay tuition up front and then wait to be reimbursed. The scholarships also created an incentive for higher education institutions to design P-3 certification programs that were accessible for working pre-K teachers.

New Jersey’s alternate route to teacher certification, the nation’s oldest such program, also played a critical role. Alternative routes to certification allow individuals who already hold bachelor’s degrees to enter the classroom with minimal pre-service teacher training and to earn certification through a combination of in-service coursework and on-the-job mentoring.<sup>46</sup> Crucially, alternative certification

allowed working pre-K teachers to earn certification while remaining in the classroom, without taking time off for full-time student teaching.<sup>47</sup>

These efforts by the state and institutions of higher education paid off. By 2005, 99 percent of teachers working in *Abbott* pre-K programs met the court’s requirements, holding a bachelor’s degree and P-3 certification.<sup>48</sup> Today, virtually all *Abbott* pre-K teachers meet these requirements.

Teacher compensation requirements in the state code supported these efforts by mandating that certified pre-K teachers working in community-based *Abbott* pre-K programs receive compensation and benefits comparable to those of teachers working in their district’s public school system.<sup>49</sup> This policy created a carrot, as well as a stick, for teachers in community-based programs to earn degrees and certification. Preschool teachers had to earn the degrees in order to keep their jobs, but in return, they could now earn substantially more than they had before *Abbott*.

These requirements have also helped New Jersey retain certified pre-K teachers in preschool classrooms, in community-based providers, and in *Abbott* districts. In many states, preschool teachers who earn degrees quickly leave the field to work in public elementary schools, where pay is much better than in community-based preschool settings. By compensating *Abbott* preschool teachers, including those in community-based settings, comparably with other public school teachers, New Jersey has avoided this problem. There are still some discrepancies in compensation between public schools and community-based providers, because public school systems are able to offer much more generous health and retirement benefits, and because teachers in community-based providers don’t receive longevity pay for the years they worked in early childhood prior to *Abbott*. But New Jersey has gotten close to evening the playing field between schools and community-based providers—at least in *Abbott* districts—and has significantly increased compensation for teachers in community-based pre-K settings.

Complementing efforts to raise the educational credentials of *Abbott* pre-K teachers, school districts in New Jersey also provided a great deal of in-service professional development. Districts provide the same professional development opportunities to all pre-K teachers, whether in school- or community-based settings, which supports common quality standards across the entire district and creates oppor-

tunities to build a shared professional community among teachers working in different pre-K settings. Teachers received extensive training tied to the curriculum models chosen by their districts, as well as instruction in implementing developmentally appropriate, performance-based assessments of learning. Many teachers also received professional development focused on literacy and serving English language learner students.

New Jersey uses Master Teachers to provide individualized coaching and professional development to its preschool teachers. These Master Teachers are experienced early educators—state code requires them to have at least three to five years' experience teaching pre-K programs—who visit *Abbott* preschool classrooms, observe the teachers, and work with them to help improve their practices. Master Teachers are also responsible for conducting the observations that districts use to monitor the quality of pre-K classrooms and providers. Districts must provide one Master Teacher for every 20 *Abbott* pre-K classrooms, as well as additional ones to address special needs, such as supporting new teachers or working with teachers on inclusion of children with disabilities.<sup>50</sup> This approach allows school districts to provide professional development that is both consistent across a variety of settings and tailored to the needs of individual teachers and settings.

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Now that the state has succeeded in raising the qualifications of *Abbott* pre-K teachers, it needs to take a careful look at the quality and outcomes of P-3 licensure training programs in the state, to ensure that they are truly equipping teaching candidates with the knowledge and skills to effectively teach children in grades PreK-3rd.

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New Jersey's success in raising the educational qualifications of teachers in *Abbott* pre-K programs is impressive, but improvement is still needed. The P-3 credential is supposed to qualify teachers to teach from pre-K through third, but it is primarily viewed by principals, teaching candidates, and indeed some teacher preparation programs as a credential to teach pre-K. Teaching candidates report that

they are frequently encouraged to pursue the state's K-5 credential, either in addition to or in lieu of the P-3 credential, because it is seen as "more marketable."<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, educators and officials in New Jersey raise numerous concerns about the quality of P-3 teacher preparation programs: the quality of professors in these programs and their ability to provide instruction relevant to P-3 practice, the rigor of program coursework, and the extent to which coursework and field experiences truly prepare graduates to teach at any level across the P-3 age range.<sup>52</sup>

Now that the state has succeeded in raising the qualifications of *Abbott* pre-K teachers, it needs to take a careful look at the quality and outcomes of P-3 licensure training programs in the state, to ensure that they are truly equipping teaching candidates with the knowledge and skills to effectively teach children in grades PreK-3rd.

### Pre-Kindergarten Outside the *Abbott* Districts

*Abbott v. Burke* required New Jersey to implement universal pre-K only in the 31 districts named in the litigation. But these 31 school districts are not the only ones in New Jersey with pre-K programs. Two additional state programs, Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA) and the Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI), have funded pre-K in 115 school districts.

**ECPA:** The ECPA program, created in 1996 as part of the Comprehensive Education Improvement and Financing Act (CEIFA), provides pre-K funding to 101 non-*Abbott* districts that serve significant populations of children in poverty.<sup>53</sup> Districts may use these ECPA funds to provide full-day kindergarten, half-day pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds, or otherwise improve early education in grades PreK-3rd. Over 7,500 children received pre-K services through ECPA in the 2007-08 school year.

ECPA districts receive roughly \$4,850 per child from the state for pre-K—significantly less than *Abbott* districts. Pre-K programs in ECPA districts are also subject to lower quality standards and less rigorous quality control than in *Abbott* districts. For example, although pre-K teachers in ECPA-funded programs must have bachelor's degrees and state teacher certification, ECPA permits larger class sizes than *Abbott* does and does not require the use of a state-approved, developmentally appropriate pre-K curriculum. And ECPA districts are not subject to the same *Preschool*

*Program Implementation Guidelines* and Self-Assessment and Validation System (SAVS) used to monitor quality and drive ongoing improvement in *Abbott* pre-K programs.<sup>54</sup>

**ELLI:** In 2004, the state established the Early Launch to Learning (ELLI) program to further support pre-K quality and access. Any New Jersey school district, including districts that received ECPA funding and wished to improve or expand pre-K programs, could apply for ELLI funds to implement pre-K, expand the number of low-income children served, extend hours, or improve program quality. ELLI-funded pre-K programs are subject to most of the same quality requirements as *Abbott* preschool programs. In the 2007-08 school year, New Jersey provided \$2.7 million in ELLI funding to provide pre-K to 660 children statewide. Despite differences in quality and funding, it is clear that some ECPA and ELLI districts have used these funds to build high-quality pre-K programs and implement a broader set of PreK-3rd reforms. Red Bank Borough, one of the districts that has made the most progress toward building seamless PreK-3rd systems, is a non-*Abbott* district receiving funds from ECPA or ELLI.

Legislation passed in early 2008, the School Funding Reform Act, included provisions to merge these three programs into a single, expanded pre-K funding stream that would provide all school districts in the state with pre-K funding on a per-pupil basis and apply *Abbott*-quality standards to all state-funded pre-K programs. A fiscal crunch

has prevented the state from providing sufficient funding to implement these changes, however, so most school districts continue to receive the same amount of funding (with adjustments for population changes and cost of living). They are also subject to the same program and quality standards as before SFRA's passage.

In addition, many middle-income and affluent districts that don't qualify for ECPA or ELLI have used local funds to provide or operate pre-K programs that parents pay for. ❏

## Moving on Up: PreK-3rd and Intensive Early Literacy in New Jersey's *Abbott* Districts

It's tempting to focus on the success of New Jersey's *Abbott* pre-K initiative and ignore its track record at the elementary and secondary level. But *Abbott* pre-K has never been an end in itself. For the court, for the Education Law Center and other advocates, for state officials, and most importantly for New Jersey's children, *Abbott* pre-K has been a component—a critical one, but still just a component—of a larger effort to drive long-term learning gains for the state's most disadvantaged students.

In New Jersey, *Abbott* pre-K has become the cornerstone of a larger PreK-3rd reform agenda that joins high-quality pre-K, full-day kindergarten, and data- and literacy-focused reforms in the early grades. As a result of these reforms, the state has moved farther toward establishing

### What Is PreK-3rd?

Key features of PreK-3rd early education programs:

- High-quality, voluntary universal pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds
- Full-day kindergarten
- Qualified teachers with both a bachelor's degree and specialized training in how young children learn
- Opportunities for teachers to share data, planning, and professional development across grade levels
- Strong leadership committed to providing children with a seamless educational experience
- Opportunities for parent and community engagement
- Quality, developmentally appropriate curriculum and standards that are aligned from pre-K through third grade
- Shared accountability, between preschools, public schools, parents, and communities, for ensuring that all children read and do math on grade level by the end of third grade

Source: *America's Vanishing Potential: The Case for PreK-3rd Education* (New York: Foundation for Child Development, 2008), [http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=711495](http://www.fcd-us.org/resources/resources_show.htm?doc_id=711495).

a seamless PreK-3rd early education system than any other in the country.

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In New Jersey, *Abbott* pre-K has become the cornerstone of a larger PreK-3rd reform agenda that joins high-quality pre-K, full-day kindergarten, and data- and literacy-focused reforms in the early grades.

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### The Goal: Literacy by Third Grade

When Gov. McGreevey and his new education team came into office in January 2002, they brought with them a new approach to implementing *Abbott* remedies and to dealing with the ongoing litigation. As a reflection of this approach, Commissioner of Education William Librera reorganized the Department of Education to create a new division specifically focused on improving student achievement in the *Abbott* districts, and appointed Gordon MacInnes, a former New Jersey state senator who headed an educational non-profit, to head the new Division of *Abbott* Implementation.

At the center of this new approach was an intense focus on improving reading instruction at the PreK-3rd level. Improving early literacy was McGreevey's top education priority, and that emphasis on literacy continued to the Division of *Abbott* Implementation. "Every third-grader needs to read and write well. The path to this goal is high-quality preschool and intensive early literacy in grades K-3," says MacInnes, describing the Division's driving philosophy. "Nothing else counts as much."

### Intensive Early Literacy

To realize the goal of all children achieving literacy by third grade, the Department of Education adopted a strategy it calls Intensive Early Literacy. IEL requires school districts to implement a comprehensive approach to and curriculum for early literacy that is aligned across grade levels, across all classrooms and schools within a district, and with the state's *Core Curriculum Content Standards*. That approach must include the following elements:

- Continuous assessment of students' reading progress and needs
- A 90-minute, uninterrupted language arts literacy block in grades K-3

- An emphasis on small group instruction in reading, writing, and technology
- A library in every K-3 classroom with at least 300 titles
- A school library media center
- Full-day kindergarten
- Class sizes no larger than 21 students in grades K-3
- Effective support and additional time for students with disabilities and English language learners
- Intensive teacher professional development in the elements of intensive early literacy
- Regular opportunities for teachers to collaboratively discuss and analyze student work, assessment results, and interim measures
- Use of literacy coaches<sup>55</sup>

Intensive Early Literacy is both an instructional strategy—meaning it reflects a particular philosophy about teaching young children to read—and a structural strategy—meaning it reflects certain ideas about how school districts drive improvements in instruction. Instructionally, IEL emphasizes differentiated, small group instruction in reading; guided reading; the use of texts selected to match students' reading levels; and writing. This instructional approach is rooted in research about how young children—particularly English language learners and other at-risk students—learn to read.

Structurally, IEL requires districts to put in place an aligned curriculum, conduct regular assessments aligned with that curriculum, use data to inform instruction, and provide ongoing professional development for teachers that is embedded in classroom practice. Rather than simply following the dictates of an off-the-shelf curriculum or basal reader series, as most *Abbott* districts did prior to IEL, this approach demands that district officials, principals, and teachers use data to identify the specific needs of the student population they serve, and develop a curriculum and select a variety of reading and instructional materials to address the needs, cultural backgrounds, and reading levels of their students.

Assessment is central to Intensive Early Literacy's data-driven approach. Teachers use ongoing, appropriate assessments to track students' progress and inform instruction; to match reading materials to children's reading levels; and to identify students who are falling behind and need extra help. Literacy coaches use data to help support teach-

## PreK-3rd Profile: Union City

If you want to understand New Jersey’s efforts to improve early literacy for disadvantaged youngsters, you’ve got to look at Union City, the school district that is ground zero for the state’s Intensive Early Literacy approach.

Union City may seem an unlikely education success story. It’s one of the nation’s densest school districts, serving nearly 11,500 students in a community just 1.6 miles square. Ninety-six percent of Union City students are Latino, many of them immigrants, and over one-third are English language learners. Union City also has the highest percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch—93 percent—of all the *Abbott* districts.

Given these demographics, some observers might expect less-than-stellar educational performance from Union City’s students, and indeed, for much of the district’s history they were right. In 1989, only 18 percent of the students were reading at grade level, and the district was on the verge of a state takeover.

In a last-ditch effort to avoid a takeover, Union City removed many top administrators, including the superintendent, and brought in a new administrative team. One member of that team, Executive Director for Academic Programs Fred Carrigg, who had been promoted from serving as the district’s director of bilingual programs, was entrusted with leading the development of a new literacy strategy to improve the district’s abysmal reading scores. Carrigg convened a group of 14 district educators, including 11 teachers from grades K-3, special education, and bilingual classrooms. The group spent three months reviewing the research literature on reading instruction and how young children learn to read. The group concluded that the basal readers the district used were poorly designed to meet the needs of the predominantly Spanish-speaking early elementary students, and developed a new reading curriculum that was based in research and drew on a wide array of materials to match the needs and interests of the district’s population. The district also implemented an extended literacy block in the early grades, including time for teacher-led, large-group instruction, small-group instruction, and writing.

Carrigg describes this change in the district’s approach to literacy instruction as “becoming more student-oriented than material-oriented.” Since teachers could no longer simply follow the reader and say they were teaching reading, they also required—and got—extensive professional development in how children learn to read and how to use assessments and select materials to meet the needs of their particular students.

Many of the strategies applied in Union City, which included conducting formative assessments, drawing on reading materials from multiple sources, and using locally developed “open source” curriculum materials, sound like old hat today, but when the district first implemented them, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they were groundbreaking. And one of the reasons they’ve become so popular today is the dramatic results they produced in places like Union City.

In Union City’s first year with its new literacy strategy, the percentage of first-graders reading on grade level rose from less than 30 percent to more than 62 percent. By 1992, when those children reached third grade, more than 80 percent of Union City third-graders were reading at grade level. Today, 73 percent of Union City fourth-graders are proficient on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge in Reading, and 84 percent are proficient in math. (This is a different test than was used in 1992, so these scores cannot be compared and do not necessarily indicate a decline in reading performance since then.) Union City is now tied for highest performing *Abbott* district in math, and among the highest performing in reading.

In fact, Union City has “closed the gap” in math, with a greater proportion of its fourth graders proficient in math than  
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ers' work and target professional development activities. District staff use data to monitor the district's and schools' progress and guide school improvement efforts. In the state's lowest performing schools, state and district officials analyze data collaboratively to inform intervention plans. To support IEL's intensive data focus, school districts are required to develop semi-annual "benchmark" assessments. Teachers and literacy coaches use these assessments, which are often performance-based, to track children's progress over the course of a year.

This approach was modeled after successful reforms in Union City, an *Abbott* district that has made tremendous strides in closing the achievement gap in literacy for its predominantly low-income, English language learner students. Union City's progress was so impressive that Education Commissioner Librera drafted Fred Carrigg, the administrator who had developed and implemented that approach, to head up a new Office of Urban Literacy that would work with *Abbott* districts to implement IEL.

The Division of *Abbott* Implementation (of which the Office of Urban Literacy was a part) aligned multiple, previously disparate education reforms—*Abbott* remedies, the federal Reading First program, and No Child Left Behind's mandated interventions for low-performing schools—around one goal: ensuring all students read on grade level by the end of third grade.

In 2003, the state petitioned the New Jersey Supreme Court to replace the many mandated *Abbott* remedies for elementary schools with a new approach focused on early literacy. Union City's success featured prominently in the state's case. In court-ordered mediation, the Commissioner and the Education Law Center, which represented the *Abbott* plaintiffs, agreed on a new approach. The state would continue preschool, full-day kindergarten, and class-size reduction remedies in *Abbott* elementary schools, but district requests for additional funding for "supplemental educational services" would be subject to a test of need and effectiveness. And up to half of *Abbott*

*PreK-3rd Profile: Union City, continued from previous page.*

the state has as a whole. And its fourth graders are approaching the state average in reading—a particularly impressive feat given the district's high poverty rate and the fact that many students are immigrants who enter the district's schools as preschoolers speaking little or no English.

The addition of universal pre-K, starting in the 1999 school year, and the continued expansion and ongoing quality improvements since then, have only boosted the district's early literacy efforts. The pre-K program gives children—particularly English language learners—an extra two years of support to develop language and pre-literacy skills in both English and their home languages.

In 2002, Carrigg left Union City to lead the state's Intensive Early Literacy efforts, which were very much informed by Union City's approach, as well as by research from the National Reading Panel and the federal Reading First program. It's common for successful reform efforts to fall apart once a visionary leader leaves, but Union City has managed to sustain high-quality, aligned literacy instruction in the early grades, thanks in large part to the leadership of Assistant Superintendent for Academic Programs Silvia Abbato, who worked with Carrigg during his tenure.

Today, Union City is one of the best examples out there that low-income, minority, and English language learner students can, when given the necessary supports, close the gap in reading and math with their more affluent peers.

*Sources: Interview with Fred Carrigg; interview with Gordon MacInnes; Gordon MacInnes, In Plain Sight: Simple, Difficult Lessons from New Jersey's Expensive Effort to Close the Achievement Gap (New York: Century Foundation Press, 2009); Diane Curtis, "A Remarkable Transformation: Union City Public Schools," Edutopia (January 24, 2003), <http://www.edutopia.org/remarkable-transformation>; Education Law Center, Abbott Indicators District Profiles 2007, <http://www.edlawcenter.org/ELCPublic/AbbottvBurke/AbbottProfile.htm>.*

## PreK-3rd Profile: Elizabeth

Several *Abbott* school districts have used *Abbott* preschool, Intensive Early Literacy, and additional funding to move toward creating seamless PreK-3rd early education systems. The Elizabeth Public Schools are one good example.

Elizabeth serves a diverse population of students—nearly two-thirds are Latino, one-quarter are black, and the remaining 10 percent are white or Asian. Three-quarters of Elizabeth’s students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, and about 15 percent are English language learners.

When Commissioner of Education William Librera, Assistant Commissioner for *Abbott* Implementation Gordon MacInnes, and urban literacy director Fred Carrigg began instituting the state’s approach to Intensive Early Literacy, in 2003, Elizabeth was one of the districts that most enthusiastically embraced it. Officials in Elizabeth had already been working to create a more aligned, district-wide approach to early literacy—in place of the mishmash of different curricula and Whole School Reform models that schools had adopted under earlier state and *Abbott* mandates. But district officials didn’t have the background or capacity to develop and implement a coherent, research-based approach to teaching youngsters to read. The Department of Education and *Abbott* mandates provided little support.

But all that changed when Elizabeth entered into a partnership with the state Department of Education, faithfully implementing the Department’s prescription for Intensive Early Literacy. Through this partnership, reading experts from the Department of Education provided extensive professional development to the district’s early elementary teachers to help them implement IEL. In the first year of implementation, early elementary teachers in Elizabeth got as much as 60 hours of professional development, nearly all of it focused on research-based information about how young children learn to read—something many early elementary school teachers in Elizabeth, and New Jersey as a whole, had never really been taught. Teachers were also trained to understand the needs of bilingual students and children with disabilities. Specialists in those areas were included with general-education teachers in professional development. This helped to align what is typically “silo-ed” special-education curricula with that taught in regular classrooms.

“This relationship has become an incredible changing point for the district around development of curriculum, implementation, improvement of student achievement,” says Elizabeth Superintendent Pablo Muñoz. “We gained a significant knowledge transfer from Fred Carrigg and the New Jersey Department of Education around Intensive Early Literacy that did not exist in our district prior to this point.”

Just as important, Muñoz and other district leaders used these efforts to advance a new culture in the district’s public schools, one that includes what Muñoz calls “a laser-like focus on teaching and learning.”

That focus is palpable in the district’s schools today: Examples of students’ written work—even drawings and “writing” created by pre-K and kindergarten students—cover the walls in classrooms and hallways. And teachers in each grade level meet regularly—often daily—with their peers to analyze student data and co-plan lessons.

High-quality pre-K has provided an important starting point for Elizabeth’s efforts. The district enrolls 3,100 3- and 4-year-olds in a variety of settings, including classes offered in most elementary schools, nine community-based providers, and three dual-language immersion centers serving preschool and early grades students. All providers use the HighScope Curriculum for preschool. Elizabeth supplements this curriculum with literacy materials published by Scholastic, a strategy adopted after a 2006 analysis showed that language, literacy, and phonemic awareness were areas of weakness for many preschoolers. The district has also provided preschool teachers with extensive training in promoting phonological awareness.

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elementary schools could receive a waiver from *Abbott V*'s requirement to implement Whole School Reform (WSR) models. This agreement would enable districts to replace the collection of different WSR models used by *Abbott* elementary schools with district-wide implementation of Intensive Early Literacy.<sup>56</sup> The Commissioner also approved Intensive Early Literacy as an “alternative whole school reform model” that satisfies requirements for WSR models in *Abbott* elementary schools.

The mediation agreement, *Abbott X*, also required the New Jersey Department of Education to intervene in 42 low-performing *Abbott* elementary schools where fewer than half of fourth-graders were reading on grade level. This mandate gave the Division of *Abbott* Implementation entrée into those schools, enabling it to work with the 12 districts involved to implement interventions based on Intensive Early Literacy.

Intensive Early Literacy also became the state's strategy for Reading First, a federal program that provided the state with more than \$110 million from 2002-2007 to implement research-based approaches to reading instruction in the early elementary grades. New Jersey used Reading First funds to support implementation of IEL in more than 75 schools located in 20 school districts, including 10 *Abbott* districts.

Although Intensive Early Literacy is focused on grades K-3, the approach builds on and sustains the progress that children make in high-quality *Abbott* pre-K programs. Carrigg, the head of the Office of Urban Literacy, and Frede, who oversaw *Abbott* pre-K implementation, worked together closely to ensure their efforts were aligned and complementary—their offices were even located next to each other. IEL and *Abbott* pre-K took similar approaches to developmentally appropriate assessment of young children, and school dis-

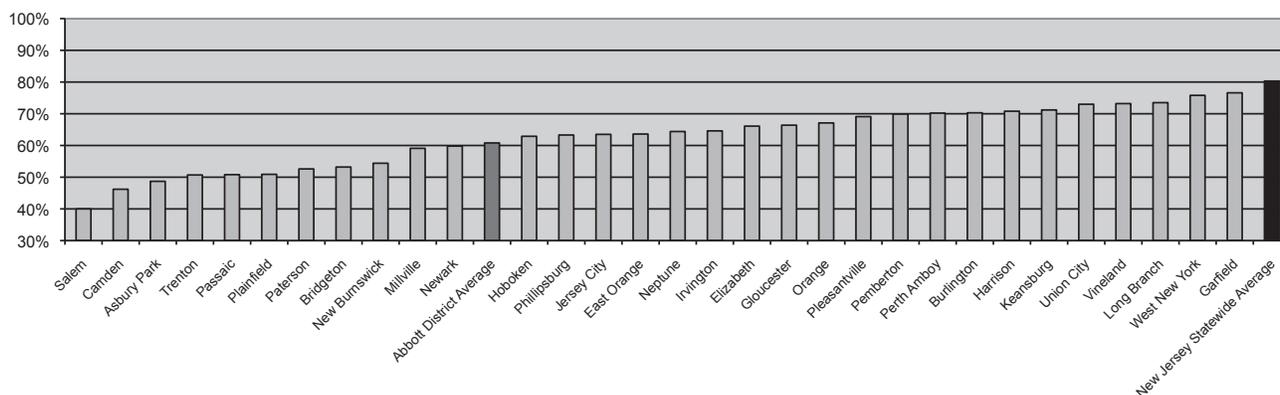
*PreK-3rd Profile: Elizabeth, continued from previous page.*

School district officials in Elizabeth clearly see pre-K not as an add-on, but as a critical component of their school system. As it did with IEL, the district has worked closely with New Jersey's education department to provide professional development and implement state guidelines for improving pre-K quality. As a result, observational measures of quality in Elizabeth's pre-K classrooms have risen steadily over time. In 2008, pre-K classrooms in Elizabeth received an average ECERS-R score of 5.6—well within the “good” quality range, and higher than the statewide average for *Abbott* pre-K classrooms. Elizabeth has also incorporated space for preschool classrooms into its long-range building plans. And district officials increasingly talk in terms of a PreK-12, rather than K-12 system. “We want to make technology available to our students, starting with the pre-Kindergarten 3-year-olds, and going all the way through the high school level,” Superintendent Muñoz recently told a reporter.

Elizabeth's approach—combining high-quality pre-K with Intensive Early Literacy in grades K-3—has paid off. From 2005 to 2008, the percentage of Elizabeth third-graders reading at grade level or above on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge rose from 69.5 percent to 80 percent, and the percentage doing math at grade level or above rose from 73 percent to 81.8 percent. Elizabeth still falls short of the statewide averages—86 percent of all New Jersey third-graders read at grade level or higher, and 86.7 percent do math at or above grade level—but it is closing the gap. If we look only at those third-graders who attended two years of preschool and have been in Elizabeth for their entire six years of schooling, 88 percent are reading at grade level—better than the statewide average. These results offer a compelling argument for why other *Abbott* districts—those that have not taken the same approach and continue to produce dismal student achievement results—should implement comprehensive PreK-3rd reforms.

Sources: Remarks made by Pablo Muñoz at “Closing the Achievement Gap Through Additional Funding, High-Quality Instruction, and a Focus on Early Literacy,” Center for American Progress forum (April 7, 2009); Education Law Center, *Abbott Indicators District Profiles 2007*, <http://www.edlawcenter.org/ELCPublic/AbbottvBurke/AbbottProfile.htm>; “The Daring Dozen,” *Edutopia* (March 19, 2008), <http://www.edutopia.org/pablo-munoz>; New Jersey Department of Education, *New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge: Statewide Report (Spring 2008)*, <http://www.state.nj.us/education/schools/achievement/2009/njask3/statewide.pdf>.

## Percent of 4th Graders at Grade Level in Reading (NJASK)



Source: Education Law Center, *Abbott Indicators District Profiles* (Newark, N.J.: Education Law Center, 2007). Data from 2007 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK).

districts were expected to ensure alignment between the developmentally appropriate curriculum they selected for Abbott pre-K and the materials used in K-3 reading programs. This aligned approach had support from above—Commissioner Librera and Gov. McGreevey both viewed IEL and Abbott pre-K as “synergistic” elements of a larger strategy to raise student achievement in the Abbott districts.<sup>57</sup>

Just as the state’s approach to raising quality in Abbott pre-K programs focused on building the capacity of districts to monitor and support quality, the Division’s work on K-3 early literacy focused on school districts as the essential unit for driving instructional change.

This was a shift from the education reform approaches taken by both Gov. Whitman and the earlier Abbott decisions, which focused on individual schools and largely ignored school districts. For example, under Abbott V, each school in the Abbott districts selected its own Whole School Reform model, so a single district could be home to a variety of curricula and instructional approaches. This meant that districts didn’t have a coherent district-wide approach to curriculum and instruction—and it was particularly problematic given that nearly 20 percent of children in Abbott districts change schools in any given year.<sup>58</sup>

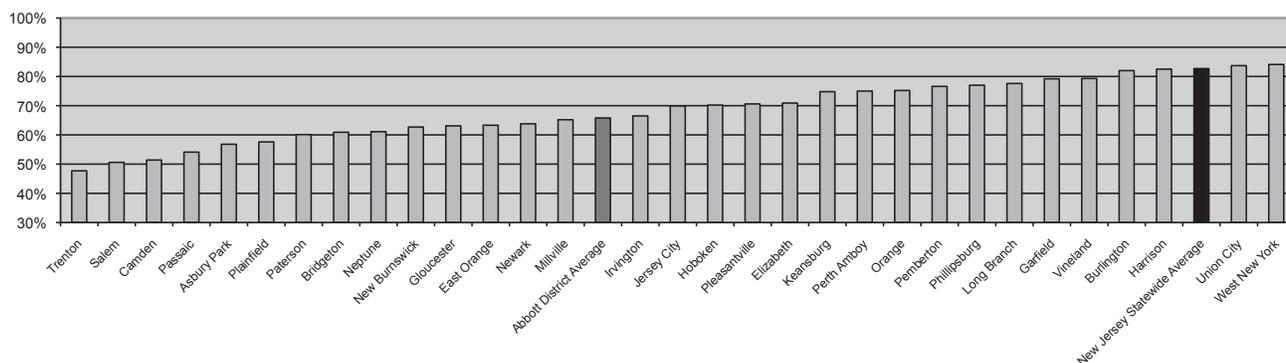
The Intensive Early Literacy approach, however, puts the onus on districts to establish a coherent, district-wide approach to early grades reading instruction. They are also responsible for developing semi-annual “benchmark” assessments that are aligned with the curriculum and used

to track children’s progress over the course of the year; implementing district-wide databases to track and analyze information on student learning; and ensuring that schools have the resources they need to implement the components of Intensive Early Literacy.

To help Abbott districts implement Intensive Early Literacy, Carrigg and his team of reading coaches provided extensive, research-based professional development that taught Abbott elementary teachers how young children learn to read—something many New Jersey elementary school teachers had never learned in their teacher preparation coursework. This training gave them the skills to implement research-based strategies in their classrooms. In one year alone, Carrigg provided over 200 hours of professional development directly to teachers, and 25 other reading professionals working at the Department regularly provided professional development in districts throughout the state. In the 12 districts where Abbott X required the Department to intervene in low-performing schools, Department staff also worked in partnership with district officials to design and implement appropriate interventions targeted to the causes of poor student performance.

This approach to improving early literacy in the elementary grades largely follows the same principles as the state’s approach to driving quality improvement in Abbott pre-K programs: Set standards, collect data, identify areas where results are coming up short, and go back and provide supports for improvement. The measures collected are different, reflecting developmental differences between the

## Percent of 4th Graders at Grade Level in Math (NJASK)



Source: Education Law Center, *Abbott Indicators District Profiles* (Newark, N.J.: Education Law Center, 2007). Data from 2007 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK).

pre-K years and the early elementary grades, but the theory of action is the same.<sup>59</sup>

### Is it Working?

Have New Jersey's Intensive Early Literacy efforts paid off in increased student learning gains? That turns out to be a difficult question to answer. Unlike in the *Abbott* pre-K programs, there is no high-quality, rigorous longitudinal evaluation of the impact of New Jersey's K-12-level school reform efforts in the *Abbott* districts. That's partly because, unlike pre-K, *Abbott* at the K-12 level isn't one thing, but multiple court-mandated remedies, and it's too difficult to disentangle the effects of numerous mandates. It's also because New Jersey is only now in the process of implementing the kind of state-level, longitudinal student data system necessary to rigorously evaluate *Abbott's* effects.

More fundamentally, there has been tremendous variation in the extent to which districts implemented the early literacy focus and other pedagogical changes championed by the Division of *Abbott* Implementation. New Jersey is a state that believes in local control in public education, and the Department of Education had no authority to force districts to implement its approach to data-driven, literacy-focused school improvement in the early elementary grades. Even in the 12 districts where the Department was obligated to intervene in low-performing schools, it had little leverage to drive changes that district staff and leaders didn't want to make. Thus, while some districts made the most of new funding and reform opportunities to drive student learning gains, others kept doing what they'd been doing, and not

surprisingly, continued to produce poor results for students. Simply being in an *Abbott* district and receiving additional resources is not enough to raise student achievement. It is the individual districts' commitment to effective reforms—specifically IEL—that makes the difference.

It is clear, though, that the *Abbott* districts that most enthusiastically embraced the Intensive Early Literacy strategy—Elizabeth, Orange, and Union City, where it originated—have made significant student learning gains and are narrowing—in some cases closing—the gap between the disadvantaged students they serve and statewide averages in fourth-grade reading achievement. As MacInnes writes in his book *In Plain Sight*, the experience of these districts demonstrates that, “Poor, racially isolated districts...can sustain dramatic improvements in the literacy of young students, and continue those gains into the middle grades. This progress is something that has not been demonstrated on such a wide scale elsewhere.”<sup>60</sup>

### An Office for PreK-3rd

In early 2007 Commissioner of Education Lucille Davy, as part of a larger restructuring of the Department of Education, elevated the Office of Early Childhood Education to a new Division of Early Childhood Education and appointed Jacqueline Jones, an early childhood researcher with the Princeton, N.J.-based Educational Testing Service, to head the division, in the newly created role of Assistant Commissioner for Early Childhood Education. Ellen Frede, who previously oversaw the office as Assistant to the Commissioner for Early Childhood Education, had recently

left the Department to return to academia, where her professional roots were. (Jones is now the U.S. Secretary of Education’s senior advisor for early learning.)

This change not only elevated the importance of early childhood education in New Jersey; it also signified a broadening in the Department’s understanding of early childhood as a developmental stage. The previous Office of Early Childhood Education had focused primarily on pre-K issues—with good reason, given the magnitude of the task it faced in implementing and raising the quality of *Abbott* pre-K programs, but at the expense of the broader range of early childhood issues, encompassing kindergarten and the early elementary years, that Frede would have liked to have addressed.

The new Division of Early Childhood Education, however, was designed to be focused not just on pre-K, but on the broader PreK-3rd continuum. The mission statement posted on the Division’s Web site reads: “The Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) of the New Jersey Department of Education has programmatic responsibility for preschool through 3rd grade (PK3) programs. Working with PK3 programs across the DOE, the Division of Early Childhood Education is responsible for the development, implementation, and alignment of program components with a focus on standards, curricula, and assessment.” The Web site further notes that the Division’s creation “acknowledges that a continuum of developmental stages constitute what is traditionally known as early childhood [and] protects New Jersey’s investment in high quality preschool by providing high quality kindergarten through third grade educational experiences for young children.”<sup>61</sup>

New Jersey is the first state in the country to create a state-level office or division specifically focused on PreK-3rd as a unique developmental stage deserving of specialized attention in state policy and district-level educational practice. The new Division provides a structure for PreK-3rd policymaking at the state level. It also establishes that the creation of a seamless, aligned system of PreK-3rd education is an important state goal and one that local districts should also pursue.

Creating this Division was an important step for New Jersey, and one that has real potential to drive the PreK-3rd reform agenda forward. But to date this promise has been muted by the new Division’s lack of resources or author-

ity to spur real changes in how New Jersey school districts operate their early elementary programs.

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While the Division’s mission was expanded to encompass all of PreK-3rd, its funding and staffing were not. In fact, the Division today has fewer staff than it did as a primarily pre-K-focused office. And it is now responsible for both *Abbott* pre-K programs and the proposed expansion of pre-K in non-*Abbott* districts. That doesn’t leave much capacity to address the K-3 components of its broader PreK-3rd portfolio. Moreover, the Division lacks authority over many programs related to PreK-3rd, which remain located in other offices within the Department of Education. For example, IEL and bilingual education programs remain located within the Office of Language Arts and Literacy, in the Division of Education Standards and Programs, even though IEL is a K-3 program and many PreK-3rd students are English language learners. This limits the Division’s ability to influence district policy or practice in these early grades.

Although PreK-3rd is clearly articulated as a goal at the state policy level, the message has not translated into changes in practice at the district level. A few forward-looking districts, such as Red Bank, Orange, Elizabeth, and Union City, are close to having truly integrated and seamless PreK-3rd early education systems. But in most New Jersey districts, there remains a disconnect between pre-K and the early elementary years. Elementary school teachers in many districts still view pre-K teachers as babysitters, rather than teachers. Community-based providers are not always well-integrated into district-wide efforts. Transition activities for children moving from pre-K to kindergarten are often limited to one-shot “events” rather than ongoing collaboration that creates smooth transitions for all students. Alignment, both within and between grades, and implementation of developmen-

tally appropriate practices in the early elementary years, also are often weaker than they should be.

This is not an indictment of New Jersey's PreK-3rd efforts to date. In fact, New Jersey has done more than any other state to establish a seamless PreK-3rd early education system as the goal for districts, schools, and early educators, and to implement crucial components of the PreK-3rd reform agenda. But it does demonstrate just how hard it is for even deeply committed and empowered state policymakers to translate the PreK-3rd vision from rhetoric to reality at the school and district level. Implementing PreK-3rd requires significant changes in how districts, schools, early childhood providers, and teachers approach the work of educating young children, and these changes require substantial time, resources, and conscious effort on the part of leaders at all levels. ❏

## School Funding Reform and New Jersey's Efforts to Take PreK-3rd Statewide

The PreK-3rd reforms that *Abbott* birthed in New Jersey have clearly benefited some of the state's poorest children. The state has put in place infrastructure and systems to deliver one of the nation's highest-quality pre-K programs to 3- and 4-year-olds in the 31 *Abbott* districts. Research clearly indicates that children who participate in *Abbott* pre-K programs are reaping cognitive and academic benefits. In the districts that most aggressively implemented the state's approach to literacy-focused, data-driven, well-aligned pedagogy in the early grades, the combination of resources and changes in practice, brought about by *Abbott*, have produced significant learning gains and substantially narrowed gaps between low-income students and their peers statewide.

But these gains have not been without costs. *Abbott* districts spend a lot of money—more than \$14,000 per student on average in 2007-08, with some spending much more than that—to produce learning outcomes that are, when viewed across all districts, decidedly mixed.<sup>62</sup> The process allowing *Abbott* districts to request funding for “supplemental programs addressing special needs of students in poorer urban districts”<sup>63</sup> has proved effective in allowing some districts to inflate their budgets and payrolls—less so in improving educational outcomes for students in those districts.<sup>64</sup>

*Abbott* has also drawn considerable resentment from taxpayers living outside the 31 specified districts. Although

these districts enroll 21 percent of New Jersey children, they consume nearly half of state spending on elementary and secondary education, and for the past decade have consumed nearly all increases in education spending in New Jersey. Because over half of property taxes go to fund schools, voters have also come to blame *Abbott* for the state's high property taxes.<sup>65</sup>

Perhaps most important, New Jersey's demographics have evolved since the *Abbott* case originated, and slightly more than half of poor children in New Jersey now live outside the *Abbott* districts. This means that many at-risk children who would benefit from pre-K, additional funding, and other services provided in *Abbott* districts don't have access to those services.

For all these reasons, state policymakers, including Gov. Jon Corzine, sought to gain relief from *Abbott*'s more cumbersome mandates by overhauling the state school funding regime to make it meet court requirements to provide a “thorough and efficient” education to children in the *Abbott* districts. In 2006, the New Jersey state legislature, as part of a special session on tax reform, convened a Joint Legislative Committee on Public School Funding Reform, to make recommendations on an overhaul.

The Committee's final report called for the creation of a new, simplified, and transparent funding formula that provides all districts in the state with per-pupil funding, based on the needs of the population of students the district serves and the district's ability to pay. To ensure that the formula provides adequate resources to educate students with different educational needs—such as English language learners or students with disabilities—the Committee recommended that the state use an expert panel to determine the costs to educate such students. The Committee also recommended that the state expand universal pre-K to a larger set of non-*Abbott* districts serving significant percentages of disadvantaged youngsters, and provide targeted pre-K for all low-income children in the state, regardless of where they live. It also recommended expanding full-day kindergarten in non-*Abbott* districts.<sup>66</sup>

### School Funding Reform Act of 2008

These and other Committee recommendations were incorporated into the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA), which passed the New Jersey legislature in January 2008 and was signed into law by Gov. Corzine. In creating the new fund-

## PreK-3rd Profile: Red Bank Borough

Red Bank, a resort community located on the Navesink River, seems far removed from the urban challenges facing the *Abbott* districts. But looks can be deceiving: the Red Bank Borough Public Schools serve a diverse population of students who bring to school many of the same challenges facing youngsters in the *Abbott* districts. Red Bank serves a higher percentage of disadvantaged youngsters—those who are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch—than 23 of the 31 *Abbott* districts, and half of the children entering Red Bank schools are English language learners.

To meet the needs of these students, Red Bank, under the leadership of Superintendent Laura Morana, has implemented PreK-3rd reforms that provide children with a seamless early education experience intended to help them achieve proficiency in reading, math, and English language by the end of third grade.

It starts at age 3, with high-quality preschool. Although Red Bank isn't an *Abbott* district and doesn't receive *Abbott* preschool funding, it has been able to offer full-day preschool since 2004, using a combination of local funds and state funding received through the Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI). In the 2008-09 school year, Red Bank was one of only five districts statewide to receive the first installment of preschool expansion funding under the School Finance Reform Act. This funding allowed Red Bank to expand preschool access and to hire a Master Teacher to work with pre-K teachers to help them improve quality.

Red Bank offers pre-K in both its own primary school and through a partnership with the local YMCA's preschool program. District staff have devoted considerable energy to creating alignment and collaboration between the school-based and YMCA preschool programs, in ways both small and large. To send the message that the Red Bank schools and YMCA are partners in delivering preschool, messages to parents of preschoolers go out on letters bearing the logos of both organizations. Teachers in both the YMCA and school-based preschool receive shared professional development. And children in both settings go on the same field trips.

All preschool and kindergarten classrooms in Red Bank use the same curriculum. Tools of the Mind, based on the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky and developed by researchers at the Metropolitan State College of Denver, focuses on improving children's self-regulation through pretend play. It is one of five developmentally appropriate curricula approved by the New Jersey Department of Education for use in *Abbott* and Preschool Expansion districts, but it is less frequently used than some of the other options. Red Bank's use of Tools of the Mind in both pre-K and kindergarten is particularly unusual, but has produced real benefits for children, according to Red Bank officials.

Using Tools of the Mind for both preschool and kindergarten helps the district create a seamless experience for children—not just between pre-K and kindergarten, but also between kindergarten and the early grades. Like most approved preschool curricula in New Jersey, Tools of the Mind uses “centers”—different areas within the classroom where children go to participate in different activities, such as dramatic play, writing, blocks, etc. At the beginning of the year, kindergarten classrooms have the same centers as preschool classrooms, but over the course of the year teachers gradually transition to more academic centers, which by the end of the year match the learning centers that elementary grade classrooms use as part of Red Bank's approach to early literacy instruction.

Red Bank has implemented a consistent language arts and literacy program in grades K-3, emphasizing balanced literacy, learning centers, and guided reading. First- through third-graders have a 120-minute literacy block, including 30 minutes of whole-group instruction and 90 minutes in centers, as well as a 40-minute writing block. Teachers in grades preK-3rd have weekly common planning times for data analysis and lesson co-planning. The result is a horizontally and vertically aligned PreK-3rd experience for children.

—Continued on the next page.

ing formula, the governor and legislature simultaneously sought to: simplify the state’s existing funding regime; provide adequate funding to allow a “thorough and efficient” education for children in all New Jersey districts; rein in property tax growth; and provide funding to meet the needs of the more than half of all low-income children living in non-*Abbott* school districts in New Jersey.<sup>67</sup> To address the new school finance formula, Gov. Corzine increased direct education aid to school districts by \$530 million in fiscal year 2009 and \$275 million in fiscal year 2010.<sup>68</sup>

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SFRA didn’t just change the way K-12 schools are funded in New Jersey. It also significantly expanded the *Abbott* pre-K model to serve all low-income children in the state.

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In May 2009 the state Supreme Court upheld the School Funding Reform Act as a replacement for *Abbott*, albeit with a variety of caveats—most notably that the state must fully fund the SFRA formula or risk falling out of compliance.<sup>69</sup>

SFRA didn’t just change the way K-12 schools are funded in New Jersey. It also significantly expanded the *Abbott* pre-K model to serve all low-income children in the state. SFRA expands universal pre-K programs beyond the 31 *Abbott*

districts to include 84 districts that the state classifies as “district factor group A and B districts”—or low-socioeconomic-status districts, as defined by a formula that takes into account a variety of demographic and other data about school districts. SFRA provides these “universal pre-K” districts—home to approximately 18,000 preschoolers—with per-pupil funding for pre-K and requires them to provide universal pre-K for all children by 2013. Other districts in the state will be required to provide pre-K for all children who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, as well as in schools where more than 40 percent of students qualify, and will receive state per-pupil pre-K funds to do so. All state-funded pre-K programs will be subject to the same high-quality standards and quality improvement process used in the *Abbott* pre-K program, rather than the different standards that had governed the ECPA and ELLI programs.

### Hitting a Fiscal Roadblock

Theoretically, these changes should dramatically expand the reach of pre-K in New Jersey. Combined with a new funding formula in the K-3 grades, they have the potential to drive significant PreK-3rd reform in districts throughout the state. But these ambitious elements of the state’s new funding formula ran smack into the worst economy in a generation—one that has hit New Jersey particularly hard, as the state faces down a 22 percent funding shortfall for fiscal year 2010.<sup>70</sup>

Initially, the Department of Education instructed school districts in the state to plan to begin implementing

#### *PreK-3rd Profile: Red Bank Borough, continued from previous page.*

Red Bank’s efforts to build a seamless PreK-3rd system have paid off in student learning outcomes. Ninety-one percent of Red Bank fourth-graders are doing math on grade level—besting the statewide average by a whopping 14 percentage points on the New Jersey Assessment of Knowledge and Skills. The reading results are slightly more modest—77 percent of the district’s fourth-graders are proficient readers, a rate that approaches the statewide average despite the district’s high percentage of English language learners. Just as important, 45 percent of children who enter pre-K as English language learners no longer need bilingual or English as a second language services by the end of kindergarten.

In the coming years, as more non-*Abbott* districts will be required to offer pre-K, Red Bank provides a good model for how smaller, less urban districts can partner with community-based providers to offer high-quality pre-K, and how they can use pre-K as a foundation for broader PreK-3rd reforms that drive measurable student learning gains.

Sources: [www.edbudgetproject.org](http://www.edbudgetproject.org); interviews with Laura Morana, Red Bank Superintendent; Danielle Yamello, Pre-K Master Teacher, and Richard Cohen, Red Bank elementary school principal.

SFRA's pre-K requirements at the start of the 2009-10 school year. (The 2008-09 school year was a planning year, in which districts were supposed to develop a plan to implement universal and targeted pre-K over the next five years—getting to full implementation by the 2013 school year.) But in early 2009 the Department of Education made clear that low-poverty districts that didn't qualify for universal pre-K expansion—most school districts in the state—didn't need to plan on creating new pre-K slots for the 2009-10 school year.

Despite the fiscal challenges, however, Gov. Corzine's original budget request to the legislature included \$25 million in pre-K expansion aid that would be available to universal pre-K districts that committed to spending a portion of their own federal Title I funds received under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA, also known as the stimulus) on pre-K. This proposal was designed to leverage some of the \$183 million in federal Title I funds coming into the state through ARRA to support pre-K expansion. Districts that received these funds would have to meet *Abbott* and pre-K expansion quality standards, rather than the lower standards set by the federal Title I law for pre-K programs.

Even this fairly modest investment in pre-K expansion fell by the wayside in May 2009, though, in the face of increasing fiscal pressures. The state will continue to fund existing programs and will in fact spend an additional \$52 million on pre-K in fiscal year 2010—serving nearly 50,000 children and bringing total state pre-K funding to nearly \$600 million. But those funds will simply maintain existing programs and respond to population and enrollment growth in *Abbott*, ECPA, and ELLI districts. The 84 universal pre-K expansion districts, which had made plans to enroll more than 6,000 additional children in pre-K this year, have not been able to do so. Nor have existing ECPA and ELLI districts been required to raise quality to meet *Abbott* and expansion standards, as they would if pre-K expansion funding had materialized.

Ultimately, the state's failure to fund universal pre-K expansion and other new investments in SFRA could land the state and its new school finance system back in court. In its May 2009 ruling upholding the new school funding formula, the court indicated that the decision was contingent upon the continued commitment of the legislature and governor to support SFRA's effectiveness. The state's

failure to fully fund SFRA could call that commitment into question. The legislation itself, however, sets a 2013 deadline for implementation of many key provisions, and does not specify a more detailed timeline for implementation from year to year before then. Advocates appear to be waiting, giving the state a chance to get through the current fiscal crisis and reassert its fiscal commitment to SFRA before challenging the new school finance system again. But if the state does not pony up the cash in 2011 or 2012—including funding universal pre-K expansion and targeted pre-K for all low-income children in New Jersey—it could wind up right back where it started.

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**Ultimately, the state's failure to fund universal pre-K expansion and other new investments in SFRA could land the state and its new school finance system back in court.**

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### **Moving Forward Despite the Fiscal Roadblocks**

The state's fiscal woes may have slowed the pace of universal pre-K expansion for the time being, but that hasn't blocked other work to advance PreK-3rd reform in the state.

### ***Supporting Pre-K Quality***

The delay in implementing pre-K expansion has given school districts—both those that don't currently receive pre-K funding and those that receive ECPA and ELLI funding—additional time to plan for their eventual implementation of expanded access and higher quality. The state Department of Education is using this time to familiarize district staff with the state's *Preschool Program Improvement Guidelines* and help them get ready to implement those guidelines in their own pre-K programs.<sup>71</sup>

### ***Districts Aren't Waiting***

Even though resources have not yet materialized, the state's expressed commitment to pre-K expansion has sparked new commitment and enthusiasm for early education among some school districts. Some districts are even moving forward with pre-K expansion using their own resources or federal Title I and stimulus funds, while others are taking advantage of Department of Education support and building their capacity to implement high-quality pre-K.

### *Extending the Abbott-Quality Approach into Kindergarten*

The slowed pace of pre-K expansion has also given the Division of Early Childhood Education a chance to focus much-needed resources and energies on other pieces of the PreK-3rd continuum. The Division has embarked on an ambitious effort to extend the *Abbott* approach to improving pre-K quality upward into kindergarten. The Division of Early Childhood Education has formed a kindergarten focus group to develop a set of kindergarten implementation guidelines comparable to those already used in pre-K programs. These guidelines, which the Division hopes to publish in 2010, would form the basis for a Self-Assessment and Validation process similar to that used to monitor and drive improvement in the quality of pre-K programs.

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**PreK-3rd reform also creates opportunities to extend promising practices, strategies, and understandings about child development upward, from pre-K into the kindergarten and early elementary grades.**

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These efforts illustrate an important point about PreK-3rd reform. Efforts to expand universal pre-K and PreK-3rd reforms are often viewed—sometimes with fear on the part of early childhood educators—as extending the public education system downward into children’s earlier years. But PreK-3rd reform also creates opportunities to extend promising practices, strategies, and understandings about child development upward, from pre-K into the kindergarten and early elementary grades. There are “so many ways of supporting best practices that we’ve learned from preschool,” says Ellen Wolock, who directs the Division’s Office of Preschool Education and is playing a key role in developing the kindergarten guidelines. “That doesn’t mean we’re looking for the same things [in kindergarten classrooms as in pre-K], but we are drawing from what we learned about how to drive change and quality within preschool.”

Kindergarten is a particularly ripe field for these efforts, because kindergarten has often been overlooked by both early childhood educators and public school reformers, leaving educators and elementary school administrators uncertain about what quality kindergarten programs

should look like or accomplish. In particular, many educators are uncertain about how “academic” kindergarten programs should be, the appropriate balance between child-directed play and teacher-led instruction, and appropriate approaches to kindergarten assessment. “In kindergarten everyone’s looking for solutions, information, guidance from the state,” says Wolock, noting that the Division can help districts, “take care of some issues around quality by recommending certain schedules with certain amounts of child-directed time, how to do an appropriate reading block, amount of outdoor time, how much time children should be spending with literature instead of reading booklets, how to set up the kindergarten environment.”

Eventually, the Division hopes to expand this approach to improving the quality of early education settings all the way up the PreK-3rd continuum to incorporate pre-K through the early elementary grades.

The focus of the professional development the Division offers to districts is also shifting upward, focusing on elementary school principals and district-level administrators to help them better understand the needs of young children and best practices for grades PreK-3rd. Many elementary school principals—in New Jersey and nationally—lack a solid understanding of child development or the unique needs of young children. As a result, some principals under pressure to raise test scores may push teachers in the kindergarten and early elementary grades to implement developmentally inappropriate “test prep” strategies that are ill-suited to young children. The Division’s efforts to improve elementary administrators’ knowledge should help build their capacity to support high-quality, developmentally appropriate PreK-3rd experiences that lead to real and sustained learning gains for young children.

### **A Cautionary Note: The Fragility of Reform**

New Jersey has made tremendous progress over the past decade to improve PreK-3rd education for its most disadvantaged youngsters. It has implemented one of the nation’s highest-quality, universal pre-K programs for 3- and 4-year-olds in the 31 *Abbott* districts, and is currently in the process of expanding that system statewide. With support from the state, some of its highest-poverty districts have implemented aligned, coherent approaches to early literacy in grades PreK-3rd, and are using them to narrow or even eliminate achievement gaps for the low-income, minority students they serve. And the New Jersey Department of Education

has done more to create the infrastructure for a seamless system of PreK-3rd education—a P-3 teacher credential and a division within the Department of Education that is specifically focused on PreK-3rd—than has any other state. This is all excellent news, and provides a model for how other states, as well as the large number of New Jersey districts not included in *Abbott*, can implement PreK-3rd systems and narrow achievement gaps.

But that doesn't mean that the state's policymakers can rest on their laurels just yet. Successful implementation of Intensive Early Literacy—and the progress it has yielded—is still limited to only a handful of *Abbott* districts. And the state has a large task ahead in expanding the *Abbott* approach to high-quality pre-K statewide.

Moreover, there are clouds on the horizon that threaten continuation of even those gains already achieved. Under Gov. Corzine's leadership, the Department of Education shifted its focus away from *Abbott* implementation and early literacy. Further restructuring of the Department has reduced the number of staff available to support districts in implementing both high-quality pre-K and effective approaches to early literacy. In particular, the Department can no longer offer the kind of intensive professional development in literacy that it provided to teachers in Elizabeth and similar districts.

The School Finance Reform Act—if the state can get its fiscal house in order and fully fund the law's implementation—has real potential to extend access to quality pre-K for low-income children throughout New Jersey and to provide more equitable resources and learning opportunities for poor children outside the *Abbott* districts. But there are shortcomings here as well. While SFRA extends *Abbott* requirements for high-quality pre-K to all districts that will receive SFRA expansion funding, it does not extend requirements for Intensive Early Literacy and in fact abandons the existing rules and regulations requiring districts to implement IEL.

The Reading First program—which supported implementation of IEL in 20 districts, including both *Abbott* and non-*Abbott* districts—is also disappearing, as Congress discontinued funding for the program in fiscal year 2009.

High-quality pre-K could be in trouble, too. In November 2009, New Jersey voters elected Chris Christie, a former

U.S. Attorney who had questioned the value of publicly funded pre-K, to be their governor. Christie had once during the campaign gone so far as to denigrate *Abbott* pre-K as “babysitting.”<sup>72</sup> While Christie has since backtracked on those comments, he has also expressed reluctance to continue statewide expansion of pre-K. Christie, who supported charter schools and vouchers during his campaign, has positioned himself as an education reformer, but has provided few signs thus far about whether or how early literacy and other elementary school reforms fit into his reform agenda.

All of these developments underscore the incredible fragility of reform in education. Even successful state and district education reform initiatives—such as those New Jersey has put in place—are dependent on the political winds and the personal commitment of school, district, and state leaders to keep them going. Political or personnel changes can undo even well-thought-out, research-based, laboriously implemented, and effective reforms. And at this moment in time, New Jersey's PreK-3rd reforms appear to be at particular risk. Unless advocates, district leaders, state officials, and the general public keep the momentum moving forward for PreK-3rd reform in New Jersey, the state stands to lose much of what its districts and state officials have worked so hard for in the past decade. ❏

## Lessons from New Jersey's Experience with *Abbott* Pre-K and PreK-3rd Reform

New Jersey's experience with *Abbott* pre-K and PreK-3rd reform offers many lessons for policymakers in other states and at the national level who are seeking to build effective systems to support high-quality early education, expand access to quality pre-K, or implement PreK-3rd reform. Specifically, we draw the following lessons from New Jersey's experience:

**Districts that focus on literacy, use data to inform instruction, and align standards, assessment, and curriculum in the PreK-3rd grades can produce significant learning gains and eliminate the achievement gap for disadvantaged youngsters.** Not all *Abbott* districts have made student learning gains as a result of *Abbott*. But those that have done the most to implement the Department's approach to data-driven, literacy-focused, well-aligned pedagogy in the early years, and have connected it with high-quality pre-K programs in PreK-3rd systems, have eliminated the gap

between their largely low-income students and statewide averages, demonstrating: a.) that disadvantaged, minority students can, with appropriate supports and instruction, achieve at the same level as their more-advantaged peers; and b.) that PreK-3rd strategies that use data and align curriculum, pedagogy and interventions around the goal of all students reading on grade level by the end of third grade are an effective approach to narrow achievement gaps.

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Unless advocates, district leaders, state officials, and the general public keep the momentum moving forward for PreK-3rd reform in New Jersey, the state stands to lose much of what its districts and state officials have worked so hard for in the past decade.

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**Strong state-level leadership is essential for implementing PreK-3rd reform and high-quality pre-K at scale.** New Jersey would not have seen the results it has, on either pre-K or PreK-3rd, without strong state-level leadership committed to quality pre-K and the goal of ensuring all children read proficiently by the end of third grade. Gov. McGreevey and Commissioner Librera’s commitment to these goals played a key role in enabling Gordon MacInnes, Fred Carrigg, and Ellen Frede to articulate clear visions of quality—in early literacy and in pre-K—and to build enduring systems that pushed district-level officials and community-based providers to make meaningful changes in practice that improved program quality and outcomes for children.

**District leadership is essential to create high-quality, aligned PreK-3rd early learning experiences.** The districts that have achieved the greatest student learning gains as a result of *Abbott* pre-K and Intensive Early Literacy—Union City and Elizabeth—are those where superintendents and other district-level leaders fully embraced reforms and committed district resources and their own political capital to make these efforts successful.

**There are real benefits to addressing pre-K expansion in conjunction with broader school reform agendas.** Pre-K in New Jersey has never been an end in itself, but has always been part of a larger strategy to improve achievement of

disadvantaged youngsters. This has had real benefits, adding urgency to *Abbott*’s focus on pre-K quality, allowing the lessons and effective models of *Abbott* pre-K programs to flow upward to influence changes in practice at the K-3 level, and supporting district efforts to build seamless PreK-3rd early learning systems.

**States can build high-quality, universal pre-K systems that include both public schools and community-based pre-school and child care providers—but it requires a great deal of systemic support for both school districts and providers.** New Jersey has built a very high-quality universal pre-K system in its 31 *Abbott* districts, with two-thirds of children served in community-based providers. New Jersey has succeeded in raising the quality of community-based providers and the qualifications of staff working in community-based settings to very high levels, but doing so required substantial support from the state and school districts, including investments in professional development, higher education, teacher scholarships, increased teacher pay, and a system of monitoring and accountability. Community-based providers need support not only to improve the quality of their early education instructional programs, but also to improve their capacity to appropriately budget and spend public funds, and to manage other administrative aspects of publicly funded pre-K. School district personnel require substantial professional development and guidance to build their capacity to oversee and support quality improvement across a range of diverse providers.

**Diverse delivery systems for pre-K can utilize community providers while also maintaining a strong role for school districts in ensuring consistent quality standards and PreK-3rd alignment.** Some early childhood educators fear that a PreK-3rd approach requires moving children out of community-based settings into school-based pre-K programs. The experiences of several New Jersey school districts—most notably Red Bank and Orange—demonstrate that this is not true. These districts are implementing seamless PreK-3rd systems that fully incorporate community-based providers as equal partners with schools in PreK-3rd. By giving school districts central responsibility for implementing *Abbott* and ECPA programs and overseeing quality across a range of providers, New Jersey’s approach gives districts the tools to build a strong PreK-3rd system in a diverse delivery context, but a commitment by district leadership to PreK-3rd is also crucial.

Community-based providers carry many benefits, but policymakers should not view them as a cheaper alternative to public schools for providing high-quality pre-K. Following the 1998 *Abbott V* ruling mandating universal pre-K in all *Abbott* districts, the Whitman administration pursued the use of community-based pre-K providers because it thought this approach would be cheaper than putting pre-K in the schools. But the Court in *Abbott VI* rejected the Whitman administration's initial implementation of this solution, which held community-based providers to lower quality standards. While the impulse to give community-based providers a prominent role in *Abbott* pre-K was clearly right, for a host of reasons, New Jersey's experience shows that it's not a money saver—providing high-quality pre-K through community-based providers costs just as much as doing so through the public schools. Policymakers in other states should learn from New Jersey's example and build high-quality early education systems that utilize diverse providers—but they should not expect the use of community-based providers to produce significant cost savings.

**Targeting pre-K by geography, rather than family income, is an effective strategy for implementing quality programs on a smaller scale before moving toward universal pre-K.** Whether publicly funded pre-Kindergarten programs should be universal or targeted only to low-income or otherwise at-risk children is currently a hot topic in early childhood policy. Programs that target pre-K geographically—making programs universally available to all children in school districts or communities where children are at high risk for school failure, as *Abbott* pre-K does—offer a possible solution to this debate. Making pre-K universal within a school attendance area or school district simplifies enrollment for parents and eliminates the need for districts or providers to devote energy to verifying families' incomes. Basing eligibility on community risk factors rather than family income allows children to remain in pre-K programs for the whole year even if their parents' incomes fluctuate, and recognizes research findings that community contexts—not just individual factors—influence children's risk of school failure and other negative outcomes. Guaranteeing all children in a school zone or district a slot in pre-K can also help support PreK-3rd alignment, since teachers and principals know most children have benefited from pre-K learning opportunities.

**Translating PreK-3rd alignment from rhetoric to reality is difficult, requiring sustained commitment from educators**

**and policymakers at all levels.** Even with all the progress New Jersey has made, and all the state policies and infrastructure it has put in place to support PreK-3rd—universal pre-K, full-day kindergarten, Intensive Early Literacy, and an entire Division dedicated to PreK-3rd—PreK-3rd is far from a reality in most New Jersey school districts. Moving toward a truly seamless PreK-3rd system in New Jersey, at both the state and local level, is a long-term project, requiring sustained commitment and dedicated leadership at both the state and district levels, as well as from outside partner organizations.

### Lessons for Policymakers in Other States

These lessons lead us to recommend that policymakers in other states and at the national level do the following:

**Integrate investments in pre-K and other early childhood programs within a broader education reform agenda that seeks to improve student learning outcomes from preschool through higher education (P-16).** Too often, policymakers and advocates view pre-K and school reform as entirely separate initiatives, rather than “synergistically” as New Jersey officials viewed pre-K and Intensive Early Literacy. By integrating early childhood into a broader P-16 agenda to raise student achievement and narrow achievement gaps, policymakers can better advance both early childhood and school reform goals.

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**Simply funding slots or mandating that programs meet certain requirements—such as teacher credentials or small class sizes—isn't enough to ensure children high-quality early learning experiences. States must build systems and structures to support quality and accountability in early childhood programs.**

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**Invest in building state-level infrastructure for quality pre-K, not just the expansion of slots.** The court's *Abbott VI* decision required the state to provide universal pre-K to all preschoolers in *Abbott* districts, but it was the state's commitment to building the infrastructure for quality—standards and guidelines; teachers' scholarships and new-teacher preparation programs; professional develop-

ment; a process for accountability and continuous quality improvement; enhanced district capacity; and a strong state office overseeing early education—that actually produced high-quality pre-K programs in New Jersey. Simply funding slots or mandating that programs meet certain requirements—such as teacher credentials or small class sizes—isn't enough to ensure children high-quality early learning experiences. States must build systems and structures to support quality and accountability in early childhood programs.

**Ensure that pre-K and PreK-3rd education systems include systems of data collection, analysis, and accountability to drive ongoing quality improvement.** New Jersey's *Abbott* pre-K and Intensive Early Literacy programs used similar approaches to drive improvements in quality and outcomes: Set standards for performance, collect data on whether educators are meeting those standards, provide feedback and support to improve, and hold providers accountable for performance. States and school districts should ensure that they are collecting data about the performance of early education programs, including data on inputs, process quality, and comprehensive measures of child outcomes, using appropriate measures.

**Provide scholarships to help working early childhood educators raise their levels of skills and knowledge, and design these programs with the needs of early educators in mind.** New Jersey could never have met the Court's requirement that all *Abbott* pre-K teachers have a bachelor's degree and certification to teach grades PreK-3rd, without providing scholarships. Most early childhood educators simply don't earn enough money to pay for the costs of degree coursework out of pocket without financial assistance. New Jersey's experience also illustrates the importance of designing scholarships to fit the needs of working early childhood educators. Scholarship programs that make upfront payments directly to postsecondary institutions are much more accessible for working pre-K teachers than are programs that require teachers to pay out of pocket up front and wait to be reimbursed.

**Support the development of high-quality traditional and alternative routes for teachers to earn PreK-3rd credentials.** Improving quality in both pre-K and early elementary programs will require an increase in the supply of highly skilled educators. Building that supply will require new early educator preparation programs and routes to

certification that: a.) recognize the PreK-3rd years as a unique developmental stage; b.) are based on scientific evidence about what teachers of young children in this age range must know and be able to do; and c.) include programs specifically designed to meet the needs of working early childhood professionals, nontraditional students, and adults for whom English is a second language. Just as New Jersey made grants to institutions of higher education to support the development of P-3 programs, states and the federal government should invest in the development of new models of preparation for PreK-3rd educators. High-quality, streamlined alternative routes to certification, which have played a critical role in meeting New Jersey's need for P-3 certified teachers, should be part of the mix of strategies used. ▣

## Strengthening New Jersey's PreK-3rd Reforms

New Jersey has made tremendous progress in advancing high-quality pre-K and PreK-3rd reforms. But there is still much to be done. Policymakers in New Jersey must take the following steps to consolidate early education gains and build a truly aligned and universal system of high-quality PreK-3rd education:

**Provide funding to keep the momentum going for pre-K expansion.** The state's current fiscal crisis has stalled pre-K expansion efforts. While it's understandable that the recession will slow progress on some initiatives, there is a danger that too much delay in funding or implementing pre-K expansion could destroy momentum and ultimately undermine its success. The state should provide small amounts of funding for pre-K expansion and planning in order to maintain district-level momentum and encourage districts to use this additional time to better prepare to implement high-quality pre-K when additional funds become available.

**Continue to extend the *Abbott* pre-K program's approach to quality upward into kindergarten and the early grades.** Using standards, guidelines, and a self-assessment and validation system, New Jersey developed an effective model for driving ongoing improvement in pre-K classrooms. But many kindergarten and elementary school classrooms continue to fall short of the quality needed to foster children's social and emotional development and enable them to read and do math on grade level by the end of third grade. The Division of Early Childhood Education

has begun replicating the *Abbott* pre-K approach to drive improvement at the kindergarten level. State policymakers should continue and support those efforts and should continue to extend them, one grade at a time, across the entire PreK-3rd continuum.

**Reaffirm and sustain the state’s commitment to high-quality early literacy instruction.** New Jersey’s approach to improving early literacy has yielded real learning gains and helped narrow achievement gaps in the districts that have most wholeheartedly embraced it. Yet a variety of factors—the Corzine administration’s reduced focus on early literacy, changes in Department of Education structure and staffing, loss of federal Reading First funding, and failure to include IEL in SFRA’s requirements—have undermined the state’s early literacy initiatives. State leaders must renew their commitment to literacy by third grade as the foremost goal of New Jersey’s education reforms, and must ensure that the state Department of Education has both the staffing and the regulations in place to work in partnership with districts to implement Intensive Early Literacy.

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**Link the state’s new funding formula to PreK-3rd reform.** Many non-*Abbott* districts that serve disadvantaged students have received increased funding as a result of SFRA, and will receive further increases in the future, when the state’s fiscal situation improves. But those funds have not been accompanied by requirements to implement Intensive Early Literacy and other reforms at the K-12 level—even as new pre-K expansion funding has been accompanied by requirements that districts meet *Abbott* quality standards for preschool programs. That’s foolish. Improving the quality and alignment of instruction and

curriculum in the early grades is just as critical to driving long-term learning gains for disadvantaged students as is high-quality pre-K. The legislature and state officials should take steps to ensure that future funding increases provided by SFRA are linked to requirements that districts implement reforms designed to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students—in particular, Intensive Early Literacy in grades K-3—so that the state gets something in return for its increased investments.

**Move toward full-day kindergarten in all New Jersey school districts.** Even as New Jersey expands pre-K access to all low-income children in the state, one-third of the state’s school districts currently offer only half-day kindergarten. To create a truly seamless PreK-3rd system, provide more time for both academics and child-driven activities in kindergarten, and meet the needs of working families, New Jersey should ensure that all children in the state have access to full-day kindergarten. Where lack of public school facilities is an obstacle to expanding full-day kindergarten access, districts should consider using high-quality community-based pre-K providers to deliver some full-day kindergarten slots, replicating the *Abbott* pre-K program’s successful approach to raising and ensuring quality across diverse providers.

**Give the Division of Early Childhood Education increased programmatic authority in grades K-3—and the resources to execute it.** New Jersey is the first state in the country to create a division within the state Department of Education specifically committed to PreK-3rd, and DECE is doing important work to strengthen PreK-3rd alignment and translate the state’s approach to improving pre-K quality upward into kindergarten. But the Division still has limited programmatic control over programs and funding streams outside of pre-K, and it lacks the staff and resources to fully implement both pre-K expansion and an aggressive PreK-3rd agenda. The Commissioner of Education should carefully reevaluate current structures and programs within the Department and identify ways to strengthen DECE’s authority and give it control over programs and funding streams—particularly those related to kindergarten and early literacy—to truly drive changes and improvements in district practice at the K-3 level.

**Identify and highlight examples of districts doing an exemplary job with PreK-3rd.** Several New Jersey school districts—Red Bank, Orange, Elizabeth—are doing an excel-

lent job of implementing PreK-3rd reform and now deliver a near seamless PreK-3rd early education experience for young children. But many districts still struggle with alignment between pre-K and the early grades—if it's even on their radar at all. The state should identify and highlight school districts doing an exemplary job of implementing PreK-3rd, and provide professional development opportunities for leaders in other school districts to learn from their experiences and best practices.

**Implement new observational measures to track and drive improvement in the quality of instruction in PreK-3rd classrooms.** *Abbott*-funded pre-K programs in New Jersey have made enormous quality improvements—so much so that a significant number of providers are close to maxing out on the tool most commonly used to measure pre-K classroom quality in New Jersey, the ECERS-R. In order to continue driving ongoing quality improvement in these and other preschool programs in the state, New Jersey should consider adopting another reliable, validated observational measure that is more intensely focused on the quality of teaching in *Abbott* preschool classrooms. The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), developed by researchers at the University of Virginia, is one such measure—and it has the advantage that a version of CLASS can also be implemented in K-3 classrooms, as the state extends its approach to quality up the PreK-3rd spectrum.

**Strengthen the P-3 credential.** New Jersey has done a tremendous job of getting all pre-K teachers to earn a P-3 credential. But now it needs to ensure that those credentials truly indicate that teachers have obtained the skills and knowledge they need to teach all grades within the PreK-3rd continuum. The state should undertake an evaluation of rigor, quality, and comprehensiveness of P-3 teacher preparation programs in the state, to ensure that they have high standards, are appropriately staffed, are based in solid research evidence about what educators of young children should know and be able to do, and prepare graduates to work at all grade levels within the PreK-3rd continuum. The state should also consider creating guidelines and a Self-Assessment and Validation Study process for P-3 teacher preparation programs, similar to those that currently exist for *Abbott* pre-K programs. As the state ensures the quality of P-3 preparation programs, it must also address common misconceptions among principals, teacher educators, and students that the P-3

credential is just for pre-K, and encourage principals to view P-3 certified teachers as a good choice for early elementary positions. To reduce confusion and ensure that all prospective elementary teachers receive research-based training linked to the developmental needs of the students they will work with, the state should consider eliminating the overlap that currently exists between the P-3 and K-5 credentials, creating separate early grades (P-3) and middle grades (4-6 or 4-8) credentials.

**Continue working to build a statewide longitudinal student data system that tracks students from pre-K through college.** The lack of a longitudinal data system capable of tracking data on individual students across grade levels and districts has been a significant shortcoming in and obstacle to assessing the effectiveness of New Jersey's PreK-3rd efforts. Gov. Corzine and Commissioner Davy have made implementation of a statewide longitudinal data system a priority for state education policy, but the Standards Measurement and Resource for Teaching (SMART) data system is still very much a work in progress. New Jersey must continue to move forward with implementation of this system and ensure that it is accessible for educators, researchers, and policymakers and includes data on children's pre-K experiences in both community- and school-based providers, allowing the trajectories of individual children to be tracked from pre-K through college.

**Establish a revolving loan fund to help community-based providers finance improvements to pre-K facilities.** New Jersey has invested more than \$10 billion in facilities over the past decade, and some of those funds have gone to meet early childhood facilities needs, building early childhood centers and PreK-3rd campuses in *Abbott* districts. But virtually all of the state's investments in early education facilities have gone to buildings housing school-based programs, rather than community-based providers, even though these providers serve two-thirds of *Abbott* pre-K students. Community-based providers lack access to state funding streams for facilities and often have difficulty obtaining financing for facilities improvements. As the state expands pre-K access, it should establish a revolving loan fund to help community-based pre-K providers finance expansion, renovation, or other improvements in their facilities. Such a fund could also help address facilities needs of the state's charter schools, which face similar difficulties in obtaining facilities funding. ■

## Endnotes

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