



Association for Children  
of New Jersey

# BUILDING STRONG RUNGS TO BUILD STURDY LADDERS

THE STATUS OF PRESCHOOL - 3RD GRADE SYSTEMS IN NEW JERSEY

ACNJ POLICY BRIEF

January 2007

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## INTRODUCTION

During the last ten years, New Jersey's commitment to pre-school (PK) has grown dramatically both in scope and quality. In the 2006-2007 school year in over 150 school districts, the NJ Department of Education (DOE) has projected that in the three state supported preschool programs, Abbott, Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA) and Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI), nearly 33,609 four year olds and 20,254 three year olds are being exposed to experiences that support child development and are being prepared for kindergarten and beyond.

Recent test scores are showing that the PK benefits are paying off. In 2005, 3rd grade scores in the state's poorest or "Abbott" school districts increased in one year by 20.0% in math and nearly 11.1% in language arts. These third graders are the first group of children to have taken advantage of two years of Abbott preschool.<sup>1</sup>

While New Jersey continues to be the vanguard for quality preschool, recent national studies have shown that investing solely in preschool is not enough. Although well-designed early learning programs assist in improving children's social and cognitive skills, the gains made in the early years often fade as children advance beyond kindergarten.<sup>2</sup>

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This problem stems from the frequent perception that "early childhood" should be viewed narrowly - as solely an initiative that prepares children for kindergarten. While this is an important outcome, quality preschool is only the first step to a child's early learning experience. In order for the gains to be sustained, preschool must be followed by aligned and integrated experiences in kindergarten and through the third grade.<sup>3</sup> By adopting a broader view of early learning that aligns quality preschool with the early elementary years, policy leaders will reap a better return on their preschool investment. More importantly, such alignment will have a long-lasting benefit for the children who participate.

## WHAT IS A P-3 APPROACH?

In a recent article entitled "Ladders of Learning: Fighting Fade-Out by Advancing PK-3 Alignment," author Kristie Kauerz states:

*"Learning and development are like climbing a ladder. One starts at the bottom rung, then climbs to the next, and then to the next, ultimately reaching the top...If, however there are no rungs - or only one or two - at the bottom of the ladder, then a long distance of open air with a random rung here and there, successfully climbing the ladder becomes a dicier proposition...High quality PK and full-day Kindergarten give children a boost to successfully climb the first few rungs on the ladder of learning. If the rungs stop after kindergarten and there is a long gap of unsupported space until the top of the ladder, children will have more difficulty - and need more assistance - to reach the top. Education should be structured in such a way that all children have learning experiences that build on those previous years and connect with those to come, creating smooth and a predictable climb to the top."<sup>4</sup>*

Like Ms. Kauerz's ladder, a perfect P-3 approach is structured in a way that all children have learning experiences that build on past experiences and are connected to those yet to come. This can be accomplished by having clear expectations for children at every grade, aligning what is expected with what is actually taught in the classroom and using assessment to guide instruction.<sup>5</sup> These aligned and coordinated programs would begin in preschool and extend through third grade.<sup>6</sup>

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While alignment and coordination are partnered, they mean two different things. "Alignment" is defined as a lining up of standards, curricula and assessment into a coherent plan for P-3 children. "Coordination" includes an ongoing effort by skilled teachers and strong leadership to use the align-

ment to achieve the effective education of children in the P-3 years.<sup>7</sup> This includes coordinating both teacher preparation and professional development with children's developmental levels and having appropriate teacher expectations. Implementing both concepts is critical so that chil-

dren between the ages of 3 through 8 can experience age-appropriate, systematic and coordinated experiences.

Moreover, the development of such an approach could be a major factor in sustaining public investment in education.<sup>8</sup> Early intervention is a better solution than remediation later in a student's educational experience. An aligned set of educational experiences has the potential of saving public dollars by reducing grade retention and special education costs.

Research, however, indicates that educational experiences are not aligned for most children between PK - third grade. The differences in classroom quality within schools demonstrate a lack of a single vision and planning for how children's experiences connect, overlap and build on each other.<sup>9</sup>

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### NEW JERSEY'S P-3 APPROACH

New Jersey has acknowledged that PK can make a difference in the lives of its youngest citizens. During the 2006-2007 school year, the State will spend over \$600 million on preschool programs and/or wraparound services in 150 school districts. From both a Supreme Court mandate and state legislation, New Jersey has effectively used these funds to provide quality learning experiences for thousands of preschoolers. After these children complete PK, however, little has been documented about the connection between that system and the systems that are in place in the primary grades.

The State has also made a substantial investment in preschool teacher training. As required by the New Jersey Supreme Court, all new preschool teachers in the 31 poorest school districts must have a Bachelor's degree and a Preschool - 3<sup>rd</sup> grade endorsement. While these teachers are required to have specialized training, new preschool teachers outside these districts do not have that same requirement.

The Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) recognized the need to determine the link between New Jersey's tremendous state preschool investment with its subsequent educational systems. In order to gauge the long-term sustainability of children's progress made during the preschool years, ACNJ, through a grant from the Foundation for Child Development, proposed to study the early childhood connections in three important systems:

- **School Practices:** Through the examination of school practices, what is the status of P-3 systems within New Jersey school districts that provide state funded preschool?
- **Teacher Preparation:** Are New Jersey's Preschool -3<sup>rd</sup> grade preparation programs preparing prospective teachers for each age level in the P-3 system? and

- **Regulation and Governance:** How is New Jersey's DOE working to establish and support integrated P-3 systems in school districts and what direction and guidance is DOE providing to school districts to support that end?

This policy brief examines the first issue, and analyzes the status of P-3 systems in New Jersey's school districts that receive state funding for preschool. Future policy briefs will address the issues of teacher preparation and regulation and governance.

### METHODOLOGY

The findings reported in this policy brief were obtained from district preschool operational plans as well as through focus groups with early childhood administrators and elementary school principals. As there are currently three types of state supported preschool programs in New Jersey, the review of the operational plans depended on the program.

#### Abbott Preschool Programs:

Since the 1999-2000 school year, the State's poorest school districts have been required, by a directive of the Supreme Court to implement high quality preschool for three and four year old children.<sup>10</sup> Since that time, these 31 districts, now known as "Abbott" districts have been required to develop various forms of operational plans for the DOE.

#### Non-Abbott Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA) Programs:

Through legislation, over 100 additional districts that comprise the next tier of high percentages of children in poverty, receive state funding to provide half-day programs for four year olds and full-day kindergarten programs.<sup>11</sup>

#### Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI) Programs:

Through a competitive award process, this initiative begun in 2004, provides non-Abbott districts with partial funding to implement preschool programs for four year olds.

When ACNJ's research began, the most recently submitted district transition plans to the DOE were from 2004-2005. (At that time "transition" was addressed in the "Curriculum and Instruction" subsection of the Abbott Three-Year Operational Plans from School Years 2003-2004 through 2005-2006) ACNJ reviewed all three state supported programs to elicit whether districts were implementing any and all of the components of a P-3 system. In addition, due to the size and scope of the Abbott programs, ACNJ saw the value of reviewing other subsections of these operational plans and subsequent plans, including Overview, Administration, Master

Teachers, Curriculum and Instruction and Professional Development.

ACNJ staff then identified those districts that had described within their plans, some components of a P-3 system. Superintendents from more than 30 districts were sent a letter describing the study and asked for staff participation in several planned focus groups. Two focus groups, one in the northern and one in the southern part of the state, were scheduled for early childhood supervisors of preschool programs. A third focus group was scheduled for elementary school principals. A total of eight early childhood supervisors participated in the two focus groups and nine principals and supervisors participated in the third. All of the focus groups were held in the summer, 2006.

The findings below outline the major themes identified from both the review of the operational plans and the focus groups.

## FINDINGS

### The "Evolving" P-3 Systems in Abbott Districts

The operational plans indicate that no one Abbott district had implemented all of the components that would lead to a comprehensive P-3 system. However, as the Abbott plans evolved, districts were beginning to include more of these components within their plans. In the more recent plans, several Abbott districts mentioned program alignment and were beginning to provide opportunities for teachers to come together to discuss and plan for such alignment.

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In all of the focus groups, participants highlighted the range of their districts' planning successes. While the participants recognized the importance of developing such a system, certain districts were further ahead in discussing and planning for it. Others seemed overwhelmed by the implementation of individual existing programs, such as preschool, making the additional work of developing a new system extremely taxing.

### Using the "Buzz Words"

Throughout the plans, many districts used phrases that would indicate that coordination or alignment was taking place across grade levels. Phrases such as "cross-level articulation," "cross-level meetings," "articulate respective curriculum objectives" and "curriculum congruent with standards," were found in many of the plans. Under closer inspection, many of the plans provided minimal evidence of how the coordination/alignment was being implemented, such as professional development opportunities or prepara-

tion time for teacher collaboration. This does not mean that those "opportunities" were not taking place either informally or within individual school buildings, it just was not documented in the text of the plans.

### An Undefined "Vocabulary"

In New Jersey, there are currently no regulatory definitions of a P-3 system. Because of this, words such as "articulation," "alignment," "coordination," and "transition" meant different things in different districts. For example, in the district operational plans for the 2003-2004 through 2005-2006 school years, each Abbott district was to describe, *"How does your preschool program relate to your other school improvement efforts and how will you ensure smooth transitions from preschool to elementary education?"*<sup>12</sup> The length and depth of the Abbott responses varied tremendously. The transition plans in the ECPA and ELLI districts were equally wide-ranging. Overall, there were four main ways that districts defined "transition." The plans usually had either one or more of the following definitions:

*"Transition" meant different things in different districts.*

- **The actual movement of children from one environment to another, such as the transition from preschool to kindergarten.** Some transition plans, particularly in the ECPA and ELLI districts, only included "events" that would help prepare children for the change in educational environment. Such events included visiting kindergarten classrooms, meeting their new teachers, classroom story visits and pen pals. In these cases, transition was "student driven."
- **The preparation of families for transition.** This approach was linked with communication between the parents and the schools on what to expect once their child transitioned from one environment to the next. The family "transition" was often "event" driven, including opportunities for the families to meet with both school administration and staff. Districts that had family transition plans usually had a child plan as well.
- **The exchange of information between preschool and kindergarten teachers regarding the upcoming kindergarten cohort.** This transition included opportunities for preschool and kindergarten teachers to meet to discuss children and exchange information such as child assessment data.
- **The collaboration between staff members on programmatic issues.** Some plans included providing preschool and kindergarten teachers with opportunities to meet and discuss their respective curricula, grade-level objectives and/or "articulation." Others included planning led by administrative staff.

Because "transition" is not defined by the State, it is uncertain as to what the DOE was looking for when it asked districts to describe their transition plans. Although varied in depth and scope, both between and within the three state supported programs, all of the plans reviewed were approved. Without state definitions and with state approval of their plans, it was natural for districts to assume that their transition plans were on the right track.

Moreover, with no definitions, the experiences of the individual developing the plan (early childhood supervisor, director of curriculum, etc.) played a key role in how the words were defined. One of the focus group participant's educational background was in special education. Her district's "transition" plan had a strong emphasis on the transitioning of children with learning disabilities. Most districts did not mention special education in this section of their operational plans, yet all of the plans, including this one, was reviewed and approved by the DOE.

The lack of a definition for "early childhood education" led to a more narrow perception of what that definition included. This has had a direct impact on the development of P-3 systems. During all of the focus groups, when participants talked about "early childhood" it was nearly always in the context of preschool. Although the participants all were proponents for the development of a P-3 approach to learning, "early childhood" was usually not described as including children between the ages of 3 and 8, but rather between 3 and 5. By not envisioning a broader definition of early childhood, the development of a P-3 system is more difficult.

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### The Alignment of Standards—On Paper

One of the most critical components of successfully implementing a P-3 approach is for all standards to be aligned. The reviewed district plans seemed to understand this importance and nearly all indicated that their preschool standards, the *Preschool Teaching and Learning: Standards of Quality* were aligned with New Jersey's K-12 *Core Curriculum Content Standards*. Whether the alignment on paper translated into actual implementation in the classroom was not clear from the plans. The opinions of focus group participants confirmed this disconnect. One participant stated that both the *Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations: Standards of Quality* and the *Core Curriculum Content Standards* should be "living" documents as evidenced in lesson planning, teaching practices and children's work. The consensus of one group was that they were not.

### The Preschool-Kindergarten Alignment

Because the perceived definition of "early childhood" was nar-

rowly defined, the best identified alignment was between preschool and kindergarten. Depending on the district, this specific alignment took on various forms. For example, some of the more recent plans outlined "opportunities" for preschool and kindergarten teachers to come together to discuss program alignment and participate in professional development experiences to-

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gether. The number of times these meetings were actually taking place varied from once a year to every month. There was also evidence of kindergarten teachers being in-serviced on district preschool curriculum and preschool teachers being in-serviced on kindergarten curriculum, in order to better understand what should be taking place in each classroom. In many cases, the administration was involved in the PK-K alignment, by either providing time for the teachers to discuss this or by actually participating themselves in the discussions.

While positive steps were being taken to provide a seamless system for children in these age groups, nearly every plan described PK-K as either the sole or major component to their transition planning. Only a handful of districts included transition or alignment planning beyond kindergarten. The conversations during all the focus groups also discussed "transition" within the context of preschool and kindergarten. The sentiment from one focus group participant was that she was "not sure of what was going on in first grade because I am stuck on Kindergarten."

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Even with evidence of alignment between preschool and kindergarten, several significant challenges exist that directly impact alignment success.

1. The Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) Disconnect: Some operational plans and comments from the early childhood supervisor focus groups indicated that it was the perception of the PK community that many kindergarten teachers were not implementing developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in their classrooms. Children entering kindergarten were experiencing a very different environment than what they had experienced in preschool. Early childhood

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supervisors described that while learning through center-based play was the norm for most preschoolers, sitting at desks and doing work was frequently taking place in kindergarten classrooms. Unlike preschool teachers in the Abbott districts who are required to have specialized training in early childhood, kindergarten teachers are required to possess an elementary certification and may not be as familiar with DAP of young learners.

2. The DAP v. Testing/Outcomes Disconnect: Early childhood supervisor focus group participants believed that the lack of DAP practices in kindergarten classrooms may be partly due to the tension placed on these teachers for their students perform well on standardized tests. The participants indicated that the pressure around kindergarten assessment does not foster an environment in which important developmentally appropriate strategies can be implemented. Even in kindergarten, children are being “taught to the test.” Focus group participants acknowledged that even though they knew that implementing DAP in kindergarten classrooms would eventually lead to higher test scores, they felt that they often did not have the administrative and State support to move in that direction. Moreover, professional development in DAP was being offered, but kindergarten teachers were finding it difficult to balance implementing what they learned with the administrative pressure for children to do well on tests.

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3. The Expectations Disconnect: Because of the pressure for their students to do well on tests, a few of the more recent Abbott operational plans stated that some kindergarten teachers' preconceived notions as to what the children should be accomplishing once they enter kindergarten were a barrier to implementing DAP in their classroom. In fact, early childhood supervisor focus group participants stated that their kindergarten teachers wanted the PK teachers to observe their classrooms so that they could understand what is expected of the children at that grade level. One participant described the difference between PK and K by using a scissor as an example. She stated that, “preschool is ‘process’ driven, while kindergarten is ‘product’ driven.” Preschool teachers are concerned with children learning how to use a scissor, while kindergarten teachers are more concerned with what a student was making with that scissor. This difference and the expectations that make up the difference contribute to tensions between PK and K teachers and impact the development of aligned systems.

4. The Abbott Unequal Funding Disconnect: In order to implement high quality, intensive preschool in the Abbott dis-

tricts, the state has had to provide significant funding. In the 2006-2007 school year, the education component of the Abbott preschool day has been funded at nearly \$460 million. Funding for kindergarten programs however, is nowhere near that number and does not enjoy the same charge or support found in PK. In fact, kindergarten is not required in New Jersey and is often viewed and as a supplementary program.

This funding disconnect perpetuates a schism for effective program alignment between PK and K, impacting both kindergarten teachers and their students. For example, because of funding, kindergarten teachers do not have the types of professional development opportunities that preschool teachers receive. Several participants during one of the early childhood focus groups described this disparity by using as an example how the NJ Early Learning Assessment System (ELAS) was implemented in Abbott PK and K. Under this performance based assessment, preschool and kindergarten teachers assess children in “real-life” situations, using typical classroom activities. Preschool teachers received significant training on the instrument and how to use it. The training was provided by a combination of state university staff and district master teachers, all of whom had experience and training in early childhood education. The ELAS training and support for kindergarten teachers continues to vary by district. The responsibility and support for ELAS differs between PK and kindergarten. Supervisors of early childhood are responsible for PK. For kindergarten, either the supervisor of language arts literacy, the principal or the director of curriculum and instruction bears this responsibility. During one early childhood focus group, a participant stated that because the person responsible for the kindergarten staff was not required to have an early childhood background, this person was often only “one-step” ahead of the teachers. Moreover, the kindergarten supports were inadequate during implementation. As a result, focus group participants stated that many kindergarten teachers disliked using ELAS and viewed the assessment process as an added pressure to their work. This disconnect has fostered a level of tension between PK and K teachers. Participants stated that K teachers wanted the same supports that their PK colleagues were receiving.

5. The Preschool Isolation Disconnect: In all state-supported preschool programs, preschool teachers are often in a different physical location than their K-3 colleagues. In Abbott districts, nearly 63% of the preschool students are not housed in public preschool classrooms, but rather in community-based and Head Start pro-

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grams.<sup>13</sup> Even when the preschool classrooms are located within the public schools, the children often have different schedules than the older children, making it difficult for staff to meet and collaborate. During the principal and one of the early childhood supervisor focus groups, a few administrators in ECPA districts stated that their preschool teachers saw their educational role differently and preferred to be separate from the K-3 staff. For whatever the reason, the staff separateness provided fewer opportunities for systems development. Even early childhood administrators felt disconnected from their elementary colleagues. In one focus group most of the participants stated that their principal/administrative counsel meetings focused on "housekeeping" issues and had little relevance to their work. One participant felt that preschool had no "voice" at these meetings. Lastly, even the documents that assessed children were different in PK when compared to K and beyond. Early childhood supervisors felt that it would be beneficial if children's report cards between PK and K were the same. They felt that the children were being assessed differently and "aligning" the report cards would be beneficial.

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### The Role of Administrators

A key factor in successfully developing a P-3 system is strong leadership. While providing opportunities for teacher collaboration are important, it is not enough to develop the systemic reform necessary to effectively educate all of the children within that age group. The types of institutional changes that are necessary require decision-making from the top. Leadership at the state, district and building level is tantamount to success.

Those districts that were the furthest along in developing a P-3 system had administrators, at both the district and building level, who were well-informed in DAP. Districts that recognized the importance of this knowledge approached this issue in several ways:

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1. **Professional Development:** In most plans, there was evidence that administrators, usually principals and other supervisors, were being provided with some form of professional development on early learning. The types and amounts of professional development, however, varied. In some district plans, principals were participating in workshops related to best practices, or on the specific early childhood curriculum adopted by the district. Other plans described cross-level trainings related to curriculum, assessment and program practices for PK and K staff and administrators. In other districts, administrators were required to spend more time in preschool classrooms to better understand DAP. One early childhood supervisor said that she

tried to make an early childhood presentation at every administrative meeting. The principal focus group participants from ECPA and ELLI districts stressed the importance of having administrators who had knowledge in early childhood education. Unlike the Abbott districts, these districts often did not have an early childhood specialist and it was usually the principals who made both the program and budgetary decisions on preschool and kindergarten.

2. **A Knowledgeable Superintendent:** During one of the focus groups, an early childhood supervisor stated, "We won't get anywhere unless we take the time to make sure that there is understanding of early learning from the top down. It must be a priority to include the superintendent in what we do." The focus group discussions demonstrated the importance of the relationship between the individual responsible for early childhood and the superintendent. Early childhood supervisors in the districts with more advanced P-3 systems recognized that the superintendent must understand DAP if preschool was ever going to be linked with K-3. To facilitate that connection, they stated that they met regularly with their superintendents and kept them up-to-date on early learning issues. For example, one supervisor described how she worked with her superintendent to understand how DAP was linked with No Child Left Behind, and explained the scores from their preschool classrooms' Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS/R). Others tried to include the superintendent on various early learning committees, such as Reading First.

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3. **A Partnership Between the Early Childhood Supervisor and the Principals:** Principals play a pivotal role in connecting PK with the K-3 system, yet often are not experts in early learning best practices. During one of their focus groups, some of the early childhood supervisors described how regularly collaborating with principals was a way of educating them on DAP and putting both administrators on the same footing. This was often a difficult task because "the bottom line" of the early childhood supervisor is frequently different than that of the principal. The conflict often involved how to implement DAP that includes the necessary didactic elements to increase test scores. Participants stated that a working partnership brought about a better understanding of each other's bottom lines and kept the focus on what was best for children.

### Building A System: The Orange School District

The Orange School District appears to be well on its way in making preschool through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade alignment entrenched in its learning community. While the district is experiencing success in developing its P-3 system, it hasn't come easily. Dr. Nathan Parker, Orange's superintendent, describes teaching as "isolating by nature," and schools as structured in a way that makes coordinating efforts amongst staff very difficult.

Orange is trying to address these issues by using a combination of leadership, support and relationships as the foundation for building its P-3 system. Dr. Parker believes that the key to any sustained alignment, regardless of grade, requires "tying together" the natural breaks in our educational system. "Opportunities" must either be developed or provided, so that teachers can become acquainted with the types of learning going on beyond their own teaching experiences and better understand the commonalities and crossovers between programs and grades. One way is by providing opportunities for supervisors and principals to collaborate. By scheduling joint, regular administrative council meetings which include principals and supervisors, time is provided for relevant discussions on articulation, setting mutual goals and other concerns.

Providing professional development to both teachers and administrators is critical to effective systems building. Knowledgeable staff in curriculum, instruction and developmentally appropriate practices is key to developing a P-3 system. Dr. Parker believes that school administrators are often focused on issues such as facilities and budgets and do not spend enough time on "what" (curriculum) and "how" (developmentally appropriate practices) children are being taught in our classrooms.

"Developmentally appropriate practices are a foreign language to most administrators," said Parker. "Curriculum must be developed based on those developmentally appropriate practices." If this takes place, implementing a coordinated and aligned P-3 system will be less of a struggle. Staff will understand both what children should be learning at each age and the developmentally appropriate way to teach it.

Although leadership and support is crucial to implementing a new system, without "relationships" between staff, success will not be realized. In Orange, the administrative council meetings have played an important role in providing an opportunity for new professional connections. These collaborative meetings have cultivated new relationships between administrators whose paths, in the past, had rarely crossed.

While Orange is doing everything to implement its P-3 system, barriers still exist. Orange, an Abbott district, has greatly benefited from state funding for preschool. However, K-3 funding has not been the same. "Everything set in place for preschool needs to be implemented in K-3," said Parker. "Both the state and each district need to look at available funds and how best to allocate them in order to attain the same level of support for all children," Parker added.

Unfortunately, some administrative issues were identified as a significant stumbling block to better aligned P-3 systems. While the above identified examples of effective communication between the administrative staff, not every district was at that point. These barriers were identified in all three types of programs. The following are some of the examples of administrative barriers:

1. Elementary School Principals' Experiences Focused on Elementary Education: It was clear in the plans that principals were being given more opportunities to participate in professional development experiences in early childhood education. However, more work is necessary. During the early childhood supervisor focus groups, participants stated that all principals needed to be well-versed in early childhood education. They indicated that the tension kindergarten teachers were experiencing for their students to do well on tests was often a response to principals whose training may not have included working with young children. As a result, these principals may not understand the philosophies and benefits of implementing DAP.

Not having a working knowledge of DAP in the early years may be more critical in ECPA and ELLI districts. Unlike the Abbott districts that have both early childhood supervisors and master teachers who provide one-on-one support to the preschool teachers, principals in these districts are often solely responsible for the PK programs in their buildings. Because they may not have any background in early childhood education, best practices decisions may not always prevail. One ECPA principal with limited background in early childhood education said that he realized that he couldn't be an "expert" in everything. Thus, when he had to hire a new vice-principal, he sought someone who had a background in early childhood.

2. Principals were Often "Not in the Loop: While principals were receiving more professional development opportunities in early childhood, they perceived themselves as not being part of the decision making group for district transition/alignment. During the principals' focus group, several of the participants stated that they were purposely left out of any transition or alignment planning and viewed themselves as only being responsible for teacher and administrative "coverage." They said that they often learned things through emails or memos. As one principal described, "We are in a noose, not in the loop."

3. The Principals' Management v. Curriculum Dilemma: During the principals' focus group, participants felt that the reason why they were often excluded from P-3 planning was because many did not have a curriculum background and were not viewed as equal contribu-

tors. As one participant stated, "As a principal I am busy doing management work. Where do we learn about curriculum?" They said that they struggled between effectively managing the buildings and providing opportunities for professional development. The backgrounds of the principals also seemed to make a difference in how they viewed "transition." For those who had a limited curriculum background, their transition plans were more focused on management and "events." Those who had curriculum experience viewed "transition" more broadly and were cognizant that it meant more than specific activities for children. All of the participants agreed, however, that principals had to be part of this process, but also needed to acquire a better understanding of curriculum issues.

### **The Roles of the Early Childhood Supervisor and Master Teacher in Abbott Districts**

All 31 Abbott districts employ both an early childhood supervisor who is responsible for the program in all district preschool classrooms and master teachers who provide one-on-one support to preschool teachers in community-based classrooms. All of these individuals have specialized training and experience in early childhood and are funded through state preschool dollars. The way in which these administrative support positions are funded was identified as a barrier to better program alignment between PK and K. Because these positions are funded through PK dollars, early childhood supervisors and master teachers are discouraged to work with and provide support to kindergarten – 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers. A few early childhood supervisors said that they tried to provide support for their district's K teachers, as long as they did it "quietly." Because of their expertise, the early childhood supervisor and the master teachers would provide a natural crossover between PK and K teachers. The budgetary process, however, was fueling how curriculum planning between PK and K was and was not evolving.

In most of the Abbott plans, the only time an early childhood expert worked with both PK and K teachers was in transition planning. The role of the early childhood supervisor usually included being responsible for developing, coordinating and overseeing transition activities between PK and K. However, the plan descriptions had a heavy focus on "events" rather than meaningful collaboration around alignment.

In ECPA and ELLI districts, some appeared to have administrative participation in meetings between PK and K teachers to discuss curriculum coordination and continuity. From the plans however, it was district specific. Often, the individuals responsible for a district's early childhood program, such as the principal or curriculum supervisor, appeared to be only responsible for scheduling meetings around coordination or alignment issues between the PK and K teachers, rather than actually participating in them.

### **Other Issues**

In both the operational plans and the focus groups, several unrelated issues were identified that impacted the progress of

the development of a P-3 process.

1. District Size Matters: While it can be done, findings indicated that coordination and alignment is much easier to accomplish in a smaller district than a larger one. This issue was discussed during the focus groups and identified in several of the larger districts' plans. Providing both technical support and planned opportunities for administration and staff to meet to discuss program alignment was much easier when the parties were all in the same building. It was far more difficult when the individuals are spread out within a district. One Abbott plan was frank in admitting that providing opportunities for preschool and kindergarten teachers to work together was very difficult because they were in "too many different places and have different work schedules to gather all in one place."

2. Finding the Time was Difficult: In all of the focus groups, participants acknowledged that it was difficult to find the time for effective planning. Building a P-3 approach was only one issue that needed staff time. Professional development opportunities were based on program needs, encompassing many different important subjects. Similarly, regardless of the types of planning included in the district operational plans, they ranged from monthly to annual meetings for discussions on program alignment and were often voluntary.

3. Nationally Recognized Curricula Helped Coordination and Alignment: Districts that had implemented nationally recognized curricula in both their PK and K programs stated that the K program was built on the PK program and made alignment easier.

### **Recommendations**

The following are recommendations that were elicited from focus group participants and after review of all the operational plans:

1. School Districts Must Make the Conscious Decision to Implement an Aligned P-3 Approach. A coherent plan for aligning standards, curriculum and assessment practices will not take place when only PK and K teachers are meeting intermittently. Systems development cannot evolve without leadership from the top. This is a thoughtful and long-term process that first requires superintendent leadership to make district decisions that set the vision for the required changes. It cannot begin, however, without the superintendent being knowledgeable about early childhood issues. Even with such "global" leadership, several specific pieces must be in place:

- a. Everyone needs to be on the same page. From both the operational plans and the focus groups it was clear that whatever alignment work

was being implemented it was usually narrow (PK-K) and compartmentalized. Both administration and staff must move beyond discussions and planning on PK, K and 1-3 issues as if they were separate entities but as the first tier of children's learning experiences. Again, it is the responsibility of the superintendent to set the "P-3 tone," so that all staff is on the same page.

b. The process must be inclusive. An effective plan requires all of the "players" to be part of the planning--from the beginning. This may require some administrators to view their colleagues differently, particularly how principals are viewed. They are an integral part of successful implementation and cannot be left out of the planning process or viewed as merely the conduit for solving staff coverage problems.

c. Professional development is necessary for all. If all staff is to be "on the same page," more early childhood professional development opportunities are essential. This includes training administrators and non-preschool teaching staff on DAP and best practices. This is particularly important in the ECPA and ELLI districts that may not have as many staff members well-versed in early childhood issues. For example many district operational plans indicated that their administrators and principals trained in their specific early childhood curricula, such as High Scope or required them to take early childhood courses. Other districts required principals to visit preschool classrooms to "witness" DAP. These are all necessary steps but districts can also take advantage of their "in-district experts." One early childhood supervisor stated that she made a presentation on early childhood at every administrative staff meeting so that her colleagues would become more familiar with both the terms and her district's ultimate vision of implementing P-3.

d. All new teachers in preschool through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classrooms should have a P-3 certificate. More classroom teachers with specialized training in early childhood will help foster better collaboration between and amongst grade levels. Currently, only new preschool teachers in Abbott districts are required to have this specialized training. By requiring new teachers in all districts to have such pre-service training, more classrooms will implement DAP and more teachers will be "on the same page" for addressing issues on alignment.

2. A District's P-3 Approach Must be Implemented By Early Childhood "Experts." Both the district plans and the focus group discussions outlined many examples of "missed opportunities" for districts to develop a stronger P-3 alignment process. Whether this problem was fueled by budgetary or supervisory restraints, not having knowledgeable early childhood administrators responsible for P-3 development exacerbates the disconnect between both PK and K and K through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Having early childhood administrators that provide leadership, support and oversee the day to day operations of implementing

the P-3 approach is just as critical as a superintendent's leadership.

To move towards that end, early childhood supervisors and/or master teachers must be provided with opportunities to collaborate with their K-3 counterparts. Systems development can only happen when district administrators understand each others' issues and work together effectively.

3. Funding Should Not be a Barrier to Systems Development. The report's findings indicated that some programmatic decisionmaking was linked with state funding requirements. For example, because Abbott early childhood supervisors receive state funding to be responsible for preschool, assisting kindergarten teachers is either problematic or is frowned upon. Since they are their districts' early childhood "experts" their role in ensuring developmentally appropriate practices beyond preschool is important.

4. The P-3 "Vocabulary" Must Be Defined. The P-3 words, such as transition, alignment, coordination and articulation meant different things in different districts to different people with different educational backgrounds that held different positions. The clearest example of this was the vast disparity of how the operational plans defined "transition." The DOE approved operational plans ranged from student driven "events" to regular staff meetings on vertical alignment between the grades. Regardless of the ultimate definition of these words, they should mean the same to all district administrators and staff, regardless of their location and individual educational background. This can only be accomplished by defining these words through new regulations.

5. The Early Childhood Playing Field Must be Levelled. The funding and support disparities between PK and K in the Abbott districts were significant enough to be a barrier to P-3 planning. The State and districts must be flexible so that budget requirements are not driving how programs are implemented and supervised. Whenever possible, all P-3 staff should be experiencing similar trainings and support together.

6. The State Must Take a Leadership Role in the Development of a P-3 Approach. While DOE is beginning to talk about the importance of a P-3 approach, it is only just starting to show the necessary leadership. In one of the early childhood supervisor focus groups, a participant described the appointed Early Childhood DOE liaison to her district as a wonderful support and a key piece to her district's successful PK program. Beyond preschool however, the State was not viewed as a resource, but rather as a punitive authority. A DOE "liaison" that would address district P-3 issues would be the first step for the State to take to demonstrate its support for the P-3 approach.

### 7. District Models Must Be Identified and Promoted.

One of the biggest findings of this research was that the concept of a comprehensive P-3 approach was not on most district's radar screen. While it was true that most understood the connection between PK and K and some talked about "cross-articulation," the broader vision of P-3 was, for the most part, missing. This lack of vision probably explains why whatever is currently being implemented is comprised of component segments, rather than systems development. It would be extremely beneficial if those districts that were further along in implementing P-3 were identified and held up as models so that other district administrators and staff could understand what needs to be done to implement the P-3 approach.

### Conclusion

In studying the status of P-3 systems in 150 New Jersey school districts, it is clear that the ladders are in place but the rungs need to be strengthened. While most districts have taken first steps in identifying the importance of developing a P-3 approach, much work still needs to be done. Districts must begin to envision "transition" or "alignment" as a system that encompasses all aspects of early childhood education—from preschool through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade rather than separate district programs. In order for this to happen, reform must occur at the state, district and school level. Only then can every child take advantage of an aligned and coordinated system of early learning.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. School districts must make the conscious decision to implement an aligned P-3 approach.
2. A district's P-3 approach must be implemented by early childhood "experts."
3. Funding should not be a barrier to systems development.
4. The P-3 vocabulary must be defined.
5. The early childhood playing field must be leveled.
6. The State must take a leadership role in the development of the P-3 approach.
7. District models must be identified and promoted.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Grade 3 New Jersey Assessment of Knowledge and Skills Spring 2005." New Jersey Department of Education December 2005. 19 December 2006 < <http://www.state.nj.us/njded/schools/achievement/index.html> >.

<sup>2</sup> Graves, Bill, "PK-3: What Is It and How Do We Know it Works?," *Foundation for Child Development Policy Brief, Advancing PK-3, No. Four*, May 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Bogard, Kimber and Ruby Takanaishi, "PK-3: An Aligned and Coordinated Approach to Education for Children 3 to 8 Years Old," *Social Policy Report*, Vol. XIX, No. 111, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Kauerz, Kristie, , "Ladders of Learning: Fighting Fade-Out by Advancing PK-3 Alignment," New America Foundation Early Education Initiative, Issue Brief 2, January 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Bogard, p.18.

<sup>6</sup> Kauerz.

<sup>7</sup> Bogard, p.6.

<sup>8</sup> Bogard, p.5.

<sup>9</sup> Bogard, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> *Abbott v. Burke*, 153 N.J. 480 (1998).

<sup>11</sup> N.J.A.C. 6A:23-5.4.

<sup>12</sup> *Abbott Preschool Program, Three-Year Operation Plan Instructions and Forms, School Years 2003-04 through 2005-2006*, New Jersey Department of Education 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Rice, Cynthia. (2006) "The Link Between Classrooms and Enrollment: An Abbott Preschool Dilemma." Newark: Association for Children of New Jersey.

*This policy brief was funded through a grant from the Foundation for Child Development. Special thanks to Karin Garver and Karen Nemeth, NJDOE; Jill McLaughlin, ACNJ Consultant; Dr. Nathan Parker and Kathleen Priestley, Orange School District; and the Education Law Center staff for their assistance in this report. For additional information contact [crice@acnj.org](mailto:crice@acnj.org) or at 973-643-3876.*