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Policy Progress

Building Blocks for New Jersey's Youngest Citizens



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Key Recommendations:

- Develop a faculty/student ratio standard for all institutions of higher education to follow.
- Modify teacher preparation programs to meet state regulation standards.
- Standardize articulation agreements for all 2- and 4-year colleges.
- Improve coordination by institutions providing professional development opportunities.
- Provide preschool teachers with more opportunities to attend workshops that address diversity issues.



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Does "Qualified" mean Quality?

Filling in the Gaps of New Jersey's Early Childhood Teacher Training System

INTRODUCTION

During the last six years, the number of New Jersey preschoolers having access to quality early learning environments has grown dramatically. Since the 1998 Supreme Court decision of *Abbott v. Burke*¹ requiring high quality preschool for 3- and 4-year old children in the poorest school districts, the State has expanded state-funded preschool to include nearly 130 additional districts, known as non-Abbott Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA) districts and Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI) districts.

While New Jersey currently has these three early learning delivery systems in place, part of the "quality" equation in each of the systems includes "qualified" classroom teachers.² Research indicates that in order for a teacher to have all the skills necessary to be "qualified," he/she should possess a bachelor's degree and have received specialized training in early childhood education. There is a clear link between children's learning and development and the educational qualifications of their teachers.³ Preschoolers taught by highly qualified teachers score better on social, emotional, linguistic and cognitive assessments and are less likely to require special education, engage in criminal activity or be unemployed in the future.⁴

Presently, there are two components to preschool teacher education in New Jersey:

- **Teacher preparation**, which includes a course of study leading to a formal degree or certificate. Teacher preparation is provided through the state's 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education.
- **Professional development**, which supports individuals already working in the field by providing short-term workshops, classes and other forms of technical assistance to support and increase teachers' bases of knowledge.

Although more and more of the State's youngest citizens are attending early learning classrooms, little is known about these components that prepare, support and maintain our current preschool teaching workforce. Currently, teachers are meeting regula-

tory qualification standards; however without more information on the content being provided, it is uncertain whether New Jersey's higher education system is providing the knowledge base and skills necessary for them to be prepared to meet the needs of its preschool population.

Moreover, as New Jersey continues to expand access to quality preschool, the demand for qualified teachers will continue to increase. Little is known about the existing capacities of these two components in meeting the State's current and growing demand for qualified preschool teachers.

A recent report released by the Foundation for Child Development (FCD) examined the content and capacity of the two components that make up New Jersey's preschool teacher education system. The report also identifies the gaps between what the standards recognize preschool teachers need to know and what they are actually receiving from their preschool teacher education experience.⁵

This policy brief outlines the report's findings, identifies critical policy issues and provides recommendations that will ensure consistency and continuity in the development of New Jersey's preschool teacher workforce and provide for a better coordinated system of teacher preparation and professional development.

TEACHER PREPARATION

Overview

In order for preschool teachers to be "qualified," the higher education system that prepares them must also be of a high quality. Research indicates that teacher preparation programs should include coursework in general education, professional foundations and instructional knowledge.⁶ Armed with this information, teachers will have the tools to apply specific program planning and assess and adapt instruction to meet the individual needs of children.⁷

The importance of teacher quality in state funded preschool classrooms is reflected in New Jersey policy.

Regardless of whether a district is in an Abbott, ECPA or ELLI preschool teachers must have a bachelor's degree and an appropriate certification. Most BA level programs require 30 credits in both an academic major and education methodology courses and 60 credits in general education. State regulations require that the 30 credit hours of educational methodology include behavioral/social sciences, the teaching of literacy and numeracy, and educating special needs and linguistically diverse students.⁸ In order for these standards to be attained, NJ teacher education programs must develop programs accordingly to adequately prepare teachers to meet the regulatory standard.

While New Jersey teacher preparation programs have graduated thousands of new preschool teachers during the past few years, the FCD report identifies several issues that place in question whether these teachers are leaving our colleges and universities with all the skills necessary to meet the needs of the state's preschoolers.

Finding: Faculty/student ratios vary widely in both 2- and 4-year higher education institutions.

Research indicates that intensive and personal interactions between faculty and students in teacher education programs are a critical component in becoming an early education teacher. This supportive and personalized advisement is especially important to the success of non-traditional students.⁹

While all of New Jersey's institutions of higher education provide faculty advisement support, the faculty/student ratios vary significantly. While the four-year universities reported their mean student to full-time faculty ratio is 1:43, the variation across institutions ranged from 1:2 to 1:156. The community college mean ratio of faculty to student is 1:35 with a variation ranging from 1:11 to 1:225.

Recommendation: Develop a faculty/student ratio standard for all institutions of higher education to follow.

High faculty/student ratios lead to larger advisement loads that can have a significant impact on the quality of stu-

dent's educational experiences.¹⁰ For example, community college students must navigate a system with multiple challenges that without proper advisement could affect their ability to transfer into a 4-year institution. With reported faculty/student ratios reaching as high as 1:225, it is important that a standard be developed by higher education leaders to keep faculty/student ratios low at both 2- and 4-year colleges. In recognizing that staffing at institutions will vary, choosing one number does not seem like an adequate way to address the issue. However, allowing ratios to reach high levels will be detrimental to the teachers' education and potentially to the children with whom they will eventually serve.

Finding: Students attending 2- and 4-year colleges to become early childhood teachers are more likely to receive stand alone coursework in child development, curriculum, and literacy than in other content areas or diversity issues.

Research indicates three broad areas of knowledge that preschool teachers need to know in order to teach young children effectively: early childhood foundations, curriculum content, and working with families and diversity issues.¹¹ Currently New Jersey higher education institutions are offering coursework in child development and curriculum content often at the expense of other content areas and diversity issues. For example, a majority of the programs at the 4-year universities offer entire courses in child development, curriculum development and literacy. Conversely, several programs do not include social studies, math, music or art in any of their coursework. Approximately one-third of the 4-year universities require students to take a course on working with children with special needs. However, three programs offer no coursework on this topic. Similarly 20% of university programs offer no courses in working with children from diverse cultures and English language learners.

While the community colleges provide more coursework on working with children with special needs, other content area topics, including social studies, math, and science are not covered in several different programs.



Finding: Articulation and partnership agreements between 2- and 4-year colleges are institution specific, with some colleges not participating in any form of collaboration.

The role that community colleges play in preparing our nation's teachers has grown dramatically. Transcript studies on the institutions attended by the nation's current classroom teachers indicate that more than 50% attended a community college for at least part of their education.¹⁴ Despite growing recognition of the important role that community colleges play in the teacher preparation system, barriers continue to exist for the development of seamless articulation systems and partnerships between the institutions.

New Jersey is no exception to that rule. The FCD report uncovered a wide variety of limited agreements and partnerships. For example, eight of the 17 participating community colleges reported having articulation agreements with four different universities which enabled students to transfer some of their early childhood coursework towards a P-3 certification. Other 4-year institutions offer P-3 coursework on a community college campus. Further, half of the 4-year universities and 5 community colleges report offering for-credit coursework with some districts and resource and referral agencies.

While pockets of good collaborative work are taking place in New Jersey's community colleges and universities, change has not been systemic. As the demand for qualified preschool teachers continues to grow, New Jersey's existing higher education system does not effectively use all its resources to ensure that every preschool classroom has a qualified teacher.

Recommendation: Standardize articulation agreements for all 2- and 4-year colleges.

The need for a seamless system of articulation is particularly important for students studying to become preschool teachers. The average preschool teacher in New Jersey is 38 years old and is working full-time while attending school.¹⁵ Many have begun their studies at the local community colleges. While

At both the four year institutions and the community colleges, course offerings, or a lack of course offerings, at several of these institutions are not meeting the regulatory standard required for educational methodology.

Recommendation: Teacher preparation programs should be modified to meet state regulation standards.

The FCD report indicates that New Jersey institutions of higher education are providing extensive coursework in those areas considered foundational to early childhood teaching. Certainly, the depth of this valuable content knowledge should remain unchanged. However, there are other important content areas that are either not receiving the level of attention necessary to provide students with an adequate knowledge base or are ignored in the coursework and are consequently in violation of state regulation.

This lack of regulatory compliance is having an impact on preschool teachers who have completed their formal education and find themselves without the requisite skills to address daily class-

room issues. In a recent report, a majority of the teachers interviewed stated that their pre-service training did not adequately prepare them to address the diverse needs of their preschoolers.¹²

This is a difficult problem in light of the regulatory limitations placed on universities and colleges in developing teacher preparation programs. While the existing 30 credit ceiling is a barrier to comprehensive program development, the fact remains that several programs are neither complying with state regulations nor adequately preparing their teachers to address the diverse needs of New Jersey's preschool population.¹³

There are several ways to address this issue, including an increase in the 30 credit cap. The existing problem will not be remedied however, without the support, commitment and leadership of the institutions of higher education. Leaders of these institutions must work collaboratively with the New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) to both come into compliance with state regulations and better prepare their students for when they begin teaching.

existing partnerships have supported many of the preschool teachers who were mandated to obtain their certification, taking advantage of a successful articulation system may depend on where you live. Statewide systems change is the only remedy to ensure that all students wishing to become qualified teachers are afforded that opportunity.

One way to assure that students receive the critical content in their programs is for universities to accept early childhood credits from students that transfer from community college programs. In order to do this, community colleges and 4-year colleges should align their early childhood curricula to assure that the coursework from the community college contains the same content and is of a quality that the degree granting university will be comfortable with.

There are examples of community college/ 4-year partnerships in existence at this time. It is important, however that students transferring from all community colleges have access to these agreements. Existing articulation agreements should be studied and used as a resource in standardizing articulation agreements for all 2- and 4-year schools.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Overview

Remaining a qualified preschool teacher in New Jersey's state funded preschool programs requires continued education beyond a bachelor's degree and appropriate endorsement. Research indicates that short-term professional development opportunities for teachers currently working in the field can increase their skills and knowledge base. Such opportunities may also fill in the gaps of those areas in which teachers are lacking.¹⁶ If done correctly, a teacher's professional development experiences should be linked with his/her individual experience level and the specific teaching and learning activities currently existing in his/her classroom.¹⁷ New Jersey policy supports the research by

requiring preschool teachers in Abbott and ECPA districts to attend at least 105 hours of professional development within a period of five years.

The professional development opportunities for preschool teachers are currently offered through three major entities:

- Individual school districts
- Each county's Resource and Referral agency (R&R)
- Some of the 2-year community colleges.

While trainings are being offered throughout the state, the FCD report identifies several issues that undermine the effectiveness of these offerings in meeting the research-based goals.

Finding: There is no coordinated system of early childhood professional development.

Throughout the State, school districts, community colleges and the county R&Rs are offering many opportunities for preschool teachers to take advantage of workshops and trainings. However, on closer inspection of the course offerings, it is clear that little dialogue is taking place amongst these three entities.

For example, the 71 Abbott and ECPA districts interviewed indicated that 40% of their 1,127 workshops focused on curriculum content and district purchased curricula. Similarly, except for workshops on health and safety issues, the 17 R&Rs interviewed identified early childhood curriculum workshops as the most offered course. Lastly, the highest proportions of workshops address curriculum practice in the eight community colleges that offer not-for-credit programs.¹⁸

While the report indicates that the depth and scope of the content of each of the programs being offered may vary, it is clear that the three major entities providing professional development to preschool teachers are providing them in the same or similar topic areas.

Moreover, data from the report indicated that only five of the R&Rs interviewed had some type of partnership with school districts in their county to provide professional development services.

Recommendation: The institutions providing professional development opportunities must be committed to improving coordination amongst themselves in order to implement a unified delivery system for early childhood professionals. This can be accomplished through regionally coordinated professional development opportunities.

Currently, the goal of professional development described in the overview cannot be met because the providing entities continue to work in isolation of each other. Moreover, in fiscally difficult times, the lack of collaboration potentially wastes continually shrinking resources.

It is recommended that the preschool professional development be regionally coordinated. By working collaboratively, the three entities can first understand the strengths of each of their programs and then develop partnerships to be more effective at coordinating their course offerings. In this way, the specific needs of the teaching pool will be met and shrinking dollars will be spent more wisely.

Two factors are critical in order for such a collaboration to be successful. First, coordination cannot take place without leadership. The most logical entity to undertake this responsibility is the New Jersey Professional Development Center (NJPDCC), a state agency that maintains a clearinghouse of training and education opportunities and operates the New Jersey Registry for Childhood Professionals as a statewide database of practitioners' credentials and professional qualifications. Secondly, the three entities must come to the table committed to developing and implementing a better coordinated system of professional development.

Finding: Regardless of the auspice, minimal professional development opportunities exist for preschool teachers regarding cultural and linguistic diversity and working with children with special needs.

While each of the three entities providing professional development afforded teachers multiple opportunities to attend content-based workshops, a minimal

number of workshops were offered on diversity, multiculturalism, special education and English language learners. Overall, of the 2300 training sessions offered during the 2003–2004 school year, less than 10% addressed the above issues. For example, while community colleges offered 115 workshops to preschool teachers during this time period, only six addressed diversity issues.¹⁹

Such minimal training opportunities are problematic in a state with a population as diverse as New Jersey. The 2000 census indicated that New Jersey's population is more diverse than ever, with large increases of persons from Hispanic

or Asian origin. According to the latest population projections, the growth in diversity will only continue. While white and black populations will moderately grow, other race populations are expected to continue to increase at a rate of 150 percent. New Jersey's Hispanic population will continue to grow and maintain its status as the largest minority group in the state.²⁰

Recommendation: Through a collaborative approach, the three professional development entities must provide preschool teachers with more opportunities to attend workshops that address diversity issues.

It is critical that New Jersey's preschool teachers have the tools necessary to work with diverse populations of students. More professional development is crucial in these areas because many of New Jersey's preschool teachers are not receiving adequate preparation to work with these students.²¹ Additional professional development opportunities in multiculturalism, special education and English language learning would address the gap in content knowledge for existing teachers who did not receive such training in their teacher preparation programs.

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¹ Abbott v. Burke, 153 N.J. 480 (1998) Abbott V.

² Abbott v. Burke, 163 N.J. 95 (2000) Abbott VI, N.J.A.C. 6A:8-3.4; New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood Education. (2004). Notification of Funding Opportunity Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI). Trenton, NJ: New Jersey Department of Education.

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⁴ Bowman, B.T., Donovan, M.S., & Burns, M.S. (Eds.). (2001). *Eager to Learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; Dwyer, M.C., Chait, R., & McKee, P. (2000). *Building strong foundations for early learning: Guide to high-quality early childhood education programs*. Washington, DC: US. Department of Education, Planning and Evaluation Service.

⁵ Lobman, C., Ryan, S., McLaughlin, J., Ackerman D.J. (2004). *Educating Preschool Teachers: Mapping the Teacher Preparation and Professional Development System in New Jersey*. New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development.

⁶ Honig, A.S., & Hirallal, A. (1998). Which counts more for excellence in childcare staff: Years in service, education level or ECE coursework? *Early Childhood Development and Care*, 145, 31-36.

⁷ Bredekamp, S. (1996). Early childhood education. In J. Sikula, T. Buttery & E. Grayton (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education* (pp.323-347). New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillian.

⁸ N.J.A.C. 6A:9-10.2.

⁹ Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). *Studies of Excellence in Teacher Education*. Washington D.C.: AACTE Publications.

¹⁰ Lobman, et al. at 47.

¹¹ Lobman, et al. at 20.

¹² Ryan, S., Ackerman, D. J., & Song, H. (2004). *Getting qualified and becoming knowledgeable: Preschool teachers' perspectives on their professional preparation*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

¹³ N.J.A.C. 6A:9-10.2.

¹⁴ Education Commission of the States. (2003). *Teacher Preparation Policy Toolkit: Articulation & Transfer*. Retrieved on December 6, 2004 from <http://www.communitycollegepolicy.org/html/toolkit/articulation/default.asp>.

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¹⁷ Bowman, B.T., Donovan, M.S., & Burns, M.S. (Eds.). (2001). *Eager to Learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

¹⁸ Lobman, et al. at 34-39.

¹⁹ Lobman, et al. at 39.

²⁰ Castro, Ida L. (2004) *Managing a Diverse Workforce*. New Jersey Conference of Mayors. Retrieved on December 2, 2004, from <http://www.njmayornet.com/CastroWin04.htm>.

²¹ Ryan, et al. at 15.

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