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Partnering for Preschool

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



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INTRODUCTION

In a series of New Jersey Supreme Court decisions now known as *Abbott v. Burke*, urban school districts serving the state's poorest students were ordered to create systems of high-quality preschool for all three- and four-year-old children, beginning in the 1999-2000 school year. The developers of the Abbott Preschool Program—a group including policy makers, academic experts, practitioners and advocates—tackled three key policy issues:

- establishing a program that not only operates within school districts at school sites, but has also built upon existing early childhood services in the community.
- developing a “wrap-around” system to extend the preschool program’s six-hour day and ten-month year to a 10-hour day and full year, in order to serve many families’ needs for full-time services.
- seeking to place preschool teachers on an equal footing with K-12 teachers with respect to compensation and qualifications.

The Abbott Preschool Program now serves approximately 40,000 children, the majority of them in classrooms located in private child care centers. According to the recent Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study, or APPLES (Frede, Jung, Barnett, Lamy, & Figueras, 2007), 56 percent of children are served in private centers, 37 percent in school district classrooms, and seven percent in Head Start centers. The program is therefore an important source of information for those who are interested in developing a mixed delivery system, offering publicly funded preschool in private child care centers as well as public schools.

The purpose of the New Jersey Abbott Preschool Director Study has been to elicit the perspectives of child care and Head Start center directors, who (together with school district administrators) have borne the front-line responsibility for the day-to-day implementation of this ambitious educational reform. The study has compiled firsthand accounts from directors about their experiences in becoming Abbott contracting sites and operating Abbott classrooms, and their thoughts about how the program might be improved, specifically looking at features related to administration, governance, staffing and wrap-around services.

While most directors made suggestions for improving the Abbott Preschool Program, their assessments of the program were overwhelmingly positive, citing increased quality in their centers and impressive gains in the learning and school readiness of the children they served. They noted increased skill and stability among teaching staff, largely due to the program’s mandates for higher levels of training, education, and compensation. Finally, most directors praised the quality of the support services they had received from their public school district.

METHODOLOGY

The universe for the New Jersey Abbott Preschool Director Study included 405 of the 440 private child care and Head Start centers, administered by a total of 270 agencies, in 16 of the 31 Abbott school districts. These centers included single-site centers; multiple-site centers run by larger child care or multiservice agencies, and Head Start centers. Some centers also operated early childhood services for infants and toddlers, three- and four-year olds ineligible for the Abbott Preschool Program, and/or school-age children, while others operated Abbott classrooms exclusively.

The 270 eligible respondents were either directors of single-site centers or were persons responsible for overseeing multiple-site centers, usually executive directors. We did not draw a random sample that would be representative of all Abbott Preschool Program directors, but sampled respondents from across the state and from a wide variety of school districts and organizational structures. Telephone interviews, averaging 30 minutes, and including closed-ended and open-ended questions, were completed with 98 directors between February 20 and May 4, 2007.

FINDINGS

1. Reasons for choosing to become an Abbott site

Of the 98 directors interviewed, 60 percent were employed as directors at their centers when the decision was made to implement the Abbott program, and they identified several reasons for becoming involved in it.

Nearly half of the directors we interviewed cited the opportunity to increase children’s access to preschool services, and one-quarter saw the program as helping

to fulfill their organizations' mission to provide better educational and social services to the community. About one-half saw it as an opportunity to improve staff training and compensation, and about one-third anticipated being able to improve overall center quality. About one-quarter viewed implementing the program as necessary for the economic viability and survival of their centers.

2. Most positive contributions of the Abbott Preschool Program

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. The recent APPLES study (Frede et al., 2007) indicated that privately-operated Abbott preschool centers have consistently shown quality improvement, are now providing classroom experiences on a par with those operating within school districts, and far exceed the average quality of non-Abbott, center-based care. Directors identified three interwoven features of the Abbott Preschool Program that enabled them to transform their centers: support for staff, stable and sufficient funding for center materials and operations, and the resources to offer comprehensive services to children and families.

Benefits most often cited were the following. More than one-half of the directors we interviewed noted an increase in staff skills and stability, supported by higher salaries and better educational opportunities. Nearly one-half mentioned the consistent and substantial funding that came with Abbott, enabling them to stabilize their services and enhance their learning environments. Approximately one-third cited their ability to provide more extensive and better-quality services for children and families, and a similar number noted being able to help children who were otherwise at risk of entering kindergarten well behind their peers.

3. Impact of new teacher education requirements on staffing during the first year of implementing Abbott

The sixth *Abbott v. Burke* ruling, in 2000, required all teachers in Abbott preschools—unless they already held a Nursery or Kindergarten through Grade 8 certificate, and had two years of experience working with preschool children—to obtain a minimum of a bachelor's degree, with Preschool-to-Grade 3 (P-3) certification, by September 2004. Since New Jersey had not

previously offered an early childhood teaching certificate, the state's institutions of higher education created specialized P-3 certification programs, using both an alternate route and traditional approaches to teacher preparation. A state-funded scholarship program was also launched to pay teachers' tuition as they returned to school. Thus, a system of preparation was set in place to make it possible for preschool teachers—typically in their late 30s, well short of a bachelor's degree—to further their education while working full-time.

Directors reported that this mandated increase in teacher education 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, in fact, motivated many teachers to pursue further education. Directors, however, did recall several significant impacts.

Some directors reported staffing changes: over one-quarter of the directors we interviewed needed to hire new teachers at the time of Abbott implementation, either to replace existing teachers or to staff the increased number of classrooms, and almost one-quarter experienced some staff turnover as a result of the changes in teacher qualifications. In some centers, there were teachers who did not go back to school, or who did not or could not meet the new standards for various reasons. Centers composed solely of Abbott classrooms needed to replace such teachers, but those with a mix of classrooms were sometimes able to move such teachers to non-Abbott classrooms, or to reclassify head teachers as assistant teachers in Abbott classrooms. In multiple-site agencies, directors could sometimes move staff to other centers.

Of the 55 directors who were in their positions when the new staffing regulations were enacted, a large group reported receiving assistance related to training and curriculum from their school district administration. Almost one-third said the district had helped them with recruitment and hiring of qualified teachers. About one-third, however, reported receiving no assistance from the district with this transition.

4. Directors' assessment of teacher preparation and experience

We asked directors what additional skills and knowledge their teachers could use, now that they had completed their P-3 certification and bachelor's degree.

About one-quarter of the directors we interviewed believed that teachers were adequately prepared for their current jobs, in part because their initial preparation was augmented by ongoing professional development opportunities, such as mentoring and training, provided by school districts. Nearly one-half, however, said that teachers needed additional knowledge and skills, in areas such as child development, curriculum content, working with children of particular populations (including children with special needs, and English language learners), or working with families.

The influx of new teachers to the field created by the court mandate had varied impacts on centers. Over one-half of the directors we interviewed said that they grappled with differences between teachers having more and less experience, or different kinds of teaching experience. As with differences in certification, many directors noticed that their newer teachers were less competent in managing the classroom and in implementing developmentally appropriate practices. About one-quarter of directors reported finding little difference between new hires and their more experienced staff.

5. Relationships between Abbott and non-Abbott teachers

We asked directors of sites with a mix of Abbott and non-Abbott classrooms about the relationships between Abbott and non-Abbott staff in these sites, and about what they and/or school districts had done to encourage positive relationships.

Over three-quarters of the 70 directors we interviewed who operated a center or organization with a mix of classrooms characterized the relationships among teaching staff as positive. Directors spoke of staff sharing ideas, and felt that having a mix of classrooms helped motivate non-Abbott staff to pursue further education themselves.

Others, however, cited tensions among staff due to disparities between programs, particularly in compensation. Some avoided tensions by locating Abbott and non-Abbott teachers in different sites or on different floors. But many directors reported implementing strategies to bring staff together, most often seeking parity between programs, and/or bringing staff together socially. The largest proportion of directors reported attempting to create more equity by ensur-

ing that all staff used the same curriculum, attended staff meetings and trainings together, and had access to similar materials. A small number of directors reported finding ways to begin raising salaries and benefits for non-Abbott staff.

Across all types of centers, most directors reported that school districts provided little or no assistance to non-Abbott teachers. For many, this lack of assistance was to be expected, since the non-Abbott classrooms were part of a different program. A small group of directors reported, however, that school district staff were flexible about including non-Abbott teachers in Abbott staff activities, ranging from professional development workshops to an annual preschool conference. A handful of directors also reported that their districts were quite liberal in how such district personnel as master teachers and special services teams used their time.

6. Directors' relationships with school districts

Almost all the directors we interviewed reported accessing some form of school district support in the last 12 months. This included the services of such specialists as master teachers, school nurses, social workers, special education teachers, and speech therapists.

Most directors mentioned relying on their districts for technical assistance and training related to center operations and administration; much of this support focused on fiscal issues and new or changing regulations. One-quarter of directors reported accessing district support for training related to curriculum, and referrals for helping children with special needs. A smaller number of directors mentioned relying on the assistance of a specific person in their district office to help with problems with parents, personnel, or finances in a direct and timely manner.

We also asked directors, "Was the assistance from the school district helpful?" Ninety-one directors replied, and more than three-quarters of them were pleased with the support, using such descriptions as "very productive" and "extremely helpful." Some directors qualified their assessment of district support, identifying several aspects that were helpful, and mentioning others that were not working as well as they would like. Some directors reported that the support they received did not adequately meet their needs. Both of these latter groups mentioned the lack of district personnel with sufficient expertise in early childhood as a

major source of dissatisfaction.

Finally, we asked directors whether they had any recommendations for improving the assistance or support they received from their school district. Nearly one-half of the directors we interviewed had no recommendations. About one-quarter recommended the inclusion of centers' assistant teachers and family workers in the districts' professional development opportunities.

7. Directors' professional preparation and characteristics

Although the New Jersey Supreme Court required all teachers in Abbott-funded classrooms to have a bachelor's degree and P-3 certification, it did not mandate similar educational requirements for directors. Instead, most directors were required to attend the Directors' Academy, consisting of 45 hours of training in child care center administration, management and leadership. To better understand directors' professional preparation, we asked them to discuss their educational attainment and experience working with children, and to assess their professional skills and characteristics.

More than three-quarters of the directors we interviewed reported completing a bachelor's or higher degree, with almost one-half having completed a bachelor's degree, and slightly fewer holding a master's or higher degree. Almost one-half of directors had earned their bachelor's or higher degree in a field other than early childhood or business; these included human development, psychology, and science. About one-quarter of directors had earned their bachelor's or higher degree in early childhood education, while a smaller number had earned a degree in education, or in business administration, accounting, or education administration.

Directors with a bachelor's or higher degree were asked whether they held a teacher certification, and if so, what type. Slightly more than one-half of these directors were certified. The most commonly reported certification was P-3; a smaller number had a K-8, N-8, or other type of certification.

We asked directors whether they had ever worked as elementary school teachers in a public or private elementary school, or as child care teachers in any setting prior to their current job. Slightly less than one-half had worked as child care center teachers only, just a few

had worked as elementary school teachers only, and a small number had held both positions. Directors who had worked as child care teachers had an average tenure of 5.7 years in such work. More than one-third of the directors we interviewed had no prior experience as elementary school or child care center teachers.

Directors received full scholarships for the Directors' Academy, an administration and leadership training program that most were required to attend. Executive directors of multiple-site agencies were not mandated to attend the Academy and were ineligible for scholarships, but some did participate in the trainings. The vast majority of directors who had attended the Academy found it helpful. A small number of directors responded that they did not find it personally helpful, but even they emphasized its value to directors with less education or experience. In addition, about one-quarter of directors recommended making scholarships available for directors to pursue advanced education.

8. The challenges of directing an Abbott site, and directors' suggestions for improving the program

We asked directors to identify the three greatest challenges they had faced in participating in the Abbott Preschool Program, and all directors identified at least one challenge. Many recognized that these challenges were in part the by-product of the program's ambitious scope. It has not only sought to expand the educational system by serving all three- and four-year olds in the Abbott districts, but has done so through a collaboration between local school districts and privately-operated child care centers, Head Start centers, and social service agencies—an array of institutions with histories, operating procedures, and organizational cultures quite different from one another.

Administration. Administrative issues have posed the greatest challenges for directors. Nearly three-quarters of interviewees noted such challenges, centering on three main issues: budgeting, reporting requirements and paperwork, and regulatory changes.

Across all types of centers, directors expressed a desire for greater flexibility with respect to budget categories, which many felt could be accomplished by eliminating the line item budget. In its stead, some recommended a cost per child, with certain guidelines related to general budget categories. In addition, directors recommended more resources for several expenditure cat-

egories, including facility improvements and certain staff positions.

About three out of five directors we interviewed identified paperwork and reporting as a challenge, and wanted something to be done to lessen their teachers' and their own burdens—yet few had specific suggestions about how such a reduction might be accomplished. It was difficult to discern whether they were resigned to the reporting demands in this era of accountability, or were unsure about what was possible. To reduce having to provide the same information more than once, one director urged the establishment of a “universal” format for similar information requested by various governing and funding bodies.

Directors' recommendations about regulatory changes focused on process, suggesting that governing agencies consider the timing of such changes, and provide more training to help directors accommodate to new rules and practices.

Governance. Almost one-half of directors spoke about challenges related to governance; some of these had to do with conflicting expectations and regulations between Abbott and other funding sources or organizational demands. The area of difficulty most often cited by directors was conflicting expectations around staff benefits: giving Abbott employees a more generous, comprehensive benefits package than non-Abbott staff raised serious equity issues in the workplace. Some directors, particularly those in larger organizations, also cited duplication of services and confusing lines of authority; some large agencies employed nurses, social workers and/or educational coordinators of their own, and were not always able to distinguish the functions of these employees from those in similar roles provided by school districts. Several directors called for a more centralized and coordinated system, perhaps under the aegis of one statewide agency. Several called for various kinds of streamlining, including a single audit that would be accepted by the various governing agencies.

For more than one-quarter of the directors we interviewed, governance-related issues included a perceived lack of respect from and/or collaboration with their school district. Most of these directors urged school districts and other governing agencies to approach relationships with contracting centers more collaboratively, listening and discussing rather than is-

suing directives. Directors also underscored the importance of solid early childhood expertise among those in district leadership positions.

Wrap-around care. Some directors mentioned issues related to wrap-around care. This program had been revamped in the year prior to our interviews, and directors were attempting to adapt to the new reimbursement structure. Previously, centers had contracted with the state to provide services for all children enrolled in the Abbott program, with reimbursement based on that number of students. The new approach was a voucher system in which reimbursement was based on student attendance. First and foremost, to address the challenges associated with the wrap-around program, directors recommended returning to a contract system.

Working with families. About one out of five directors we interviewed mentioned challenges related to working with families, particularly around children's regular attendance. Some suggested that school districts take a more active role in orienting parents to the Abbott program's expectations, and establishing the consequences for not meeting them.

LESSONS LEARNED

The following lessons, based on what we have learned from the director interviews, are meant to be applicable not only to New Jersey, but to other states implementing or revamping preschool systems. We recognize that there is also considerable variation among New Jersey's school districts, and that several of these suggestions will apply to some localities more than others.

Operating a Mixed Delivery System

Goal 1: Enhanced collaboration among state agencies

The lead agencies responsible for preschool and child care work to create a mixed delivery system that functions seamlessly for local school districts and centers by:

- Setting a tone of collaboration and striving to avoid conflicting expectations or duplication of effort. This might be accomplished by creating one early childhood department at the state level, or by establishing a single point of communication and information for districts and centers that

interface with more than one governing and/or funding agency.

- Establishing an “operations work group” composed of representatives of all participants in the publicly funded preschool and wrap-around child care program. The group would be established during planning and reconvened periodically needed to monitor implementation issues.
- Developing and implementing uniform, cross-system tools for auditing and reporting, modeled along the lines of the universal college application form now used by most institutions of higher education in the U.S., to avoid duplication in data collection and reporting.
- Establishing a database that tracks the retention, educational advancement, and ongoing professional development of all personnel participating in the publicly funded preschool and wrap-around program, to simplify reporting burdens and to inform professional development planning.

Goal 2: Enhanced collaboration between state agencies and school districts

The lead agency or agencies work closely with school districts that contract with private child care and Head Start organizations, creating open channels of communication and assessing and strengthening all players’ knowledge and skills related to operating a publicly funded system, by:

- Establishing an advisory committee composed of a representative sample of districts and state leaders, which meets regularly to vet compliance and governance issues.
- Developing a “readiness inventory” to identify gaps in expertise, and needs for training and technical assistance, among district and state-level leaders in areas related to early childhood education and administration.

Goal 3: Enhanced collaboration between school districts and private centers

School districts establish a collaborative communication structure with center directors by:

- Meeting regularly with directors, and building agendas that reflect the concerns of both district and center participants.
- Differentiating among centers with respect to

their organizational structures, and acknowledging that policies may need to be adapted to varying situations.

- Recognizing that for many centers, particularly Head Start agencies and larger social service organizations, preschool funding is only one source of revenue, and may not be the major one.
- Respecting the expertise of directors and teachers, and soliciting their advice on a range of issues related to classrooms, working with families, and center operations.
- Engaging other district personnel, including early elementary teachers, in learning about private centers that deliver preschool services.

Center directors seek positive working relationships with school districts by:

- Being well informed about district policies and expectations, and asking for clarification about district policy as needed.
- Investing time in educating district personnel about the particular needs and issues facing their centers, and informing the district about their areas of expertise.
- Investing in their own professional development, to ensure that they are experts in both early childhood education and program management.

Goal 4: Policies to minimize the difficulties of blending preschool and wrap-around services

State-level lead agencies, in collaboration with other stakeholders, seek to minimize disparities among early care and education services by:

- Generating strategies to develop a more unified early care and education system, with fewer discrepancies in quality standards and resources between preschool and wrap-around services, and allowing for coordinated budgeting and implementation.

Staff Parity and Equity

Goal 5: Minimize inequities among teaching staff within and across preschool centers

Policy makers can help to minimize internal and external teaching staff inequities within a mixed-delivery system by:

- Creating a “quality set-aside” in the preschool system to allow for improved professional development opportunities and compensation for staff who work in other center classrooms, or work with preschoolers during the wrap-around portion of the day.
- Establishing a mechanism to create parity in health and retirement benefits as well as in salaries, education and certification between staff in private and school district centers.
- Supporting participation in professional development activities and services for all center staff, not just those teaching in the preschool program.

Goal 6: Provide ongoing mentoring and support for center directors about staff development and equity issues within centers

The lead agency or agencies and the school districts can support directors who are creating public preschool classrooms in their centers by:

- Establishing a director mentoring program that provides one-to-one support from experienced directors, helping new directors navigate the staffing challenges associated with opening public preschool classrooms.
- Providing training for directors that enables them to guide their staff effectively toward appropriate educational opportunities.
- Providing training for directors focused on managing dynamics among staff with similar jobs but dissimilar qualifications and compensation.
- Providing training for directors on strategies for equalizing teacher pay and professional development opportunities within centers.

Professional Preparation and Development of Teaching Staff

Goal 7: Develop a training and professional development system that is accessible to teaching staff in community-based child care settings, and leads to a skilled and diverse early childhood teacher workforce

The lead agency or agencies work with policy makers to create a viable system of early childhood educator preparation and development by:

- Setting a reasonable timeline to phase in new qualifications for early childhood educators.

- Providing resources to institutions of higher education to develop a variety of options for early childhood-related courses that lead to degrees and certification, and that are accessible to working adults as well as more “traditional” full-time students.
- Creating a system of professional development, including coaching as well as ongoing coursework and training, that helps both beginning and experienced teachers continue to grow and develop.
- Working with institutions of higher education to build their capacity to enhance the preparation of teachers in specific areas such as classroom management, and working with linguistically and culturally diverse children.
- Conducting periodic assessments of teachers and directors to identify ongoing professional development needs, particularly around issues related to classroom management, English language learners, and children with special needs.

Recruitment and Preparation of Directors and Other Leaders

Goal 8: Promote ongoing leadership development for publicly funded, mixed-delivery preschool services

Policy makers and lead agencies work with other key stakeholders, including institutions of higher education, to develop and recruit diverse preschool leaders by:

- Setting standards for school district leadership positions and center directors, requiring districts over a period of time to employ and/or contract with personnel in positions of authority who have appropriate early childhood education and business expertise.
- Assessing current gaps in professional development opportunities for building the skills and competencies required for leadership positions.
- Supporting more advanced educational opportunities, providing resources for institutions of higher education to expand their graduate offerings.
- Providing scholarships and other supports to assist early- and mid-career directors seeking to advance their skills, with particular attention to building a linguistically and culturally diverse leadership.

FURTHER RESEARCH

While this study has served to clarify a number of the successes and challenges associated with creating a mixed-delivery, public-private preschool system, additional research on several related topics would be very helpful to the early care and education field. We recommend a research program, in New Jersey and other states, to investigate the following areas of interest:

- Best practices in promoting positive relationships between school districts and community-based child care centers in mixed-delivery preschool systems;
- What other states have done to ease administrative burdens on community-based child care centers in mixed-delivery preschool systems;
- Administrative and teaching staff diversity in mixed-delivery preschool systems. In order to measure the maintenance, decrease or increase of such diversity as community-based child care staff transition to meeting higher educational standards as preschool staff, we recommend that states begin by collecting baseline workforce demographic data.

NEXT STEPS FOR NEW JERSEY

Having crossed the major hurdles of becoming established, the Abbott Preschool Program moves into its second decade well positioned to grapple with the various challenges discussed by the directors whom we interviewed. In addition to the previous recommendations, intended for both New Jersey and other states, we highlight three priority areas for the New Jersey Department of Education in the coming years.

Streamlined and coordinated reporting systems. We recommend that the Department of Education convene a work group to explore creating universal reporting forms for preschool centers that will satisfy the needs of state agencies, school districts, and federal partners involved in the Abbott program.

Best practices for collaboration between school districts and private child care centers. We recommend that, through a series of focus groups with school district personnel and preschool directors, the department tap the expertise of those who have created the most successful partnerships, identifying and disseminating key practices

or elements such as communication and approaches to governance.

Leadership training and recruitment. We recommend that the department, building upon its groundbreaking efforts in raising teacher qualifications and creating the Director's Academy, now create a more extensive training and recruitment initiative to address the demand for early childhood leaders, in such positions as center directors, college instructors, mentor teachers, district supervisors, and school principals.

CONCLUSION

The New Jersey Abbott Preschool Program represents a public policy achievement that is worthy of emulation by other states and communities, and the center directors who shared their perspectives for this study have been an indispensable part of it. Their reflections on 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.

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