

## Partnering for Preschool

A Study of Center Directors  
in New Jersey's Mixed-Delivery  
Abbott Program



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Since 1999, New Jersey's court-ordered Abbott Preschool Program has provided publicly funded early education services in a mixed-delivery system of private child care centers, Head Start centers, and public schools. It has sought to place preschool teachers on an equal footing with K-12 teachers in terms of pay and qualifications, and its system of "wrap-around" care has extended part-time preschool to a 10-hour-per-day, year-round program.

Private child care and Head Start directors, along with public school administrators, have borne front-line responsibility for implementing this ambitious educational reform. Through 30-minute interviews with 98 private child care and Head Start directors in 16 of the state's 31 Abbott school districts in February-May 2007, this study has compiled firsthand accounts of this experience and suggestions for improving the program. We did not draw a representative random sample, but interviewed respondents from across the state and from a wide variety of school districts and organizational structures.

### MAJOR FINDINGS

1. *Program Accomplishments.* All directors identified positive contributions of the Abbott Program to their centers. As most had hoped, Abbott enabled many children in need to have access to more and better services. Three interwoven features of the program enabled them to transform their centers: support for staff, stable and sufficient funding for materials and operations, and resources to offer comprehensive services to children and families.
2. *Continuity of Staffing.* Directors reported that the mandated increase in teacher qualifications (a minimum of a bachelor's degree, with Preschool-to-Grade 3 certification, by September 2004) did not require any immediate changes in most centers. Most who were in their centers at the time reported that the four-year time frame for meeting the new requirements, combined with scholarships and other incentives, motivated teachers to pursue further education. A small

minority of directors reported turnover, teachers who failed to meet the new requirements, or other staffing changes.

3. *Teacher Preparation.* Nearly one-half of interviewed directors felt that teachers needed additional knowledge and skills in such areas as child development, curriculum, children with special needs, English language learners, and working with families. Others, however, felt that teachers were adequately prepared for their current jobs, in part because their initial training was augmented by ongoing professional development opportunities provided by school districts.

4. *Staff Relationships.* Most of the interviewed directors who operated sites with a mix of Abbott and non-Abbott classrooms cited positive relationships between Abbott and non-Abbott teachers, despite disparities in resources, training, and compensation.

5. *School District Support.* Almost all the directors we interviewed had accessed some form of school district support in the last 12 months, including the services of such specialists as master teachers, school nurses, social workers, special education teachers, and speech therapists. The vast majority were pleased with the support, using such descriptions as “very productive” and “extremely helpful.”

6. *Director Training.* Most directors spoke positively about the training they had received through the Abbott Program’s Directors’ Academy. In addition, they frequently requested more professional development opportunities targeted specifically to directors.

7. *Challenges.* When asked to identify the three greatest challenges they had faced in participating in the Abbott Program, all interviewed directors cited at least one. Nearly three-quarters mentioned administrative challenges, such as budgeting, burdensome reporting requirements, and regulatory changes. About one-half cited governance issues, such as conflicting expectations between Abbott and other funding sources. Differing staff benefits systems (with Abbott employees receiving a broader package than non-Abbott staff) raised serious equity issues in some workplaces. Some directors also disliked a recent change to a voucher reimbursement system for wrap-around care, and recommended a return to the previous contract system.

## LESSONS LEARNED

1. Collaborate: partnerships are essential among the state agencies that administer preschool, child care and Head Start; between state agencies and local school districts; and between school districts and private child care and Head Start centers.

2. Develop strategies to create a unified early care and education system that incorporates private child care centers, Head Start, and the public preschool program.

3. Minimize inequities in compensation and training resources among teaching staff within and across preschool centers.

4. Provide ongoing mentoring and support for center directors about staff development and equity issues within centers.

5. Develop a professional development system that is accessible to teaching staff in private child care and Head Start settings, and that leads to a skilled and diverse early childhood teacher workforce.

6. Promote ongoing leadership development for publicly funded, mixed-delivery preschool services, focusing on school district staff and center directors.

The New Jersey Abbott Preschool Program represents a public policy achievement that is worthy of emulation by other states and communities. Center directors’ reflections on their successes and challenges provide a roadmap to policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders throughout the U.S. who are committed to meeting the needs of young children and their families, while offering long-overdue professional and economic support to the teaching staff and directors upon whom high-quality early care and education programs depend.

For the full study report, and an Executive Summary, visit: <http://www.irle.berkeley.edu/cscce/>.