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## Preschool Expansion Update: Despite Limited Funding, Still Moving Forward

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In 1998, the New Jersey Supreme Court, in one of its *Abbott v. Burke* decisions, mandated that the state fund high-quality preschool in New Jersey's poorest school districts. For ten years, preschoolers in the "Abbott" districts have greatly benefited from this court decision. Studies in 2007 and 2009 from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) found that children who attended the Abbott preschool program showed great progress in language, literacy and math and were substantially less likely to have to repeat grades.

Based on the success of the Abbott preschool program, New Jersey's new school funding formula requires that all school districts provide the same high-quality program to their low-income 3- and 4-year olds. However, the state's FY 2010 budget includes no funding for non-Abbott districts to either begin or expand their preschool programs. Even without state funding, some districts are committed to providing the program to some or all of their eligible preschool-age population and have found ways to finance this expansion. This brief details the types of programs these districts plan to implement in September 2009 and how they will be funded.

### WHAT DISTRICTS WILL BE DOING IN SEPTEMBER 2009

ACNJ surveyed all 80 *universal* school districts regarding their preschool expansion plans and received information from 69. Universal districts are those districts that will be required to provide preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds because their

socio-economic status is similar to that of the Abbott districts. Of the districts responding, 12 districts, or 17 percent, plan on some preschool expansion in September 2009. ACNJ also surveyed seven *targeted* districts, and received information from six. Of these, two are planning expansion. Targeted districts will be required to provide preschool only to at-risk students. The districts planning expansion for September 2009 are scattered throughout the state from Cape May County in the south to Morris in the north. They have preschool populations that range in size from 18 to more than 1,000. Thirteen of the fourteen districts have already been providing either half-day or full-day preschool to some of their students.

One small district plans to expand its current half-day program for 3-year-olds into a full-day program and expects to convert an additional classroom for the program. This district already provides full-day preschool for 4-year-olds. Funding for this expansion will be provided by local funds and the allocation of some of the district's Title I funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), the federal stimulus package.

Title I funding has always been available for preschool but, traditionally, New Jersey districts have used it only for K-12 programs. The emphasis on using Title I funding for preschool was initiated by the Governor's draft budget, which had tied receipt of state funds for preschool to use of Title I funds. All state funding for preschool expansion was ultimately removed from the FY 2010 budget. But a

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number of the districts surveyed are finding the infusion of ARRA dollars invaluable to helping them finance expansion without overburdening local sources.

Several other districts are also converting half-day programs into full-day. One of these will use state funds it already receives for preschool through the Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA), augmented by local sources.

One large district will be adding three, full-day classrooms for 3-year-olds to the full-day program for 4-year-olds it presently operates. In addition, this district is taking steps to align its 4-year-old program with the Abbott standards by switching to a research-based curriculum approved by the state Department of Education. This significant program change is being made despite the fact that the district allocated no additional funding for preschool.

Some districts planning preschool expansion in September 2009 aim to use private money instead of public funding – whether federal Title I, state ECPA, or local property taxes. For example, one district will cover the cost of preschool for its at-risk students by charging tuition to those families who can afford it.

Many of the districts surveyed expressed frustration that they would not have the resources to begin expansion in September 2009. As the importance of high-quality early learning experiences to the academic success of at-risk children becomes increasingly evident, districts are eager to have the resources to offer these programs and help their students prepare for the future.

### **PRESCHOOL EXPANSION**

New Jersey's new school funding formula, signed into law in January 2008 and declared constitutional by the New Jersey Supreme Court in June 2009, includes expansion of the Abbott preschool model to all low-income 3- and 4-year-old children regardless of where they live. The expansion classrooms are to be modeled after the high-quality Abbott program, with a small class size, certified teachers, teacher assistants, and a research-based curriculum approved by the Department of Education. Implementation was scheduled to begin during the 2009-2010 school year, with districts mandated to serve at least ninety percent of their eligible preschoolers by 2013-2014. In preparation, all New Jersey school districts spent

the 2008-2009 school year developing a plan outlining how they would accomplish this goal.

While Governor Corzine's initial FY 2010 state budget had provided some state funding for preschool expansion, the final budget, signed into law on June 29, 2009, did not. This has created difficulty for those districts counting on state dollars to help them fund the first year of expansion. In addition, without state dollars financing their preschool programs, districts are not required to follow the Abbott standards. Some school districts, however, are committed to beginning expansion and are finding other ways to fund it.

### **ACNJ'S RESPONSE**

After the preschool expansion funding was removed from the state budget, ACNJ created a survey to determine whether districts were still planning to move forward with expansion in the 2009-2010 school year and how such expansion would be funded. The survey was sent to the superintendents of 87 school districts – all 80 universal districts and 7 targeted. The survey was e-mailed or faxed to the 87 superintendents twice in early June 2009, with a one-week interval between. In late June and early July, ACNJ contacted by phone those who had not yet responded. In all, ACNJ received information from 75 districts.

### **CONCLUSION**

New Jersey's preschool expansion is a five-year process. The first year, starting in September 2009, will not be as vigorous as originally conceived in the school districts' expansion plans because of the lack of state funds. Although some districts are finding ways to begin expansion, lack of ongoing state support will hamper their long-term success. Federal Title I funds, local tax revenues, and private resources are insufficient to meet the state's goals and requirements for this critical program. The New Jersey school funding formula commits the state to ensuring equal educational opportunity for all students. Only by backing this commitment with state dollars can New Jersey guarantee that all low-income preschool students get the high-quality Abbott program they need for educational success.

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