



Association for Children  
of New Jersey

# Abbott Preschool: 10 Years Later

## An Added Bonus: The Educational Success Story of New Jersey's Preschool Teachers

By Laura Fasbach Donovan

**When New Jersey set out to level the educational playing field between the state's poorest and wealthiest school districts a decade ago, one of the mission's most important components was ensuring teacher quality met the same high standards regardless of zip code. Nowhere was teacher quality more critical perhaps than in the preschool classroom, which has the potential to positively shape a child's educational experience for years to come. In fact, research shows, a teacher's own education and training in early childhood education is directly linked to the outcomes of their students' learning and development.<sup>1</sup>**

Fortunately the New Jersey State Supreme Court got it right in 1998 when it recognized preschool's importance as part of a series of landmark decisions in the case, *Abbott v.*

Burke.<sup>2</sup> The historic rulings established the state's now 31 Abbott school districts, including the creation of a high-quality preschool program for thousands of three- and four-year-olds from low-income communities. Hallmarks of the preschool program, which is now nationally-recognized, include small class size and a research-based curriculum. But many educators and child advocates credit the well-trained, qualified teachers throughout these preschool classrooms for much of the program's success.

"The quality of Abbott preschools has gone up dramatically from where they were to achieving over fives on the ECERS," said Dr. Holly Seplocha, coordinator of the P-3 certification program at William Paterson University, referring to the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, which measures preschool practices, on a scale from 1 to 7. "They were nowhere near that when they began. Now teachers are trained so they know how to teach, they know developmentally appropriate practices. It's not simply a crafts project or a babysitting experience."

### A Challenging Beginning

Getting there certainly wasn't easy. Consider at the onset of Abbott that New Jersey didn't even offer teachers certification in early child-

hood education while some 40 percent of preschool teachers outside the public schools had yet to earn their Bachelor's degrees. To guarantee that preschool programs were up and running in the Abbott districts quickly after the state Supreme Court made its decision, the court recommended that public school districts partner with existing community-based preschool programs, Head Start, and day care centers. Although the court required that all preschool classrooms in the Abbott system be run by well-trained and qualified teachers, it soon became clear that many of the teachers in these centers did not have the same qualifications as those in the public schools. Without a clear standard, preschool education in the Abbott districts risked becoming a two-tiered system depending on whether children attended district classrooms or off-site centers. To alleviate this concern, the court amended its decision in 2000 and required that all teachers working within the Abbott preschool program be required to return to school and obtain their Bachelor's degree and obtain New Jersey's newly-created P-3 certification regardless of where their classroom was located. For teachers who were hired at private centers prior to 1999, the deadline to earn a degree and certification under the new requirements was 2004.<sup>3</sup> Exacerbating matters was the fact that many Abbott preschool teachers, like the children they served, were from low-income households and paying for college tuition on a preschool teacher's salary simply wasn't an option.

With the clock ticking, many officials became concerned that without financial assistance available hundreds of preschool teachers would be unable to meet the requirements, ultimately threatening Abbott's success. A committee of representatives from various government agencies, including Department of Education (DOE) and Department of Human Services (DHS), recognized the concerns the new standards were raising and took action to help afford preschool teachers the opportunity to enhance their own education and return to school. Enter the New Jersey Early Childhood Scholarship Program avail-



Photo by Danielle Richards of Jersey Girl Stock Images

able only to those preschool teachers and staff working in the Abbott school districts.

Unlike many forms of financial aid available to non-Abbott teachers, the scholarship was unique in that it paid tuition directly to colleges and universities without requiring its recipients to put the money up front and wait for tuition reimbursement.

“DHS in particular was concerned that the teacher credential requirements for Abbott would serve as a barrier to collaboration for many of the community-based child care centers,” said Beverly Wellons, assistant director of Child Care Operations at DHS, Division of Family Development, which oversees the scholarship program.

The funding for the scholarship program comes from the federal Child Care Development Fund. These funds are specifically dedicated to enhance the quality of child care services for children ages birth to 13 years. Between 2000 and December 2007, the most recent figures indicate that, \$21.7 million in scholarship money was awarded to more than 6,600 preschool teachers, according to figures from Professional Impact New Jersey.

“The overall goal was to increase the amount of education the teachers were getting,” said Mary Manning-Falzarano, Clearinghouse Manager for Professional Impact New Jersey, the non-profit agency that administers the scholarship program for DHS. “The scholarship certainly enabled them to do that with less or no financial burden at all.”

Without the scholarship many teachers who were once making as little as \$8 an hour say they wouldn't have been able to pursue higher education or certification because of the cost. Preschool administrators contend the scholarship has been invaluable to improving the

quality of early childhood education not only because teachers are better prepared, but also because it has kept talented teachers from leaving the classroom in pursuit of higher-paying jobs.

## A life-changing opportunity

Amy Pacentrilli, a preschool teacher at AtlantiCare Kids in Pleasantville, said receiving a scholarship to return to school gave her the motivation she needed to finish. Pacentrilli, who had earned her Associate's Degree in Early Childhood Education from the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey in 1996, had been working for AtlantiCare Kids for 10 years when her director, Ronni Lerner, encouraged her to move into one of the center's Abbott classrooms on the condition that she return to school and earn her Bachelor's degree and P-3 certification.

“I couldn't be where I am without the scholarship,” said Pacentrilli, a mother of two who juggled work, family and college classes for two years so she could earn her Bachelor's degree from Montclair State University last December. “It was hard, but I couldn't pass up that it was free.” The hard work was worth it for Pacentrilli, who said she is a better teacher now because she returned to school. She credited her classes with allowing her to gain a fresh perspective in the classroom. “The P-3 certification helps you look at them as a whole and everything they are going through,” she said of her students, many of whom face socioeconomic hurdles as well as challenges because they are learning English as a second language. Although she had been teaching preschool for 10 years before returning to school, Pacentrilli said parents now regard her with more esteem because of her credentials. “Before they looked at you like ‘you're just a preschool teacher,’” she said. “Now even the parents treat you with a little more respect because they don't consider you a preschool teacher, they consider you a Pleasantville school district teacher.”

Rebeca Marino was working in field services for Airborne Express when she decided in 2001 to follow her calling to work with preschoolers. That's when she took a teaching job at the Egenolf Early Childhood Center in Elizabeth. Although Marino had earned her Bachelor's degree in English and journalism from Rutgers University in 1999, she needed to earn her P-3 certification in order to continue on her new career path. But like most preschool teachers, her starting salary made it difficult, if not prohibitive, to go back to school. “I was able to complete everything a lot faster because of the scholarship,” said Marino, who completed her certification in two years from Kean University. “If I had to pay for it on my own it would have taken a lot longer.” Earning the scholarship not only allowed Marino to grow as a teacher, but it

helped broaden her career opportunities. “It's really changed my life because I've been here for seven years and I've been promoted,” said Marino, who became program director at Egenolf a year and a half ago. In her latest role as administrator Marino sees how the scholarship has changed other teachers' lives and had a positive impact on the center as a whole. “If you can do something you not only enjoy, but you can feed your family and take care of your kids it makes it a lot easier day to day,” she said. “Most of the people here, including myself, don't want to leave.”

## Building preschools and their communities

In addition to improving the lives of the children they teach, preschool teachers in community-based centers who receive additional education and certification have the opportunity to improve their own lives. By becoming certified, preschool teachers are eligible for higher salaries that are on par with the public school districts their centers contract with. Consequently one unintended byproduct of the Abbott system has been the positive impact it has had on the workforce of local communities. “The biggest part was teachers were making comparable money so they didn't have to leave what they enjoyed doing to go somewhere else and make the kind of money they needed,” said Beverly Lynn, former director of the Newark Preschool Council, the state's largest provider of Abbott preschool services.

The scholarship program, its supporters say, has played a huge role in helping to advance the lives of teachers, which helps build stronger communities. “We've been able to get people to places they never thought they'd be,” said Jacqueline Jones, assistant commissioner for the DOE's Division of Early Childhood Education. “With the scholarship program we've been able to move people out of poverty in some places. If you have a family of four and one of those parents is now certified, it can really increase a family's income and move them in new ways.”

For Jevon Dunmore, a husband and father of three children, the scholarship opened a new door after a back injury ended his career as an Emergency Medicine Technician. Dunmore started helping out in the summer program at the Egenolf Center where his wife worked. After a successful month on the job the director approached Dunmore about staying on at the center while returning back to college to earn his preschool credentials. The road to earning his certification has been long with Dunmore first having to complete remedial classes. Since August 2005, Dunmore has been working toward his Bachelor's degree and should be done in the next two years. The scholarship has paid for his education. “My way of living is improving because I'm back in school,” said Dunmore.

## New Jersey Early Childhood Scholarship

The New Jersey Early Childhood Scholarship is available to head teachers, group teachers and assistant teachers of licensed child care centers under contract with public schools in Abbott Districts or Center Based Child-care who wish to obtain a:

- CDA credential
- CCP credential
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Early Childhood teacher certification.

Participants must work a minimum of 30 hours per week as a head teacher, group teacher, or assistant teacher, maintain grades of B or higher with a 2.75 GPA, and remain employed in the same center for the duration of coursework and one year following completion.

Source: Professional Impact NJ

“It’s given me a little more stability in my life as far as waking up, knowing I have a job and benefits. I don’t take it for granted. It’s not just my job, it’s my livelihood.”

## Great teachers become ‘phenomenal teachers’

To be sure, the state’s new requirements for preschool teachers at the onset of Abbott was the source of tension at many community-based centers where hundreds of teachers had taught children long before the Abbott districts were created. Even with scholarship dollars available many teachers did not want to return to school. Some teachers had no interest in going to college whether it was because they were nearing retirement or they simply didn’t want to juggle work and family obligations with college coursework. Other teachers felt slighted that their real-life experience working with preschoolers was suddenly considered not good enough by the state. Even some preschool directors felt sending their experienced teachers back to school was not worth the time and effort, including rearranging work schedules and finding substitutes to fill in for those teachers attending classes of their own.

“Many directors think they have great teachers who don’t need to get their degrees,” said Lorraine Cooke, executive director of the Egenolf Early Childhood Center. “But those great teachers who go on to get their degrees become phenomenal teachers.” Cooke says the scholarship program was a huge incentive in encouraging teachers to go back to school during the early stages of Abbott. Without it, she believes many talented teachers would have left the profession out of frustration. Fortunately at AtlantiCare Kids in Atlantic County, nine out of 11 teachers took advantage of the scholarship program to go back to college and become certified. “It really was a benefit for people who needed to go back to school,” said Ronni Lerner, AtlantiCare’s Early Childhood Administrator, adding that children and their parents were the primary beneficiaries. “Everyone has a stake in this.” The state’s requirements have raised the bar for preschool teachers and Lerner has watched this first hand at her own centers where certified teachers have brought their expertise and training into the classroom. “It has taken our field of early childhood to the next level,” she said.

## From ‘babysitter’ to professional

There has long been a public misperception that a preschool teacher is more caregiver than educator. In creating the P-3 certification, educators say New Jersey is helping to not only train preschool teachers but to raise their public profile. “The whole emphasis is trying to professionalize the field and convey-

ing to those people that teachers are professionals, they are not just babysitters,” said Pat Mennuti, executive director of Community Coordinated Child Care of Union County. Fortunately there is data to show preschool’s positive impact on young children. 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.<sup>4</sup> If certification is raising the quality of teachers in the preschool classroom then those teachers have helped to raise the

quality of early childhood centers throughout the Abbott program. At the Millhill Child and Family Development Corp. in Trenton, executive director Steven Rosen has seen the school transform since the school became part of the Abbott system and teachers in the program obtained their certifications in part through the scholarship program. In 2003, the center earned accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children, which maintains the highest standards for preschools in the country. “We would not be accredited without certified teachers,” Rosen

## Lessons Learned: Making it Through the Growing Pains

Early childhood centers contracted with Abbott school districts had their work cut out for them when the New Jersey State Supreme Court in 1999 required that all preschool teachers must hold both a Bachelor’s degree and a P-3 certification. The tough, new standards at the time were to ensure that all three- and four-year-olds within the Abbott system had access to the same high-quality education whether they attended a district classroom or a community-based program. The goal was clear-cut, but achieving it presented some of the toughest challenges to community-based directors who were forced to make difficult decisions and painful choices along the way.

As New Jersey looks to expand its nationally-recognized preschool program beyond the original Abbott school districts into hundreds of others around the state, many of the challenges that preschool directors faced a decade ago could come up again when a new group of community-based centers partner with public schools to deliver high-quality preschool programs. Fortunately, these centers can learn lessons from those that have gone through the process and come out successful.

“They’ve learned from almost 10 years of doing it,” said Pat Mennuti, Executive Director, Community Coordinated Child Care of Union County, a resource center that provides support for preschools and families. “I would say it will entail some transition unless they work with experienced centers.”

The state’s new requirements for preschool teachers at the onset of Abbott was the source of tension at many community-based centers where hundreds of teachers had taught children long before the Abbott preschool program was created. Even with scholarship dollars available many teachers did not want to return to school. Some teachers had no interest in going to college whether it was because they were nearing retirement or they simply didn’t want to juggle work and family obligations with college coursework. Other teachers felt slighted that their real-life experience working with preschoolers was suddenly considered not good enough by the state.

Some predict that a new crop of community-based centers could go through the same growing pains if a majority of their teachers

must go back to school to earn degrees and become certified. That is likely to happen considering that teachers in private centers are not required to have college degrees or be certified by the state, under state law.

Beverly Lynn was running the Newark Preschool Council, the largest Abbott preschool provider in the state, when in 2004 she was forced to demote or fire some 30 preschool teachers who did not meet the state’s deadline to earn their degrees and certification.

Acknowledging the experience was rough, Lynn advised other directors to learn from her experience. “They need to engage their staff right away and let them know what the expectations will be,” Lynn said regarding any deadlines the state might impose for teachers to become qualified.

Ronni Lerner, Early Childhood Administrator for AtlantiCare Kids in Pleasantville and Atlantic City, said that both community-based directors and school districts need to be patient as they enter into partnerships that might require many preschool teachers to go back to school. “My advice is to be open and to understand this is a change not only for the preschool, but this is a change for school districts,” Lerner said. “It’s a lot of growing pains, but it’s for the benefit for children, which is why we are all here.”

Lorraine Cooke, Executive Director, Egenolf Early Childhood Center in Elizabeth said her advice to community-based directors is to be sensitive to the dual role their teachers may have to take on if they return to school and become students themselves. Speaking from experience, Cooke said it is challenging for directors to have to carve out time for teachers to attend college classes. Although many college classes are offered in the evenings and on weekends, Cooke found herself personally filling in for teachers from time to time while some of her teachers attended classes during the school day. She also had to juggle work schedules around teachers’ college schedules, including making sure she had substitutes on hand to help out. It was challenging, but Cooke said she’s now a convert to requiring the extra training for preschool teachers. “We all think we have great teachers, but helping them become even better by getting their degree is priceless.”

said. “There would be no way to reach that higher level of quality that is required.”

## Scholarship’s future unknown

Under legislation passed earlier this year New Jersey has begun the process of expanding its preschool program beyond the original Abbott districts to hundreds of new school districts over the next six years.<sup>5</sup> Yet as these expansion goals take shape, it is uncertain whether community provider teachers in expansion districts who need to return to college will have access to the scholarship dollars. At stake is the strong educational foundation school districts are expected to provide for an additional 30,000 preschoolers by September 2013 under the state’s preschool mandate.

As hundreds of school districts develop plans to offer their own preschool programs in the next few years, many believe expanding the scholarship beyond the Abbott districts will be a valuable tool in those programs’ success.

“We certainly think the scholarship program is an important part of expansion,” said Jones, the assistant commissioner from the DOE. “We’re not expanding for the sake of expanding. We’re expanding because we believe we can expand a high-quality program and that means having the same high-quality teachers.”

School districts planning to create preschool programs in the coming years could face some of the same hurdles that Abbott districts faced 10 years ago. For starters, the expansion districts like the Abbott districts are being encouraged to use a mixed-delivery system, which entails contracting with community-based centers. Because those centers are not yet affiliated with public school districts many of the teachers they employ do not have their Bachelor’s

degree or certification. Lerner, the early childhood administrator for AtlantiCare Kids, says not expanding the scholarship program to expansion districts will hurt centers with teachers who can’t afford to go back to school. Ultimately, it could force center directors to make some tough choices such as whether to layoff or demote talented staff members, she added.

“That wouldn’t benefit anybody,” Lerner said. Adriana Kuhn of Hudson County Community College believes the scholarship program could become even more crucial to ensuring experienced preschool teachers at community-based centers return to school. She explained that preschool teachers who live and work in Abbott school districts are often eligible for additional financial aid packages on top of the scholarship program because of their socioeconomic background. But Kuhn cautions that preschool teachers in expansion districts may come from households that earn too much to receive financial aid, but still not enough to finance college. “The scholarship will become even more important in those targeted school districts that are not the lowest income, but the next tier,” said Kuhn, who coordinates her school’s teacher education program.

At Montclair State University about 70 new students begin the alternate route program in early childhood education each year. Over the past decade, Liz Kendall, the program’s coordinator, has seen a profile of the typical student emerge: adults with families at home who are returning to school to earn their P-3 certification while holding teaching jobs at preschools throughout the state. “The goal of this (alternate route) program is to assist people in getting what they need in order to go where they want to go,” she says. “We have a lot of people going through the program who would not be

able to do this if they did not have the scholarship money.” Kendall doesn’t like to think about what will happen if the state decides against expanding the scholarship program into expansion districts. If the money doesn’t come through, Kendall said facing preschool teachers from expansion districts looking to fulfill the state’s requirements will be difficult. “How am I supposed to say to these teachers, ‘yeah, you need your certification but no one is going to help you pay for it,’” she says. “If we have really well-supported teachers who are excited about teaching then we are going to have children who are excited about learning and none of that would happen if you had teachers paying for their education entirely on their own.”

## Conclusion

The Abbott preschool program has been one of New Jersey’s biggest success stories with the Early Childhood Scholarship Program playing a vital role. As the Garden State moves to continue this success into hundreds of additional public school districts over the next five years, thousands of young children stand to reap the educational rewards for decades to come. But high-quality preschool programs can only become a reality if high-quality teachers are in the classroom. If New Jersey stands by its pledge to ensure preschool teachers are well-qualified, highly-trained professionals then the state must stand by its teachers to help them reach their fullest potential. By providing support and incentives such as the Early Childhood Scholarship Program, New Jersey will not only help teachers grow, it will help teachers grow young minds.

<sup>1</sup> W. Steven Barnett, (2003a). Better Teachers, Better Preschools: Student Achievement Linked to Teacher Qualifications. Preschool Policy Matters (Issue 2). New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

<sup>2</sup> Abbott v. Burke, 153 N.J. 480 (1998) (*Abbott V*)

<sup>3</sup> Abbott v. Burke, 163 N.J. 95 (2000) (*Abbott VI*)

<sup>4</sup> Frede, E., Jung, K., Barnett W.S., Lamy C., & Figueras, A. (2007) The Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Study (APPLES) Interim Report. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research and The College of New Jersey.

<sup>5</sup> N.J.S.A. P.L. 2007, c. 260.

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