



Association for Children
of New Jersey

EMBRACING THE BIG PICTURE: THE STATE OF NEW JERSEY'S ROAD TOWARD A PK3 CONTINUUM

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ACNJ POLICY BRIEF

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INTRODUCTION

The types of school experiences young children have when moving from preschool programs through 3rd grade may impact their opportunities for future academic success. There is evidence demonstrating that when young children are part of a learning environment that is based on high standards /expectations, administrative and teacher leadership and continuity in learning opportunities across these grades, the better their developmental outcomes will be through grade three and in future years. By experiencing an aligned and coordinated "PK3 continuum," students will be developing necessary educational skills in such areas as reading and math that will maximize their chances for future academic success.¹

Recent assessments of young students in New Jersey indicate that many are already experiencing pieces of a PK3 continuum. Results from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that New Jersey fourth-graders' scores are among the best in the nation in both reading and mathematics, trailing only Massachusetts in fourth-grade reading results and tied with three other states. The fourth grade math results were also compelling with New Jersey students faring better than those in 46 jurisdictions, and again only scoring lower than Massachusetts.²

The positive assessment scores were cause for much fanfare in New Jersey. Governor Jon Corzine and Commissioner of Education Lucille Davy identified "sound preschool and early childhood education programs," including early literacy as making the difference in "providing our youngest students with a solid foundation of basic fundamentals, and the efforts are achieving positive results."³

While quality preschool and early education programs, including early literacy may be important components for young children's educational success, systems at both the state and district level, must be in place to provide a continuum of quality educational experiences.

For nine years in New Jersey, the State's focus on establishing those systems has been on its poorest school districts. In 1998, the State Supreme Court decision of *Abbott v. Burke* required the implementation of high quality preschool and full-day kindergarten in now, the 31 poorest districts in the State.⁴ While the State's primary focus after the decision was on implementing high quality preschool in the Abbott districts, it has recently taken steps to develop an aligned and coordinated system that links quality preschool programs with kindergarten and the early primary grades. Although a few school districts

throughout the country have embraced and begun to successfully implement the PK3 continuum, no other state is actively trying to implement the concept like New Jersey.

This policy brief attempts to examine this newly developing state system and identifies why its development is important, what factors are necessary for successful advancement and what barriers exist that will make its implementation more difficult.

The findings reported in this policy brief were obtained through an analysis of current legislation and regulations, a review of state websites, including the Department of Education and through an interview protocol developed by ACNJ staff. Current and past administrators and staff of the Department of Education participated in the study.

A MAJOR STEP TOWARDS A PK-3 CONTINUUM: THE DIVISION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION - PK3

In early 2007, the Department of Education (DOE) was restructured to include a new Division of Early Childhood Education-PK3 (DECE). DECE currently has the programmatic responsibility for state preschool through 3rd grade (PK3) programs and is responsible for the development, implementation and alignment of program components with a focus on standards, curricula and assessment. The DECE website states that the division was created to "acknowledge that a continuum of developmental stages constitute what is traditionally known as early childhood," and "to protect New Jersey's investment in high quality preschool by providing high quality kindergarten through third grade educational experiences for young children."⁵

This was a huge step for New Jersey's DOE which did not have a long history in the early childhood education arena. Prior to the 1998 Abbott decision, there was little at the DOE that addressed early childhood education. That soon changed with the *Abbott V* decision. In February 2002, DOE Commissioner William Librera appointed Gordon MacInnes as Assistant Commissioner for Abbott Implementation. Assistant Commissioner MacInnes was responsible for all aspects of Abbott implementation, including K-12 programs, K-12 regulations, the Abbott budget and facilities. He also oversaw the new Office of Early Childhood Education (OECE), lead by Dr. Ellen Frede, an Associate Professor at the College of New Jersey and a widely published researcher with extensive experience in early childhood program implementation and administration.⁶

During her tenure at the DOE, Frede led many initiatives to elevate the quality of New Jersey's state supported preschool programs, primarily in the Abbott districts. She was responsible for the development and implementation of the State's preschool standards, *Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations: Standards of Quality*, preschool regulations, Early Learning Assessment Systems (ELAS) and the Self-Assessment Validation Systems (SAVS). Frede was also instrumental in developing a system for implementing quality both at the state and district level. Frede and Kathleen Priestley, the former early childhood supervisor of Elizabeth, felt the best way to raise the level of quality was to provide intensive professional development to the Abbott master teachers, who are responsible for providing guidance and mentoring to all Abbott preschool teachers. Frede and Priestley designed such a course that focused on the elements of quality preschool, the preschool standards and structured program observation instruments to look at quality. Nearly 120 master teachers participated in the course, representing 29 of the then 30 Abbott districts.⁷

Assessments completed during this time showed sustained and dramatic improvement in Abbott preschool quality as well as improvement in children's learning.⁸

While the gains made during Frede's tenure were significant, the focus of the OECE remained on preschool rather than on a PK3 continuum. When surveyed, Frede stated that 95% of her job dealt with both Abbott and non-Abbott Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA) programs, another state supported preschool program. She stated that the Office focused on getting Abbott preschool "working."⁹

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This was not to say that DOE administrators did not believe in developing a system beyond quality preschool. In fact, both Frede and MacInnes stated that they accepted early on that a state PK3 approach was necessary, but that they kept "bumping up against the preschool quality issue and it remained the need." This was particularly true in community-based and Head Start programs that housed a majority of Abbott preschool programs. During the first years of implementation, quality in these programs varied significantly. The State had made a significant investment in preschool and because of that, every Abbott classroom, including provider classrooms, needed to reach high quality.

The OECE preschool focus was also necessary since preschool was "strange and foreign" to many district administrators, who may not have been in the "business of preschool" prior to the Court decision.¹⁰

Similarly, Dr. Ellen Wolock, currently the Director of the Office of Preschool Education at DOE, stated that part of the

problem was that the OECE was initially trying to focus on providing quality preschool. In order to effectively support and monitor Abbott preschool programs, the Office needed to make these programs the center of their attention.¹¹

After six years of Abbott preschool implementation, the focus at DOE began to shift in 2005 and 2006. Frede left her position in August 2005 and in the same year Lucille Davy became Acting Commissioner of Education. Davy then appointed Dr. Jacqueline Jones, an expert in early childhood education research, to be the Assistant to the Commissioner for Early Childhood Education.

Initially, Jones' responsibilities were focused on preschool. When DOE administrators began to discuss possible DOE restructuring, PK3 became an integral part of the conversation. After multiple discussions between the Commissioner and Jones, the Commissioner decided to return early childhood to its status as a Division and determined that they should expand the programmatic responsibility of the now Division of Early Childhood Education to encompass PK3.¹²

Such a restructuring would mirror the existing higher education Preschool – 3rd Grade Certificate, developed and implemented for prospective early childhood teachers. This certificate was adopted in 2000 to address the "specialized training" requirements of the *Abbott VI* decision, which required all Abbott preschool teachers to have a bachelor's degree and such training in four years from the time of the decision.¹³

Davy stated that the impetus of the restructuring of the Office for Early Childhood Education was two-fold:

1. To protect the State's investment in high quality preschool and to ensure high quality kindergarten through 3rd grade programs; and
2. To expand preschool opportunities for at-risk children outside of the Abbott districts.

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Two restructuring changes at the DOE took place. The OECE was renamed to the Division of Early Childhood Education and Jones' title was changed from the Assistant to the

Commissioner of Early Childhood Education to the Assistant Commissioner for Early Childhood Education.

Davy stated that OECE needed to be a Division because it elevated early childhood to the same level as other department divisions, such as Curriculum and Instruction, etc. Prior to the restructuring, preschool was separate and imbedded in the Abbott Division. The Abbott Division's focus was to ensure that the DOE met the standards of the Court decisions. However, everything in this Division was disconnected from the rest of the DOE. Davy believes that making Jones an Assistant Commissioner elevated the status of early childhood education within the DOE. Davy stated that "Other DOE staff needed to know that early childhood education is a high priority of the State." As Assistant Commissioner, Dr. Jones is now "sitting at the table" with other high-ranking DOE administrators and is now closely connected with broader policy issues. By combining preschool and K-3, the DOE was making a statement of its importance for both Abbott and non-Abbott children.¹⁴

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Within the DECE, separate offices were initially established for preschool and K-3. Most of the responses indicated that there would be no need for such a separation if it were not for the Court requirements of the Abbott preschool decisions. "Implementing Abbott preschool was a unique situation" because of district collaborations with Head Start and community-based programs, and such a separation was necessary.¹⁵

Getting an adequate number of DECE staff has been somewhat difficult. Currently, Wolock is the Director of the Office of Preschool Education, but a director and staff for the Office of K-3 has yet to be hired. This shortage of staff becomes problematic when issues around K-3 arise, as the expertise of the current DECE staff has focused on preschool. Once staffing problems are solved, however, Davy and Jones stated that "we won't have any walls" between the two offices so that DECE has one voice in supporting a seamless PK3 system.

The restructuring also made it easier for collaboration to take place within the various DOE divisions. While communication between OECE and the Special Education Division has generally been strong, but this collaboration was an exception. When OECE was part of the Abbott Implementation Division, collaboration with other DOE divisions was frequent but not always productive.¹⁶ Part of the reason was because of its newness; preschool was an after-

thought to the K-12 Division.¹⁷ Now, the DECE is working more effectively across all department divisions who continue to have responsibility for all things related to PK3.

The best example of this new approach of positive cross-divisional collaboration is in the area of early literacy. Since the restructuring, all DOE staff members having programmatic responsibilities for early literacy have recently begun to meet. Jones stated that at the first meeting, there were DOE staff attending that she had never met before, even though early literacy is an important component of the DECE's agenda. By moving away from divisional silos, Jones is hopeful that the DOE will be moving towards a broader picture of PK3. Moreover, by effectively collaborating, DOE will be demonstrating how individual district departments should be collaborating.

ENVISIONING A PK3 CONTINUUM

From every state administrator interviewed, the overall theme of their statements was that they fully embraced the concept of a PK3 continuum.

For those currently working at the DOE, their commitment to this continuum was clear. When asked what the impetus was for the DOE restructuring, Dr.

Wolock stated, "Because it was the right thing to do. We're talking about young kids. Their needs are different than older kids. It just makes sense to put them together. I want to protect our investment in preschool. I want good learners and positive thinkers" to be the end result of a successful PK3 continuum.¹⁸

From every state administrator interviewed, the overall theme of their statements was that they fully embraced the concept of a PK3 continuum.

Moreover, the way in which the majority of administrators defined this continuum was very similar. Most defined the system as the alignment of standards, curriculum and assessment that meets the individual needs of children between the ages of 3 and 8. Jones stated that during this critical time period, "we have to acknowledge the variability in early childhood development, but we often desire having everyone at the same place at the same time. This goes against everything we know about child development." Jones stated, however, that with a PK3 system in place, she was comfortable that "they will get kids to where they have to be."¹⁹

BARRIERS TO THE BIG PICTURE

Dr. Jones also stated that while she sees alignment as the key to a PK3 continuum, the DECE is just beginning its work towards that end. While having a shared vision and commitment of state administrators may be the largest hurdle in bringing about the type of reform necessary to

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implement a PK3 system, there are certain issues that may prove to be barriers to the successful development of such a system. While some of them are fairly easy to remedy others are far more difficult. The following are some of the barriers that need to be addressed.

REGULATORY SUPPORT

An important tool in assisting the DECE to successfully implement a PK3 continuum is for adequate state regulations to exist that support that end. While previous regulations have some of the necessary elements, on the whole, they currently do not provide an appropriate framework for effective state guidance for implementing the continuum.

The most specific regulations on the PK3 continuum are found in N.J.A.C.

6A:10A, *Improving Standards-Driven Instruction and Literacy and Increasing Efficiency in Abbott School Districts*. As they currently exist, these regulations continue a disconnect between state regulatory guidance and the DECE's vision for a PK3 continuum. There are some significant omissions that exacerbate this disconnect, including:

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- Neither the definition section of N.J.A.C. 6A:10A nor within the substantive text of the regulations include definitions of words and phrases related to a PK3 system. This omission including, *early childhood education, PK3 systems, articulation, alignment, coordination and transition* has led to individual/district interpretation to the meanings of these words. Moreover, when the above words are used within the text of the regulations, they are often used interchangeably to mean the same things. By defining these words in code, their meanings would be the same for both state and district administrators alike and would provide the DECE with much-needed support in implementing its programmatic responsibility over the state's PK3 programs.²⁰

- In their current form, the regulations generally do not support the DOE restructuring that led to the DECE. There are several sections of N.J.A.C. 6A:10A that refer to some type of alignment between the educational practices in preschool and the curricular and instructional practices in kindergarten through 3rd grade. The best example of this concerns "Intensive Early Literacy Program," which is clearly defined in N.J.A.C. 6A:10A-1.2, as a program for children age three through grade three to ensure that all students read at grade level by the end of the third grade and includes a section that outlines the required components of the program.²¹ However, beyond the Intensive Early Literacy Program, when reviewing the regulations for evidence of a broader PK3 continuum, the disconnect

remains apparent. For example, while the regulations require that "the preschool program shall be well articulated with the kindergarten through grade three curriculum,"²² districts are required in their two-year report on instructional priorities to only describe their plans for articulation between their preschool programs and kindergarten. The regulations do not require districts to provide evidence that articulation is being implemented between preschool through 3rd grade.

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

In July 2004, the State Board of Education adopted a revised version of *Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations: Standards of Quality*.²³ Any school district receiving State aid to provide preschool programs is required to implement these standards for good practice. For districts not receiving State aid for preschool but that have or are affiliated with preschool programs, the standards are guidelines for good practice.

The standards are based on a strong theoretical framework for delivering high quality educational experiences to young children that emphasize both developmentally appropriate teaching practices and expected learning outcomes for preschoolers.

Unlike the preschool standards, the Core Curriculum Content Standards do not provide guidance in such areas as teaching strategies.

The level of direction outlined in the preschool standards does not currently exist in standards for grades K-3. The K-3 standards are embedded in New Jersey's Core Curriculum Content Standards, which describe what students should know and be able to do at different time periods throughout the various grades during their thirteen-year public education. The standards provide local school districts with benchmarks for student achievement in nine content areas. Unlike the preschool standards, the Core Curriculum Content Standards do not provide guidance in such areas as teaching strategies. Moreover, their content areas are clustered differently, depending on the subject. For example, while the language arts literacy benchmarks are by each grade, math and social studies are clustered by Kindergarten-2nd grade and science is clustered by either Kindergarten-4th grade or Kindergarten-2nd grade, depending on the sub-topic.

TECHNICAL SUPPORTS

While New Jersey is in the forefront for developing a PK3 continuum at the state level, it would be difficult to reach that conclusion by reviewing the various state websites. For example, the "Education" homepage of the state's main website continues to separate "Preschool" and "K-12th Grade."²⁴ The "Preschool" link includes other links such as "Early Childhood Educa-

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tion,” which does lead to the DECE homepage.²⁵ However, a web-visitor would have to know to click “Early Childhood Education” to obtain any information on New Jersey’s PK3 continuum. The “K-12th Grade” link provides no separate information on either PK3 or Kindergarten through 3rd grade.

The DOE’s website does provide an overview of the State’s PK3 initia-

tive under its “Early Childhood Education,” section which brings a web-visitor directly to the DECE’s homepage. This homepage clearly outlines the DECE’s mission by explaining why it was created, its framework, including structure, process and alignment components and its cross-departmental efforts within the DOE. However, all the homepage links, including “Research,” “Curriculum and Assessment,” “Professional Development,” “Best Practice,” “Code and Expectations,” “DECE Calendar” and “For Families,” remain preschool focused. For example, under “Professional Development,” the three links, *Early Childhood Education Workshops, 2007-2008 Professional Calendar and Master Teachers Use of the Reflective Cycle with Teachers*, only address the professional development of preschool teachers, and preschool administrative staff in Abbott districts.

THE K-12 IDEOLOGICAL DILEMMA

Ensuring the PK3 continuum “buy-in” at the district level continues to be problematic in some districts. Although more administrators are seeing the importance of preschool, significant ideological barriers often exist for those who do not possess early childhood expertise. MacInnes’ experience as Assistant Commissioner was that most educators in the Abbott districts did not accept PK3, because they did not understand the concept of the continuum nor saw its importance. The following story provided evidence to his conclusion:

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For five years as Assistant Commissioner, I emphasized early literacy. While there was enormous support for this, there was no such thing as one approach for early literacy and I found that the various approaches were district specific. For five years, I had several face to face conversations with Abbott district administrators each year. At each meeting, the first item on the agenda was always early literacy. In about 150 meetings over the five-year period, only 15 times was preschool and full-day K identified as a possible solution for improvement in the 3rd grade test scores. I would ask, “What are you going to do about your test scores?” This entrée would have provided the administra-

tors with the opportunity to say something about using preschool and K as part of the solution—but they didn’t. Few understood that such a continuum could be part of their answer.²⁶

MacInnes sites this example as the biggest cultural and intellectual obstacle to effectively implementing a PK3 continuum because most educators do not look to preschool or kindergarten as one way of solving their educational problems. MacInnes believes that many Abbott administrators see preschool programs as a responsibility grafted onto their K-12 responsibilities by the Supreme Court. “We have given the responsibility to those who don’t think it’s important. We end up with obstacles that are not surprising and not easy to knock-down. For those that do understand it, there are important implications and we can see real change. But, it’s not everyone,” said MacInnes.

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Gordon MacInnes

Whether district administrators actively reject the concept or do not understand the importance of preschool, this issue remains a significant barrier.

MacInnes also sites the continuing conflict between many K-12 administrators and the community-based programs with whom they subcontract to provide Abbott preschool programs. Many of these administrators never enthusiastically accepted this collaboration. In some districts, this tension has made the integration and alignment more difficult between those preschool programs located in the community and the public education side of early childhood education.²⁷

There are other issues that concern state administrators. Dr. Wolock acknowledged that districts are asking for implementation guidance. They recognize the importance of high quality early childhood education but do not have the expertise to implement it effectively.²⁸

THE BUREAUCRACY OF THE DOE

New Jersey’s existing state level K-12 system could prove to be a significant barrier in effectively implementing a statewide PK3 system. While administrators and staff at the DECE believe in a coherent PK3 system, the state K-12 system has had a long tradition of programmatic and fiscal functions organized in a K-12 format. To many DOE staff outside DECE, preschool is seen as a tag-on program.²⁹ The development of a PK3 continuum presents a new conceptual framework for the state which may have difficulties adapting to this change.³⁰ While critical steps have already been taken to elevate the importance of the DECE within the DOE,

old habits die hard. Broad acceptance by DOE staff of this new conceptual framework may take time.

DOE staff responsible for preschool and K-12 may view the PK3 continuum very differently. Preschool in the OECE was a new program in which the DOE leaders had a mission in mind and hired experts to support that mission. All DOE preschool staff currently acknowledge the value of preschool and the importance of a PK3 continuum. DOE staff working beyond preschool issues may have a different philosophical view of the continuum, as their expertise is embedded in the “public school” approach to education. As all PK3 program aspects are not housed within DECE, philosophical differences may present a problem.³¹

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The way in which the DOE functions may also be an obstacle to PK3 implementation. After five years as Assistant Commissioner, MacInnes acknowledged DOE’s shortcomings. “Change is not impossible, but it requires a change at DOE. The DOE has a culture that looks for answers through regulations. DOE has reduced sentences to “must” and “shall.” What happens in the classroom cannot be controlled that way. This does not mandate good pedagogy. With such a regulatory environment, it will be difficult to bring about the change needed to develop a PK3 system.”³²

COMPONENTS OF PROGRAMS REMAIN OUTSIDE DECE

While the DECE has the programmatic responsibility for all PK3 programs, not all aspects are within the Division. For example, there are components of early literacy, special education and English as a Second Language that impact children in preschool through 3rd grade but remain in other divisions of the DOE. While DOE administration wants to be more effective at taking advantage of the expertise across the division lines and has made a conscious effort towards better collaboration within the Department, it will be a challenge to avoid departmental silos that have been a problem in the past.³³

FUNDING ISSUES

While the restructuring of the DECE was a thoughtful and innovative way to promote the continuum of developmental stages in early childhood, both the amount of funding and the funding mechanisms are playing a role in hindering progress of DECE’s work. Although the DECE took on the added responsibility for K-3 programs after the restructuring, there was no redistribution of funding from other divisions within the DOE to reflect these additional responsibilities.

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LACK OF FUNDING FOR HUMAN CAPITAL

Similarly, there has not been an increase in funding to hire new staff to support DECE’s additional programmatic responsibilities for K-3. When the OECE was initially developed, the state provided funds for 20 liaisons to address solely preschool issues. There are currently 8 staff members in the DECE, whose previous responsibility was focused solely on preschool.

Since part of the success of the Abbott preschool programs can be linked with the state preschool liaisons in each district, Dr. Jones stated that she would like to continue that successful approach by hiring 8 more staff members who have experience in the early elementary years. However, there is currently no state funding for those positions. Similarly, there is a void in leadership for the grades beyond preschool as no director of K-3 has been hired due to lack of funding.

Dr. Jones stated that the PK3 system cannot be adequately implemented because of the current lack of staff. While her staff has been conceptually talking about what the program should look like, and are looking to use existing resources to begin to implement the program, right now, “they can’t do it.”³⁴ Similarly, Dr. Wolock stated that they are trying to develop a system, but little has happened. “We’re thinking about it, but we are short on staff and it stymies us.”³⁵

The link between adequate staffing at the DECE and state leadership on PK3 issues seemed apparent.

Dr. Jones indicated that they needed a director (K-3) “to go out and do this charge. They need people because it is not the kind of project that you do sitting in an office. There needs to be a conversation between the DOE and the districts but without staff it cannot be done.”³⁶ Similarly, without adequate human capital, existing staff must concentrate on monitoring and budget work and not on substantive issues.³⁷

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BUDGETARY CONTROL

Prior to the DOE restructuring, part of the reason for the success of the OECE was that it held the purse-strings for all preschool programs. While the DECE currently is responsible for preschool budgeting, it does not have control over budgeting for K-3 programs. This has become a problem since it is hard to require districts to take certain actions in regard to K-3 programs when the DECE does not control the money.³⁸

UNEQUAL FUNDING AMONGST PROGRAMS

In this school year, over \$460 million have been appro-

priated for preschool programs in the 31 Abbott districts. That level of state funding to ensure high quality programs for preschool is not available for K-3 programs. This problem has been exacerbated because Abbott districts are not permitted to spend preschool funding outside their preschool programs. Those Abbott districts that want to implement a PK3 system cannot use their preschool funding to support and strengthen their overall PK3 program. For example, while the DOE has provided some flexibility for early childhood supervisors to work with kindergarten teachers, master teachers, who work directly with classroom teachers are only permitted to work with preschool teachers.

On the other hand, some preschool administrators fear that with too much flexibility, districts administrators will “raid” the preschool dollars to use the funding elsewhere. Dr. Frede stated that she would feel better if she knew that the state funding would be used for developing PK3 systems, but she worries that many administrators do not understand the importance of early childhood and will choose, if given the option, to use the money elsewhere.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Redistribute funding from other DOE divisions to reflect the DECE’s added responsibility of PK3 programs. The conceptual framework for the DECE developed without a funding redistribution within the DOE. There are certain divisions within the DOE that are no longer responsible for issues now the responsibility of the DECE. Redistributing DOE dollars to help support the added responsibilities of DECE must take place.

2. Provide adequate state funding for new DECE staff. Without adequate funding for additional staff, the DECE’s overall mission and vision for long-term success will be hollow. The DECE will be more effective when it has adequate staff “to do the good stuff,” as Frede indicated, such as providing programmatic support to districts instead of spending the majority of staff time on monitoring and budgetary work. The DECE has the capacity to implement a coordinated PK3 system, but it cannot accomplish its goals without adequate funding to address its staffing problems.

3. Make DECE responsible for all PK3 funding. The way in which PK3 money is allocated within the DOE has marginalized the effectiveness of the DECE. One reason why the Abbott preschool programs had been so successful in the past is because the OECE controlled the funds. The current allocations continue to divorce structure and function. DOE should separate the K-3 budget from the larger K-12 budget and either include it with existing preschool funds or keep it separate (if necessary to meet the Court’s mandates for Abbott preschool) as K-3 funding. The sole responsibility of all of these funds should be in the hands of the DECE. Since there will be a logical link between pro-

The current allocations continue to divorce structure and function.

gram planning and funding, consistent PK3 decision-making can then be made, instead of continuing to separate preschool from early elementary.

4. Incorporate all PK3 standards into one set of standards. One of the pivotal components of a PK3 continuum is the alignment of standards. While the Expectation and Core Curriculum Content Standards are said to be aligned, the fact that they remain separate and that standards for K-3 look very different, make such an alignment conceptually difficult to understand. The content of the Expectation Standards should be used as the framework for developing standards that extend to K-3 programs. Only then can real standards alignment exist and effectively be used by administrators and practitioners teaching preschool through 3rd grade.

5. Make all PK3 program aspects the responsibility of DECE. In order to maximize the effectiveness of DECE, all DOE programs that impact children within the PK3 age group should be housed within the Division. This includes special education and early literacy. While collaboration within DOE appears to be greatly improved, having one division that is responsible for all aspects of the PK3 continuum will only strengthen the continuity and alignment of programs.

6. Develop education guidelines/regulations that provide support to a state PK3 system that includes all school districts. The current regulations on standards driven instruction do not support the PK3 continuum. While the DECE is still in its infancy, new regulations must provide the guidance and support for districts to effectively implement the PK3 continuum. Moreover, such administrative guidance should include all districts, not just Abbott districts.

7. Update both the State and DOE websites to showcase PK3 initiative.

The current State website needs to be updated to reflect the work being done by the DECE. New Jersey’s PK3 initiative is a significant educational step for young children between the ages of 3 and 8, and should be highlighted and publicized at every opportunity to ensure better public awareness. For the State’s website, it is easy enough to remedy this problem. For the DOE website, the problem is a bit more difficult. While the DECE homepage provides a sound overview of its mission, it is clear that DECE’s is not providing substantive supports beyond preschool. This can easily be explained

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as the DECE is still in its infancy and does not yet have the staff to provide adequate K-3 supports. The problem is however, that to the public, the DECE staff are now the K-3 experts. With the hiring of additional staff with experience in K-3 issues, the types of rich support currently provided to preschool teachers will also be available for kindergarten and early elementary teachers.

CONCLUSION

From recent steps taken by New Jersey's Department of Education, it is clear that both its administrators and staff have embraced the vision of implementing a PK3 continuum as the best way of sustaining the achievements made from its state-supported preschool programs. Although the DOE's Division of Early Childhood Education is brand new, initial departmental changes represent a clear, conceptual vision of an aligned and coordinated system for early learning. Knowledgeable and dedicated administrators and staff are poised to make this concept a reality in New Jersey.

While the will is there, critical pieces remain out of reach. Issues such as inadequate regulations, lack of standards alignment, department bureaucracy and the continued separation of preschool from K-12 continue to be barriers towards a successful PK3 Division. The biggest challenge however, is the lack of funding for staff needed to effectively implement a PK3 continuum. As Gordon MacInnes stated in his interview, "While it is easy to talk about and describe a PK3 continuum, it is very hard work. Eight people can do a lot, but they can't do it everywhere."

*"While it is easy to talk about and describe a PK3 continuum, it is very hard work."
Gordon MacInnes*

Since 1998, New Jersey has made a tremendous commitment to preschool, both in its quality standards and its financial investment in quality programs. It is only logical to want to ensure that our children's next years of learning are aligned with their preschool experiences. The DOE has attempted to embrace this bigger picture by restructuring the DECE to include programs from PK through 3rd grade. This, however, is only the first big step. Without necessary supports and the human capital at the state level to provide districts with leadership and guidance on how to effectively do this "hard work," we will be diluting the potency of our preschool investment.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Brown, B., and Bogard, K. (2007). Pre-Kindergarten to 3rd Grade (PK-3) School-Based Resources and Third Grade Outcomes. Child Trends, Publication #2007-27, 1.

² U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Programs (NAEP), 2007, Reading and Mathematics Assessments, New Jersey Grade 4 Public Schools.

³ Press Release, New Jersey Department of Education. September 25, 2007. New Jersey Fourth-Graders Among Top Readers in the Nation. <http://www.state.nj.us/education/news/2007/0925naep.htm>

⁴ Abbott v. Burke, 153 N.J. 480 (1998) Abbott V.

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