

POLICY NOTES

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Abbott Preschool at 20 Building on Success

The Abbott Preschool at 20: Building on Success Conference was convened on March 14, 2018, at Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton, N.J., by ETS, the Education Law Center (ELC), the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) and Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ).

In this Issue

New Jersey's *Abbott v. Burke* litigation is "one of the most progressive pursuits of equity in the country," according to Michael Nettles, Senior Vice President of ETS's Policy Evaluation & Research Center. Each ruling in this case has

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Historic Beginnings

In his opening remarks, **David Sciarra**, Executive Director of Education Law Center (ELC) and lead counsel in the *Abbott v. Burke* litigation, described the New Jersey Supreme Court's 1998 *Abbott V* preschool directive as "a watershed legal ruling in the United States ... the first in the nation to require high-quality preschool as a component of a child's constitutional right to education." But, he said, when the state failed to allocate funds to implement the Court's decision, further clarity and enforcement



David Sciarra, Education Law Center (ELC), and Cecilia Zalkind, Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ)

were needed. Panel speaker former Chief Justice **Deborah Poritz** (Ret.), who led the Court during one of the major preschool decisions, described the tension these rulings placed on boundaries between the three branches of government.

“A watershed legal ruling in the United States ... the first in the nation to require high-quality preschool as a component of a child’s constitutional right to education.”

— David Sciarra, Executive Director of ELC

Ultimately, she recalled, it came down to the “constitutional imperative” behind the Abbott decisions and the recognition that any delay by the executive and legislative branches resulted in “years of lost opportunity for generations of Abbott children.” Between 2000–2002, Poritz

authored opinions specifying essential elements of a “well-planned, high-quality” Abbott preschool program, including qualified teachers, smaller classes and standards-based curriculum, which has become a national model. But, she added, these orders would never have come to life without the engagement and cooperation of community stakeholders — a viewpoint widely shared by conference speakers and audience members.

Seizing the Opportunity to Collaborate

Cecilia Zalkind, President and CEO of Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ), recalled her early work in the Abbott communities; she described the stakeholders to the Abbott preschool decision as unlikely but crucial partners. These education groups, parents, Head Start and community child care providers, school districts and higher-education institutions didn’t share much trust or prior collaborative history. What they did share was excitement about the opportunity to improve preschool quality and access and a strong belief that the state’s program, designed mainly around what it was *willing* to spend, would not fulfill the Court’s vision of quality. Zalkind had chaired a coalition of approximately 40 stakeholder organizations, which worked collaboratively for six months to develop detailed, evidence-based standards for class size, teacher certification, curriculum and salary guidelines. The Court cited the coalition’s brief in its Abbott VI opinion.

Zalkind described a key partnership within that stakeholder coalition, which grew out of mutual need: Districts had the funds and

administrative experience with K–12 educational systems; community and Head Start centers had facilities and expertise with young children. This collaborative relationship was crucial to developing an effective mixed-delivery system, engaging parents, and increasing access for three- and four-year-olds, according to Zalkind. The New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) Division of Early Childhood Education (ECE) also played a critical role in facilitating collaboration during the early years of Abbott implementation.

Zalkind recalled, the ECE division was “not just issuing guidance, but right there in the community . . . helping, teaching, providing technical assistance to the program. And, also monitoring what was happening.” According to **Ellen Frede**, who was then Assistant to the Commissioner for ECE at the N.J. Department of Education and is now Senior co-Director of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), the division’s objectives for Abbott preschool implementation were: universal access; improving quality; and collecting the data needed to inform systems, budgeting, and infrastructure. She noted that the DOE also partnered closely with the Department of Human Services and received essential backing from the governor’s office adding, “It’s hard to sustain partnerships without support and direction from above.”

Learning from Success

Twenty years ago, approximately 9,000 children in the Abbott districts attended some form of preschool or day care. Today, despite what



Sen. Teresa Ruiz (D-29), N.J. State Senate, and Deborah Poritz, N.J. Supreme Court, Ret.

some participants called chronic underfunding, the program serves nearly 50,000 children, and continues to grow. And research supports the Court’s prediction that Abbott Pre-K for three- and four-year-olds would have a “significant and substantial positive impact.” For example, a [2013 NIEER study](#) found, among children who attended two years of Abbott Preschool, standardized test scores improved, and the achievement gap narrowed by 20–40 percent through the fifth grade.

Introducing the “Best Practices” panel, ACNJ Senior Policy Analyst **Cynthia Rice** reminded the audience that the programs featured at the conference represented just a sample of excellence in New Jersey early childhood education: “Legislators know Pre-K is important, but it has not been a priority . . . we in this room know what works, so we *all* have to be the storytellers . . . we need



Michael Nettles, ETS, and David Sciarra, ELC

to tell our legislators and our governor that this is making a difference in our children's lives."

At this conference, the speakers, all of whom affected or were affected by the Abbott decisions, shared individual stories of their struggles and successes. One common theme emerged: Teachers are key to quality.

Throughout the day, participants emphasized the importance of deliberate selection, training and retention of highly qualified teachers.

Evelyn Motley, Director of the Plainfield Public Schools Office of Early Childhood, noted a direct relationship between quality in Pre-K and "the ability of the district to provide rigorous instruction in K-12." She added that Plainfield's six master teachers, six intervention specialists, dedicated ECE human resources department, and two coaches for every preschool teacher

makes alignment to high standards of teaching and learning possible. **Grace Blanco**, Director of the Ironbound Early Learning Center in Newark, also cited excellent teachers, district coaches, nurses and specialists as essential to success. She noted, however, that retaining highly qualified teachers has become a challenge given an increasing disparity between teacher salaries in community centers and in-district programs. With community center funds frozen for over 10 years, there have been no teacher raises, said Blanco. "They graduate, they come to us, we train them, and then they leave." She added, as an Early Head Start grantee, Ironbound is in a marginally better financial position than other community programs, many of which have been forced to close.

Leadership Needs to be on Board

Panelists agreed, leaders at all levels need to understand how young children learn and commit to early childhood education. District administrators make decisions about staffing, ongoing professional development and spending priorities, so "you need leadership with a vision for quality and expertise in early childhood," said Motley. Speaker **James DiDonato**, Superintendent of Mount Holly Public Schools, a non-Abbott expansion district, described his commitment to learning alongside his principals and teachers. He explained: "It takes more than just giving the funds and saying these are the mandates. It's going through the P.D. and going through the hard work with that master teacher ... you have to make sure the people and systems are in place to allow quality to happen."

Mixed Delivery Works Best as a Partnership

The “mix” of mixed delivery was well represented on the “Best Practices” panel: representatives from an Abbott school district, a community-based center, a Head Start provider, and a non-Abbott expansion district. All speakers cited the hard work of regular communication and strategic partnerships as essential to their success. **Joselyn Estevez-Vargas**, Director of Early Childhood Programs for HOPES Community Action Partnership, Inc., noted, “Some early partnerships didn’t survive.” She explained, those that endured learned to pool their strengths rather than dwell on their differences. For Abbott and Head Start collaborations, learning to work within both state and federal guidelines presents some challenges. But, she said, the benefits of collaboration — small class size, teacher and curriculum quality, family engagement and comprehensive services, to name a few — are invaluable to children and their communities.

The directors and administrators on this panel also described very deliberate attention to building relationships, skills and systems with their partners. Motley explained that the Plainfield Special Services Department partners with in-district and community centers to “train resource teachers and child study team members in curriculum and developmentally appropriate practice, so they can write real IEPs.” Describing Ironbound’s partnership with Newark Public Schools, Blanco said, “What we do would just not be possible without the support of the excellent nurses, teacher coaches, social workers and inclusion support teams.” And



Steven Barnett and Ellen Frede, National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), and Cecilia Zalkind, ACNJ

DiDonato credited collaboration and professional development through ACNJ, Grow NJ Kids and other Abbott districts for inspiring and supporting his district’s steadily improving preschool program.

Data, Data, Data

At the student, classroom, program, district and state levels, improvement demands methodical data collection, analysis, and usage. Speakers and audience members were in agreement on the value of data for individual student and program planning, budgeting, and decision making. And, panelists described some added value of data to their programs. DiDonato noted that, with perpetually uncertain funding, data-driven systems can help to keep a program on course despite fluctuation in resources. Further, Motley explained, aligning preschool evaluation, including student growth objectives, with data collected in K–12 not



James DiDonato, Mount Holly Township Public School System; Grace Blanco, Early Learning Center, Ironbound Community Corporation; Joselyn Estevez-Vargas, HOPES CAP, Inc.; Cynthia Rice, ACNJ; and Evelyn Motley, Plainfield Public School District

only improves continuity of teaching and learning for every child, but also reinforces that preschool is part of students' formal educational continuum.

Lessons to Carry Forward

The celebratory mood of this 20th anniversary was amplified by New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy's announcement, just the day before, that his proposed state budget would add \$57 million for early childhood education: \$32.5 million for existing Abbott programs and \$25 million to expand the program to more high-poverty districts.¹ Speakers and many audience members were excited, cautiously optimistic, but also anxious

about the news. They raised questions such as:

- Will rapid expansion drain resources or blur the focus on existing, underfunded Abbott programs?
- Does the DOE have the capacity to successfully scale this mixed-delivery preschool program?
- Can expansion maintain high quality given that Abbott's original launch benefitted from remarkable stakeholder collaboration and commitment to developing systems and infrastructure?

When asked about lessons to carry forward, Zalkind's response aptly summarized sentiments of her colleagues throughout the day: "How do we sustain [and grow] effective mixed delivery? Let's

¹ <http://www.state.nj.us/treasury/omb/publications/19budget/pdf/FY19BudgetBook.pdf>,
http://nj.gov/governor/news/news/562018/approved/20180313b_budget.shtml

look at what created it in the first place.” Actions described by speakers as crucial to continued success of the Abbott Preschool program include:

Rebuilding DOE Capacity

Following the Abbott Preschool decision, the DOE’s newly minted ECE had to start from scratch; building infrastructure and comprehensive systems for planning, budgeting, evaluation, data collection and hands-on technical assistance in 31 districts. Even with assistant commissioner level leadership and 18 full-time equivalents (FTEs), this was an enormous undertaking. Since then, the scope and scale of the Abbott Preschool program has grown and is about to expand to 100+ districts, while seniority and staffing for ECE has been downgraded. Now under the umbrella of the Division of Teaching and Learning, the Division of Early Childhood Education and Family Engagement is no longer led by an assistant commissioner and operates with about half the number of FTEs dedicated to preschool as were on staff at the beginning of Abbott Preschool.² Speaking from experience as early administrators of the Abbott program, Frede (with the Abbott program from 2000–2005), now Co-Director at NIEER, and **Jacqueline Jones** (with the Abbott program from 2006–2009), now President and CEO of the Foundation for Child Development, stressed that currently, the capacity to rebuild and maintain the infrastructure and systems needed for evaluation, planning and budgeting doesn’t exist at the New Jersey DOE. And, restoring capacity is

about more than just increasing FTEs. According to Jones, “It has to be senior staff (e.g., assistant commissioner), or you just don’t get to sit at the table and make those decisions.” New Jersey Sen. **Teresa Ruiz**, Chair of the Senate Education Committee, added, reinstating the former Division of ECE is not enough. She believes a Department of ECE is needed to streamline services and provide an essential focus on our children’s first eight years of life, which have some of the most significant positive impacts on an individual’s life.

Fully Funding and Staffing Evaluation Systems

Research shows Abbott Preschool improves aggregate outcomes and narrows the achievement gap. But what district, program and classroom practices work best? What subgroups are benefiting most or least, and why? What do we know about the effectiveness and adequacy of social, health and wraparound services? At some centers, like the exemplars discussed at the conference, program self-assessment data drive planning and improvement. But the extent to which that’s happening in other centers is not known. Nor is program and district level data widely or routinely collected to inform planning and decision making at the state level.

As the DOE prepares to expend scarce resources on improving and expanding the Abbott program, it must learn from what is and isn’t working: “Evaluation data is critical to understanding

² According to Frede, at the time of this writing the Division of Early Childhood Education and Family Engagement operates with 19 full-time employees, nine of which are dedicated to preschool.



Sen. Teresa Ruiz (D-29), N.J. State Senate; Jacqueline Jones, Foundation for Child Development; Steven Barnett, NIEER; and Barbara Reisman, Maher Charitable Foundation

quality [of existing programs] and to building high quality ... you can't just say 'go off and do well,'" said Jones. Recalling the 2009 Abbott XX decision, which ruled the state's School Finance Reform Act (SFRA) formula constitutional for all New Jersey students including the Abbott districts, Poritz explained: "The Court was most concerned about the lack of funding [in the SFRA] for evaluation, and that the evaluation [for Abbott districts] had not been in place ... we're still there."

Steven Barnett, Senior co-Director of NIEER, added: "This new administration presents us with an extraordinary opportunity, not just with funding, but to set some new goals for progress ... we need to measure our district level progress ...

we've moved away from that, on simple things like language and literacy skills, math skills, executive function when they begin preschool at three years old and again when they enter kindergarten. How fast are we moving that in the right direction?"

Developing and Supporting the Workforce

Between 2000–2007, the New Jersey Department of Human Services provided scholarships to approximately 6,600 preschool teachers to earn their B.A. degrees as required by Abbott.³ ACNJ's Rice noted that those scholarships rapidly professionalized the workforce, which, given preschool teachers' past average salaries of

³ For providers' accounts of the scholarships' impact, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTJH8-okGoU>

approximately \$15,000 a year, would not have happened otherwise. Maintaining and expanding the Abbott Preschool Program will require a similar commitment to teacher professional development.

“We aren’t going to sustain mixed delivery unless we are committed to community programs now. We know the future expansion districts; they’re in the SFRA,” said Zalkind.

“We aren’t going to sustain mixed delivery unless we are committed to community programs now.”

Cecilia Zalkind, President and CEO of ACNJ

Salary disparities between community-based and in-district programs must also be addressed before additional districts are brought on board. With broad consensus around the importance of mixed delivery to improved preschool access and quality, the loss of qualified community program teachers to better paying district jobs is unsustainable.

“We need a workforce that is well prepared, well compensated and well supported,” said Jones. She added that this includes working toward nationally agreed upon competencies for what a teacher with a B.A. in early childhood education should know and be able to do. This would continue to raise the bar on ECE quality, while providing important benchmarks for fair compensation.

Regarding competencies and certification, Ruiz noted that maintaining high standards for teacher



Gordon MacInnes, New Jersey Policy Perspective (NJPP)

education is key, but that the measures used for determining certification of a Pre-K teacher need to be revisited. Citing the *Praxis*® test math requirement as a frequent barrier to certification, particularly for some applicants of color whose own high school education may not have been as rigorous, Ruiz conceded she doesn’t have all the answers, but “there needs to be honest conversations to figure out those best practices, so we get a workforce that reflects our student body.” Suggesting a much broader view on accountability for teacher quality is needed, Barnett commented, “Higher education, the state, and the public schools and teachers’ unions need to come together and figure out how the profession takes responsibility for the initial and ongoing preparation of teachers.”

Advocating for and Expanding the Notion of Early Childhood Education

Murphy has expressed support for early childhood education and has put forth a budget that begins to address years of underfunding. But understanding that ECE is important for child and community outcomes is not enough to ensure that it becomes and *remains* a legislative priority.

“We’re trying to expand quality preschool to at least 50,000 more kids who are in poor districts who would also benefit from high quality preschool. The road is a long one.”

— Gordon MacInnes, former New Jersey legislator and now President of New Jersey Policy Perspective (NJPP)

Keynote speaker **Gordon MacInnes**, the former New Jersey legislator who is President of New Jersey Policy Perspective (NJPP) and was the former Assistant Education Commissioner and responsible for Abbott programs, agreed Murphy’s planned investment in preschool is cause for celebration. He noted, however, that state governments must weigh the opportunity cost of every expenditure, and this will be especially true in New Jersey for the foreseeable future. So, flexibility and continued advocacy will be essential. He said: “New Jersey is in a difficult financial situation. We’re trying to expand quality preschool to at least 50,000 more kids who are in poor districts who would also benefit from high quality preschool. The road is a long one. If you think about what we have not invested in over the last 25 years, in terms

of affordable higher education, maintaining NJ Transit ... If we want to see high quality preschool expanded, we need to find practical solutions ... You’ve gotta be prepared for some loss ... expect some opposition and try to win them over ... and do it under the most difficult circumstances that are not widely acknowledged ... It’s hard but that’s what you need in the way of spirit and focus.”

Beyond discussing expanded access to preschool, conference participants called for expanding the notion of what “early childhood education” means. **Barbara Reisman** of the Maher Charitable Foundation commented: “We have to pay attention to what happens to children after they leave those two years of high quality early learning ... and we also have to pay attention to what happens to children before they enter preschool settings. As the **NIEER study** shows, the gap already exists by the time children are three. It’s not an either/or question; it’s both/and.”

Ruiz agreed. Describing her agenda for education as “cradle to career,” she explained:

“We have to be more engaged as neighborhood stakeholders to recognize that while we can provide for our own (access to prenatal care, nutrition programs, a daycare or Abbott setting that’s really developing the child), there’s a woman who’s working two jobs, with two children who maybe has a grandparent watching 10 or 12 kids, and that child is already way behind the starting line.”

Recognizing that Quality Costs Money

By collaborating to establish concrete standards and guidelines for the Court's vision, the ACNJ stakeholder coalition enabled the DOE to design the Abbott Preschool Program based on what quality *actually* costs, not simply on what the state was *willing* to spend. Going forward, sustaining Abbott-level quality, restoring support to chronically underfunded Abbott programs and expanding to additional low-income districts, will require similar recognition of not only the true costs of high quality early childhood education, but also the exponential benefits to children and communities.

Lessons learned from the first 20 years of the Abbott Preschool program suggest urgent priorities for the future include:

- Elevating the current Division of Early Childhood Education to full Division or Department status, including senior level leadership and additional FTEs to rebuild infrastructure, data and technical support systems
- Developing and supporting evaluation systems at the classroom, center, district and state levels, as required by the Court as a condition of ruling SFRA constitutional
- Restoring funds for teacher scholarships, salary increases and other professional development
- Encouraging and supporting collaboration between districts and community-based preschool programs, in existing and expansion districts, to maximize resources and sustain mixed delivery

- Advocating for early childhood education, birth to age 8, as imperative to the state's education and community development agendas

Zalkind closed the conference by saying: "Celebrate for about five more minutes and then be advocates ... take some of what you heard today about the success in your programs, for your teachers, for your parents, but most of all for your kids and tell your legislators, 'we need this and more.'"

Key components of the Abbott Preschool program include:

- Preschool for all three- and four-year-olds in New Jersey's highest need school districts (formerly known as the "Abbott Districts")
- All classroom teachers must hold a B.A. degree with state certification for early learning
- Class size maximum of 15 students per one state-certified teacher and assistant
- Developmentally appropriate, standards-based curriculum
- Programs held in both community-based centers (including Head Start) and public schools (i.e., mixed delivery)
- Social and health services provided



Nearly 200 people attended this event.

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further defined funding and programs needed to narrow the achievement gap and provide the state's poorest urban students with the high quality public education guaranteed by the New Jersey Constitution (N.J. Const., art. 8, § IV, 1). Among the Court's historic Abbott orders is mandatory access to early childhood education for three- and four-year-olds in 31 of New Jersey's highest poverty communities. Now in its 20th year, the Abbott Preschool Program is seen as a national exemplar of quality and improved outcomes for vulnerable children. At a recent conference, nearly 200 educators, advocates and researchers came together to celebrate and draw lessons from the program's implementation.

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email: pic@ets.org

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