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ACNJ SPECIAL
REPORT

*An Information/Policy Brief on
New Jersey's Children*

***The Link Between Classrooms and Enrollment:
An Abbott Preschool Dilemma***

***By Cynthia Rice, Esq.
ACNJ Senior Policy Analyst***

With an estimated 83 percent of eligible preschoolers enrolled in court-mandated preschools, New Jersey's 31 "special needs" districts have made huge strides in ensuring that low-income children have access to high-quality preschool. The pay-off is already evident in higher test scores for New Jersey 4th graders.

But as districts look to expand programs to enroll all eligible preschoolers, their options have become limited. Facilities construction projects paid for through the Schools Construction Corporation (SCC), the state entity responsible for the construction and renovation of public schools, are on hold. Community preschools that house the majority of the Abbott preschool population have no real access to state dollars to expand or renovate their centers. And, state regulations make it almost impossible for new community providers to join as partners in the Abbott preschool program.

In fact, some providers are dropping out of the preschool program because of administrative and financial burdens placed on private providers, according to an Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) analysis of the issue.

Currently, nearly half of these districts, known as Abbott districts, have fewer than 90 percent of eligible children enrolled with three large districts, Newark, Jersey City and Paterson under 76 percent. In past years, community programs worked with school districts to accommodate preschool expansion, but a recent ACNJ survey found that over the past year, more community preschool providers have left the Abbott program than have joined.

As providers grapple with being unable to accept additional preschoolers because of capacity limits and unable to access state dollars to build new classrooms, Abbott districts will be hard-pressed to meet the state-set goal to serve at least 90 percent of eligible 3- and 4-year-olds.

For the past year, the SCC has been under fire because of its mismanagement of state school projects, increasing the costs of these projects by millions of dollars. This has left many school projects in limbo. Since May 2005, no new projects have been funded.

Association for Children of New Jersey

35 Halsey Street Newark, New Jersey 07102

(973) 643-3876 (973) 643-9153 fax

www.acnj.org • www.kidlaw.org

www.MakeKidsCountNJ.org

As New Jersey officials revamp the state's troubled school construction program, it must find creative ways to address the need for more Abbott preschool classrooms, both in district and in the community. This policy brief uses the ACNJ survey, an analysis of Department of Education data and interviews with school officials and community providers to further explore this problem and offer solutions.

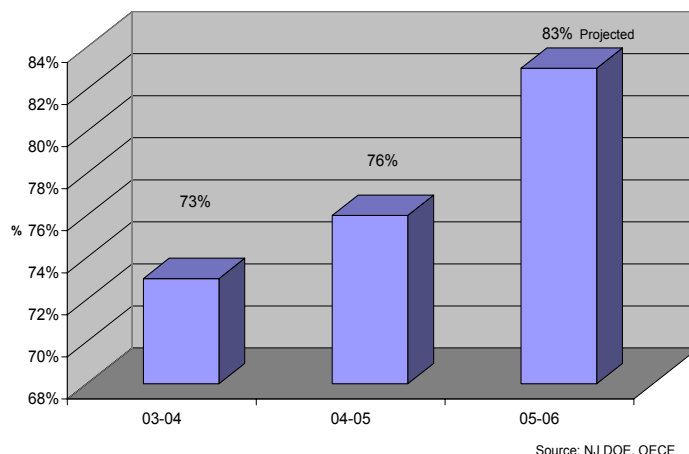
FEWER KIDS IN COMMUNITY CENTERS

Since the Abbott preschool program first began in September 1999, community centers, including Head Start, have played a pivotal role in implementing the program. By the 2003-2004 school year, private centers were serving more than 70 percent of enrolled preschoolers in the Abbott districts.

That's changing. In just two years, the percent of Abbott preschoolers served in community facilities dropped to a projected 63 percent, according to an ACNJ survey of the 28 school districts that collaborate with community preschool providers. In just one year, the total number of private preschool providers dropped over 5 percent from 417 in 2004-2005 to 389 in 2005-2006, with 81 fewer community pre-k classrooms.

This decline has occurred, even as preschool enrollment increased 10 percent, from 38,011 or 73 percent of the universe to a projected 43,142, 83 percent of the universe during the same time period.

Percent of Abbott Preschool Universe Being Served



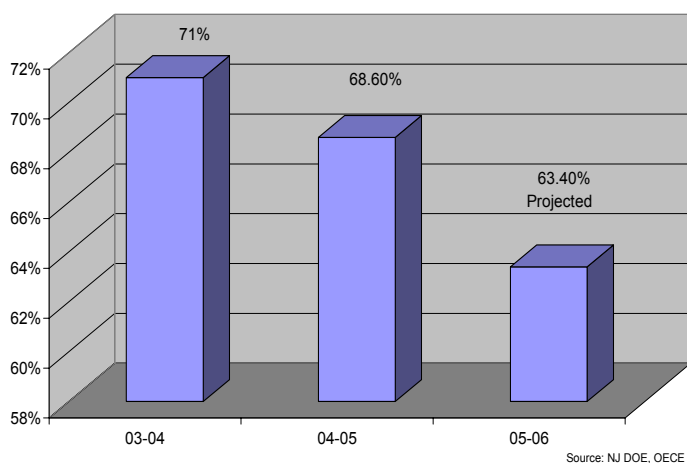
The cause for this decrease is two-fold: Some districts chose to end contracts with programs that were unable to meet the high-quality standards mandated for the Abbott preschools. According to the ACNJ survey, in 15 cases district officials uncovered problems with program quality, fiscal management or the provider facilities.

However, 13 of the 28 providers that were no longer subcontracting with Abbott districts in 2005-2006, initiated the contract termination. In these cases, the providers chose not to continue their contract because it has become more difficult to administer and cover the costs of implementing the program.

“If you are a small center, with a mix of classrooms, you end up subsidizing a good portion of the Abbott program because of the way the state allocates funding,” said Lorraine Cooke, executive director of the Egenolf Early Childhood Center in Elizabeth and the Early Childhood Coalition of New Jersey, which represents the interests of Abbott community preschool providers. “Smaller programs are finding it to be a financial hardship to participate in the Abbott pre-k program.”

The survey found that only four new community providers in four different districts began contracts with Abbott districts in the past year. Current

Percent of Abbott Preschoolers in Private Provider/Head Start Facilities



The survey also revealed that half of the 28 districts posted a reduction in the total number of community centers educating preschoolers. Only one district -- Passaic -- increased its total number of community providers, from five to six.

state regulations may be the reason for this low number. These regulations require new preschool programs to have a Department of Human Services (DHS) license for at least one year before being eligible for the Abbott program.

New centers must also be able to accommodate at least 90 children, which translates to six classrooms. While these regulations were adopted to address concerns over the higher costs of funding smaller centers, they have also closed the door to new providers that may have helped districts meet expansion needs.

WERE DID THE CHILDREN GO?

School districts used a variety of ways to handle the increase in enrollment, despite losing some community providers.

Approximately 975 new students were absorbed in 26 new classrooms that districts built with state school construction dollars. Renovations provided an additional 12 classrooms. Districts also used existing classrooms, leased space and trailers to add another 27 classrooms.

“We have a long way to go to meet our preschool facilities needs in Newark,” said Dr. Ray Lindgren, executive assistant, Newark Public Schools. “We know there are parts of the city where we are not nearly servicing the numbers of preschoolers we should be.

“As our new governor finds ways to fix the state school construction program, he must address the issue of preschool classrooms,” Lindgren added. “Right now, few providers have funds available to develop new, educationally adequate facilities to handle increasing enrollment. If this problem goes unsolved, thousands of New Jersey children will miss out on this vital – and court-mandated – early learning program.”

If these problems remain unaddressed, it will be increasingly difficult for community centers to continue helping districts provide additional classrooms for the young children who remain unserved. Recent estimates indicate that \$13 billion will be required to pay for proposed facilities projects, which include some preschool projects in the public schools. However, state funding for community provider expansion to help meet enrollment needs remains unanswered.

THE “EDUCATIONAL ADEQUACY” PROBLEM

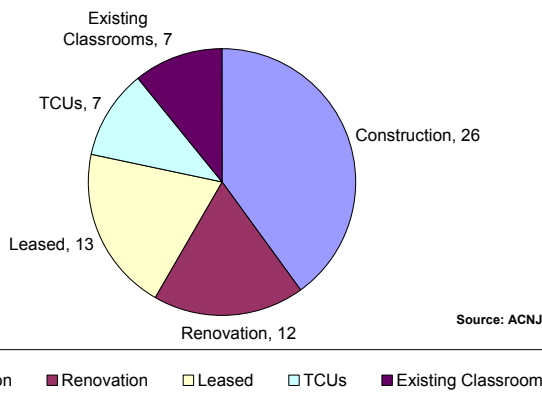
ACNJ's survey and analysis focused solely on provider and district capacity and its impact on preschool enrollment. Yet the quality of the existing facilities housing the majority of Abbott 3- and 4-year-olds remains uncertain.

The Supreme Court required that all Abbott facilities be "educationally adequate." While all public school facilities were assessed, until recently, districts were not obligated to complete a similar assessment on the provider facilities.

As this new data has not been analyzed, the conditions of these facilities remain unknown. It can be assumed, however, that many providers would not meet the court's quality standard.

Even after the data is studied, the problem will still exist because there are no funds to raise the qual-

New Abbott Public Preschool Classrooms, 2005-2006



The data also indicated that many districts continue to rely heavily on their provider partners. In the 15 districts where the number of provider contracts had changed, seven districts looked to existing providers for classroom expansion in order to better meet their preschool universe.

But some district officials say they are exhausting their options and are unsure how they will accommodate the remaining children.

ity of preschool classrooms outside the public schools. The funding process of New Jersey's schools construction program perpetuates a two-tiered system of quality for Abbott preschool facilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As Governor Corzine overhauls the schools construction program, meeting the enrollment needs of the court-mandated preschool programs must be a top priority.

ACNJ MAKES THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS:

As required by the New Jersey Supreme Court, preschool facilities must be a top school construction priority for the state. The Schools Construction Corporation, or whichever entity is appointed to oversee the program, must elevate pre-k projects to the top of the construction list.

Allow districts with fewer than 85 percent of eligible preschoolers enrolled to subcontract with new community centers, even if those providers are unable to meet the requirements to have been in business for one year and to have capacity to house at least 90 children.

Promote the continued collaboration between school districts and community providers by providing a separate pot of dollars for community-based facilities expansion or renovation. This would ensure that all Abbott preschoolers are in educationally adequate facilities.

Sources:

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

N.J.A.C. 6A:10A-2.1(e)

<http://www.nj.gov/njded/code/current/title6a/chap10a.pdf>

New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood Education, September 2005

N.J.S.A. 18A:7G

N.J.S.A. 18A:7G-5(s)

Rice, C., Ponessa, J. (2005) The ABC's of Preschool Facilities in New Jersey: A Primer. Newark, NJ: Association for Children of New Jersey/Education Law Center.

FINDINGS OF ACNJ SURVEY

- There was a reduction in the total number of providers in 14 of the 28 districts;
- The total provider numbers declined from 417 in the 2004-2005 school year to 389 in the 2005-2006 school year, with 81 less classrooms in community facilities;
- Only Passaic increased its total number of providers by 1;
- Of those providers no longer subcontracting, slightly over half were because the district did not offer a contract. Slightly less than half was because the community program no longer wanted to participate in the program;
- Only four new providers began subcontracting with four separate Abbott districts;
- Districts continue to rely on provider partners. In the 15 districts where the number of providers had changed, seven districts looked to existing providers for help with expansion;
- 14 of the 28 districts had additional preschool classrooms in the public schools that provided 65 more preschool classrooms;
- Districts have not been able to rely solely on construction and renovation to meet enrollment needs, but rather have had to use other facility alternatives including, leasing other buildings, using temporary classroom units (TCUs) or changing the use of existing classrooms;
- Of the 14 districts that had new public preschool classrooms, nine (64%) of them had below 90 percent preschool enrollment, with three of the larger districts having less than 76 percent full enrollment.

This policy brief was prepared by Cynthia Rice, Senior Policy Analyst. For additional information contact Ms. Rice at crice@acnj.org or (973) 643-3876.