



Association for Children
of New Jersey

Learning from the Experts:

New Jersey Educators Talk About Implementing a Mixed Delivery Preschool Program

By Laura Fasbach Donovan

Preschoolers will be among the biggest beneficiaries of New Jersey's new school funding formula, which calls for expanding high-quality education for thousands of 3- and 4-year-olds throughout the state within the next five years. Under new legislation passed earlier this year, school districts will be required to deliver full-day preschool programs to eligible children in some capacity - whether it's district-wide or on a per pupil basis. For lawmakers, the goal is to serve an additional 30,000 children by September 2013, bringing New Jersey's state-supported preschool population up to more than 70,000. For educators, the challenge will be making it happen.

Fortunately for school administrators who are just beginning to tackle this remarkable task, the state already has a blueprint they can turn to for guidance: the Abbott preschool programs. Since 1998, the state's poorest school districts have been required to provide high-quality preschool programs to all 3- and 4- year olds as part of a series of landmark decisions in the New Jersey Supreme Court case, *Abbott v. Burke*. The historic rulings set out to create parity between the state's wealthy suburban districts and their low-income counterparts. Along the way, a nationally-recognized model for delivering high-quality education for preschoolers was born, including small class size, certified classroom teachers and the

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implementation of a research-based curriculum. To meet the demanding requirements of delivering preschool programs to their students, many of the 31 Abbott districts adopted a mixed delivery system - a combination of district classrooms and/or partnerships with community providers and Head Start. As hundreds of school districts begin working toward New Jersey's latest preschool expansion goals, lessons learned from building the Abbott preschool system could very well serve as an invaluable resource.

"Hopefully we can save them some of the pain that happens along the way," said Kathleen Priestley, Supervisor of Early Childhood Education for Orange Public Schools, which serves 760 preschoolers in both district classrooms and community-based centers. "When we first started everybody set up their own plan. Probably what's going to be easier now is there's a model."

Getting Started

Whether it's organizing an informal meeting with administrators from the Abbott district next door or attending a Preschool Expansion seminar with the state Department of Education, early childhood educators interviewed for this policy brief recommend that school administrators become as informed as possible about what a successful preschool program looks like. For starters, it may not even be housed in a district school building. The task of finding new classrooms for future preschoolers may seem daunting to many educators around the state who are already grappling with space constraints for existing student populations and programs. The good news is there are options. Priestley suggests that administrators first do a needs assessment of their districts to measure how many children they will be required to serve, what school facilities are available - if any - and what resources the community has to offer such as licensed day care centers or a local Head Start program. Once those providers are identified, Priestley recommends that school district officials visit those centers and meet with their directors to see if collaboration is a possibility. "It's all about

Preschoolers eating a nutritious lunch at Egenolf Early Childhood Center in Elizabeth.



Photo by Danielle Richards of Jersey Girl Stock Images

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relationships and making sure both sides understand they have something to offer,” Priestley said.

When Cliffside Park received state funding to build its preschool program eight years ago, Principal Janet Merrill of the Cliffside Park Early Learning Center said she had so many questions about where to begin. Although Cliffside Park is not an Abbott District, it received Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA), a funding program set up by the state to support school districts with highly-concentrated pockets of poverty within the community. This aid has been used in Cliffside Park and other ECPA districts to build preschool programs. Merrill said she can empathize with the districts now looking to create their own preschool program having gone through the experience. “I did a lot of visiting,” said Merrill, who observed programs in Hackensack, North Arlington and Emerson. “I went in with my list of questions. It made my job so much easier.”

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Finding a Champion

All of the educators interviewed for this policy brief said superintendent buy-in is crucial for any preschool program’s success. But that buy-in can’t be superficial, cautions Sally Millaway, Principal of the Gables School in Neptune. “To get people to back and support it really starts with your superintendent,” Millaway said. “You want them to do it because they believe in it, not because this is just the latest mandate.” Millaway stressed the importance of showing administrators research and studies that show long-term results. “As you’re talking to superintendents, how do you justify offering 3- and 4-year-olds programs rather than offering that AP class at the high school or that extra athletic program?” Millaway said. “You don’t see the results over night.”

To be sure, obtaining buy-in can sometimes be a challenging task. Lorraine Cooke, Executive Director of the Egenolf Early Childhood Center in Elizabeth recalled how she and other private providers had to win over district officials when Abbott first

brought them together a decade ago. “The district considered us non-professional babysitters. They did not understand how structured early childhood education is and that everything is perfectly choreographed so children ask questions and begin to learn,” Cooke said. Over time the district began to come around, but Cooke said it took a lot of “strong marketing” in which she and other providers would distribute research and data to support preschool’s benefits. While more and more educators understand the importance of preschool education, Cooke also says data is still a necessary tool to obtain the buy-in of some school administrators. Fortunately the evidence of preschool’s impact on young children is growing. A recent study found that students who attended Abbott preschool programs demonstrated improvement in language, literacy and math skills at least through the end of kindergarten. The same study also found that Abbott’s mixed delivery system of public preschool, community-based and Head Start classrooms scored virtually the same across almost all measures of quality teaching practices. Frede, Jung and Barnett, “The Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study,” The National Institute for Early Education Research (Interim Report June 2007)

But should school administrators get frustrated or overwhelmed in the early stages of planning, educators who’ve been there say staying focused on what’s important can help them get back on track. “It’s all about partnering and doing what’s best for the kids,” Cooke said. To help ensure that goal becomes a reality, educators recommend that districts create an Early Childhood Supervisor position if they don’t already have one to oversee the preschool program. This person should ideally be well-versed in early childhood curricula while also having the business savvy to help work with private providers.

Building Successful Partnerships

In the City of Passaic’s school district there are more than 1,800 3- and 4-year-olds attending preschool. Some of these youngsters attend classes within the district’s elementary schools while others are dropped off every morning at a local Head Start program or private early childhood centers. Each setting is different, but one thing is consistent according to Dr. Colleen La Rocca Malleo, the district’s Supervisor of Early Childhood. “All

In developing a checklist, Malleo suggested administrators turn to other districts for help as well as the Department of Education’s Early Childhood web site, which offers guidelines on best practices for preschools.

of our classrooms are the same no matter where you go,” she said regarding the high quality of the programs found in each classroom whether in-district or off-site. Malleo said that monthly meetings between district principals and center directors are critical in maintaining standards and communication. The sessions include monthly walkthroughs of both district preschool classrooms and private provider sites so that educators on both sides can observe best practices and identify areas that need improvement. The district developed its own Best Practices checklist to monitor everything from whether books are in a prominent place in the classroom to whether teachers are interacting with children enough. In developing a checklist, Malleo suggested administrators turn to other districts for help as well as the Department of Education’s Early Childhood web site, which offers guidelines on best practices for preschools.

Nancy Stirling, Early Childhood Supervisor for the Asbury Park School District, said that public school educators sometimes mistakenly overlook one important fact about private providers. “I think people forget that in the private sector they’ve been doing preschool way longer than the state of New Jersey has been doing it,” Stirling said. “If you have committed teachers, strong supports in place, on-going communication and you mix all of this together you are going to reach quality.” Asbury Park currently has no in-district preschool classes and only uses private providers to serve its 520 preschoolers. The children attend classes at six separate provider sites, including a Head Start program, located within the community. Stirling said one key to the program’s success has been that district teachers and supervisors are in constant communication with the private providers, visiting the sites on a daily basis to ensure the preschool teachers remain connected with the school district. Stirling also said respect for the private provider is another essential ingredient in building a strong partnership. “Districts shouldn’t go into this and say (to the private provider) if you contract with us you lose your identity,” Stirling said. “We want them to work within the guidelines, but we don’t want them to lose who they are.”

Hoboken also uses private providers in offering preschool to its 422 youngsters, but the model is slightly different than other mixed delivery systems. Instead of sending children to private providers housed off-site, all of the providers actually rent classroom space within district schools. Jessica Peters, Supervisor of Early Childhood for Hoboken Public Schools, said in any mixed delivery system districts have to get used to giving up some control. “If they don’t feel like they have to do it all themselves it’s a relief,” Peters

said, adding that there are a lot of advantages for districts that work with private providers to develop a preschool program. Many centers already have a strong reputation in the community as well as an established student population, which can ease the burden on those districts that are developing programs from scratch. To be sure, there's a learning

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curve that school administrators and private providers both face in moving to a mixed delivery system. "I think the hardest part is it's a business world approach that school districts aren't used to," Peters said. Once these partnerships are established school administrators must hold private providers accountable for making sure curriculum is being followed to documenting whether money is being spent appropriately. On the other side, private providers who are used to running a business may have to get used to working through bureaucracy when partnering with school districts.

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Dr. Lillian Ramos, who runs Passaic's Head Start, said private providers may have to learn better fiscal management when it comes to using state dollars because of that accountability piece. "You have to make sure you do the paperwork," Ramos said. "It's a whole different ball game. These are state dollars." Providers may find too that actually getting their funding from school districts every month is a struggle, Ramos added. "A provider can't float \$50,000 to \$100,000 a month for programs and teacher salaries without revenue coming in," Ramos said. "Providers need to know they are going to get the money. Some districts are better than others." Ramos said another difficult challenge for some providers will be getting used to the constant changes that go hand-in-hand with public education, including curricula that changes from year to year or the introduction of new standards. "Every year there's been new changes and those changes come through trial and error," Ramos said. "We think we get it and then there's a new change. I don't know if it's ever going to stop because it's done to improve education."

The Department of Education has established five different preschool curricula that school districts can choose from when building their programs. Dr. Ellen Wolock, Director of DOE's Office of Preschool Education, acknowledges that by the time the expansion happens it's not guaranteed the same five will be used by the state. "We're trying to find something that is tried and true rather than piecemeal," Wolock said. Having said that, Wolock said DOE and school districts are at an advantage in New Jersey's latest preschool expansion efforts because they have time on their side. "This is different than the Abbott roll-out," Wolock said. "This will happen much more gradually to get to the 90 percent participation required. It's going to be much easier for us to help them do this in a high-quality manner." Under the legislation, only districts that already provide preschool, including ECPA districts, can opt to expand their programs as early as the 2008-2009 school year. For districts that do not provide preschool, the 2008-2009 school year will be a preschool planning year.

The Red Bank School District, which receives ECPA funding, is now beginning to explore how it will expand its preschool program to include all 3- and 4-year-olds. Red Bank Superintendent Laura Morana said she will begin reaching out to private providers because her district does not have the facilities space to accommodate additional pre-

Best Practices Checklist: Passaic City School District

The City of Passaic's school district serves more than 1,800 3- and 4-year-olds in a mix of settings from in-district classrooms to Head Start and private preschools. To ensure that high-quality programs are delivered to all of their students regardless of where their classrooms are housed, district educators visit all of the sites on a regular basis. To help maintain the district's standards Master Teacher Colleen Ortega created a Best Practices checklist that administrators and teachers can use as a reference when they conduct walkthroughs of each classroom.

Colleen La Rocca Malleo, Early Childhood Supervisor for Passaic City Schools, said frequently visiting each classroom is critical to the preschool program's success. Having a checklist on these visits makes it easier for educators to recognize what's working and what might need improvement, Malleo says. After the visits, the teachers come out and discuss what they saw. The process ends with the visiting educators completing a Classroom Visitation Feedback form, which can include a range of observations from whether there are enough books throughout the classroom to whether adults are interacting enough with the children. "That has sparked growth in the classrooms," Malleo says.

As school districts throughout New Jersey begin to build preschool programs, Malleo recommended that administrators visit other districts for guidance and share ideas and best practices. The following is a sample of Passaic City's checklist for conducting classroom visits:

Language Interaction

- Staff often link children's spoken communication with written language. This is evident on children's work, classroom displays and through planning activities.
- Individualized conversations between staff and children.
- Staff expands on ideas presented by the children.

Reading/Literacy

- Sound Map is used to promote phonemic awareness & writing.
- Staff read formally and informally to the children daily.

Activities

- Many activities are done in small groups.
- Deliberate planned self-regulation activities occur daily.

- One planned music activity daily. Various types of music should be used. Instruments with props should be accessible to the children for at least 45 minutes daily as a free choice activity.

Meals

- Children and staff wash hands prior to meals, after touching a dirty surface, upon re-entering the room from outdoor play, blowing their nose, etc.
- Meals are served "buffet style" or "family style" and children "serve" themselves.

Procedures

- Smocks should be used for messy tasks such as water and sand table and art projects.
- Children wash their hands before and after water and sand play.
- Staff explains a safety measure daily.

Source: *A Day in a Passaic Preschool Classroom, created by Master Teacher Colleen Ortega*

school classrooms. Currently the district uses in-district classrooms as well as Head Start and a local YMCA to provide preschool to its 4-year-olds. Because she has a strong early childhood education background, Morana doesn't need to be convinced of preschool's benefits. But she knows people in the community might. "We have to dispel the fears," Morana said. On the positive side, Morana said there are so many mandates from the state that districts must fulfill that are not funded, but districts will receive funding for preschool expansion. "That should ease some anxiety," Morana said. "Not only do we have to do this, but having the funding might make it an easier pill to swallow."

Wolock, of the DOE, urged administrators to attend one of the several Preschool Expansion seminars DOE is hosting around the state. The Department also plans to hold meetings with county superintendents as well as child care agencies. The newly created Division of Early Childhood Education also has a wealth of information on its web site, including links to best practices, standards as well as family and community outreach.

Gaining Community Support

One of the first steps Janet Merrill of Cliffside Park took to build community support was establishing an Early Childhood Advisory Committee. Members include representatives from all areas of the community, including the Chamber of Commerce and church groups as well as local librarians and

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a school nurse. The goal of the committee was to ensure the entire borough was on board before the school district expanded its preschool program. "The community has to embrace it," Merrill said, adding that local businesses help distribute literature about the program to prospective families in the community, including registration forms. Merrill acknowledged that there are always going to be residents who object to the school district's efforts to expand or create a preschool program. "I've always said, no one likes change but change is progress," Merrill said. Some senior citizens, for example, may complain that their taxes will go up and that the programs aren't necessary because they perceive it to be babysitting. Merrill said the best way to combat that is to constantly promote your program from holding Open Houses for the community to submitting story ideas to the local newspaper.

In Neptune, Principal Sally Millaway of the Gables School said her district won over some potential naysayers by teaming up with a local senior center to create Breakfast Buddies. Through this program, senior citizens come into preschool classes and assist serving breakfast to the children. "They couldn't believe the things the kids were doing," Millaway said. "That helps at budget time."

Conclusion

With the state's latest preschool expansion initiative, New Jersey's public schools have an incredible opportunity to help reach thousands of additional young children who will ultimately reap the educational rewards of a high-quality preschool program for years to come. In those districts that do not already provide preschool, administrators will themselves have to become students as they learn creative ways to successfully deliver early childhood education for 3- and 4-year-olds. While there will be challenges, facility constraints and faculty size don't have to limit how well a district delivers preschool to its youngest students. Working with private providers can be a rewarding experience for districts, teachers and the children and families they serve. While the process of building or expanding a high-quality preschool program may seem daunting at first, educators must remember to reach out to those districts that have already paved the way. There are many resources and options available to accomplish New Jersey's preschool goals.

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