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CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Carrots and Sticks: New Jersey's Effort To Create a Qualified PK-3 Workforce

Sharon Ryan and
Carrie Lobman

FCD POLICY BRIEF
Advancing PK-3
No. Six
OCTOBER 2006

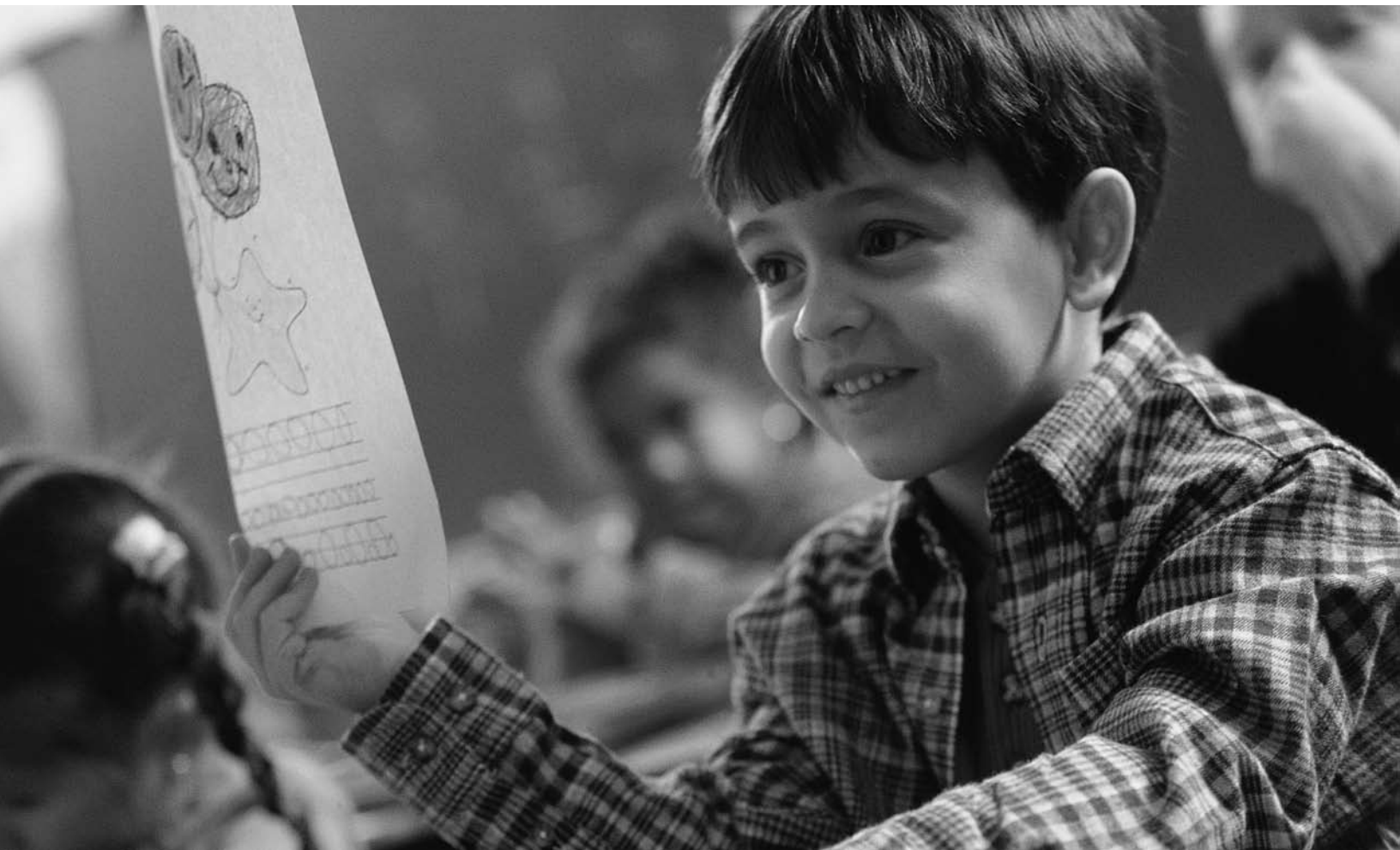


Introduction

Prekindergarten (PK) is one of the key building blocks of a new first level of public education that extends from PK through Grade Three (PK-3) in the United States. Traditionally the education of young children has been the province of multiple agencies (Head Start, child care, public schools). This situation is beginning to change. Many states currently offering PK are bringing these agencies together through a mixed service delivery model.¹

While the use of mixed delivery systems on the front end of PK-3 experiences is a reality in many states, providing an adequate supply of qualified teachers given the current workforce is no easy task. Raising the qualifications of PK teachers is expected to ensure program quality and facilitate greater cooperation, integration, and collaboration with K-3 teachers. However, nationally only about 50 percent of Prekindergarten teachers have a bachelor degree of any kind and many do not have expertise or specialized training in early childhood education.² This policy brief outlines the efforts taken in New Jersey to upgrade the qualifications of the PK teaching workforce as part of a statewide Prekindergarten initiative to reduce the achievement gap in the state's poorest school districts.³ The experiences of key stakeholders involved in this reform effort provide useful lessons for administrators and policymakers seeking to create a qualified Prekindergarten teaching force.

Before outlining these lessons, this brief provides an overview of the rationale for adopting policies that combine carrots to create incentives and the capacity to change with sticks or mandates that create the will to change.



Pressure and Support in Educational Reform

Successful implementation of educational reforms depends on both capacity and will.⁴ Capacity refers to the supports or incentives needed to change teachers' practice in some way.⁵ Considerations of capacity also extend beyond individual teachers to local education agencies and what may be needed in terms of human and fiscal resources to ensure that new policies are implemented.

Will, on the other hand, involves the commitment of those who must implement a policy initiative. If the values of key implementers are not consistent with the intent of a policy, then it is usually difficult to motivate them to comply with the new policy. To gain compliance, policymakers often use mandates that prohibit or proscribe certain activities to

motivate those working in schools to change. Mandates may also involve both enforcement and negative sanctions to raise the cost for individuals not to comply. Alternatively, policymakers may assume that individuals will not implement a policy unless they are encouraged by some kind of payoff. Therefore, another policy tool might be the use of fiscal incentives or inducements.⁶

Key to the success of implementing any mandates and incentives is that policymakers determine the best system of pressures and supports — carrots and sticks — to ensure that those who must implement the change find some kind of personal and/or professional value in doing so.

Using Pressure and Support to Create a Qualified PK-3 Workforce in New Jersey

New Jersey provides a unique context from which to consider the use of mandates and incentives in creating a qualified PK-3 teaching workforce. The *Abbott v. Burke* New Jersey Supreme Court decisions⁷ mandated that the state act to reduce the achievement gap faced by children in New Jersey's poorest school districts. These decisions ordered the 31 urban school districts that serve the state's poorest students to create systems of high quality Prekindergarten for all three- and four-year-old children beginning in the 1999–2000 school year. The court defined quality Prekindergarten programs as having a class size of no more than 15 students with a certified teacher and teacher assistant in each classroom. Each program was also required to use a developmentally appropriate curriculum linked to the state's core curriculum content standards, provide adequate facilities, and make available special education, bilingual education, transportation, health, and other services as needed.

To rapidly implement this mandate many school districts chose to integrate the child care and education systems. Prior to the court's decision, however, the credential required to be a "teacher" in New Jersey's private Prekindergarten centers and Head Start programs was a minimum of a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. To ensure quality across programs, the New Jersey Supreme Court mandated in 2000 that all teachers in Abbott Prekindergartens must obtain a minimum of a B.A. with Prekindergarten- Grade 3 (PK-3)

certification by September 2004.⁸ Teachers who already held the nursery or Kindergarten through Grade Eight certificate and had two years of experience working with Prekindergarten-aged children were exempt from this requirement.

In response to this mandate, policymakers and other entities in New Jersey created two key supports for teachers who needed to obtain a PK-3 teaching credential. First, most of the state's institutions of higher education created specialized PK-3 certification programs based on the guidelines for early childhood teacher certification programs produced by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).⁹ These programs encompass both alternate route and traditional approaches to teacher preparation, and range from initial licensure at the B.A. level to post-baccalaureate, Master's level, and endorsement programs. Under this system, teachers could access a program relevant to their level of qualifications no matter where they were in their professional education.

Secondly, a scholarship program administered through the New Jersey Department of Human Services provided teachers with financial assistance of up to \$5,000 per year for tuition costs related to attainment of an A.A., B.A., or M.A. and teacher certification. Teachers were also eligible to receive \$50 per course for other expenses such as books and photocopying.

As there had not been a specialized early childhood teaching certificate in the state, New Jersey also made an effort to build capacity within the higher education system. The Commission for Higher Education made funds available through its Quality and Capacity grants and Teacher Effectiveness and Teacher Preparation grants to help institutions of higher education expand their early childhood faculties to meet the increased demand for certified PK teachers.

At the district level, structures were put in place to improve the quality of curriculum and instruction in local Prekindergarten programs. These structures included a person designated as the district's early childhood supervisor to oversee all early childhood programs. This includes providing professional development experiences for the district's Prekindergarten teachers to address local programmatic and personnel needs.

Each district also has a team of master teachers. Reporting to the early childhood supervisor, these individuals provide technical assistance to teachers with enacting state directives. While the work of master teachers and early childhood supervisors is not directly linked to programs of teacher preparation, it does focus on developing the expertise of teachers in the field through a variety of professional development opportunities (district workshops, in-classroom support, etc.).

With the merging of Prekindergarten into the public schooling system, the Abbott decision also changed the governmental infrastructure that oversees and administers Prekindergarten programs and, by extension, Prekindergarten teacher professional development. The state legislature consolidated primary responsibility for state-funded Prekindergarten education into the Department of Education through its Office of Early Childhood Education. This office took the leadership role for implementation of high quality Prekindergarten programs and continues to oversee the curriculum and instruction of all Prekindergarten classrooms funded as part of Abbott programs in the 31 districts. The Department of Human Services maintained responsibility as the lead agency for child care, including Head Start. This responsibility involves the licensing and administration of various training supports for teachers such as the scholarship program and the Professional Development Center for Early Care and Education.

Thus the Supreme Court mandate was the stick, and the scholarship program the carrot employed to motivate teachers to improve their qualifications within the prescribed deadline. In addition, the institutionalization of PK-3 certification programs and provision of professional development resources at the district level led to the development of a system of PK professional preparation and development.

Lessons Learned

The system of PK-3 teacher preparation and professional development has now been in operation in New Jersey for almost six years. Several studies¹⁰ have been conducted to document how the system is operating from the perspectives of both teachers and those who are involved in their professional development. These studies point to several key lessons for those enacting similar reform efforts in other states.

The combination of a mandate along with necessary supports (scholarship program, accessible number of certification programs) can lead to a qualified workforce.

Interviews with a representative sample of teachers in all of the Abbott districts carried out during 2002–2003 found that

of the approximately 2,825 Abbott Prekindergarten teachers, 90 percent would potentially have a bachelor's degree and be at least provisionally certificated by the deadline.¹¹ When the 2000 Supreme Court decision was handed down, only 15 percent of teachers in private settings had a B.A. in early childhood¹² and there was no system of professional preparation in place to meet the increased demand for qualified teachers created by this mandate.

Efforts must be made to recruit and retain a diverse workforce.

When asked about their future plans, 33 percent of the teachers who were enrolled in some kind of PK-3 program indicated that they intend to leave their positions once they

became certified. Most of these teachers were working in child care settings and were either African American or Hispanic. As the majority of these teachers reported wanting to teach in a public school setting because of the additional benefits, the better working conditions, and the higher status, it is quite possible that these teachers may take up a preschool teaching position in a public school setting within an Abbott district. However, the absence of continuity of care has been shown to negatively impact children's learning and development.¹³ Moreover, the early childhood workforce is already disproportionately white, female, monolingual, and middle class. Given the increasing diversity being experienced in early childhood programs across the nation, it is imperative that when policymakers are creating PK-3 systems that they target incentives to recruit and retain teachers from nonwhite backgrounds. Although New Jersey's Abbott program mandated that all schools — both community and school-based — offer salaries that were commensurate with the district pay scale, the same did not apply to benefits such as health care and pensions. One obvious way to begin this work is to ensure parity in salary, benefits, and working conditions for PK teachers no matter where they work.

Policies should target the education of teacher-leaders as well as teachers.

Creating a PK-3 credential along with a mandate and system of supports may ensure a qualified teaching workforce but it overlooks the limited expertise of many child care directors, school principals and other administrators within the system. Focus group conversations¹⁴ with teachers, policymakers, and those in higher education in New Jersey repeatedly raised issues about the limited numbers of qualified individuals to fill administrative and training positions. Moreover, teachers in child care talked about the problems of working with school

district personnel and their own directors who did not understand the child development and learning theory underpinning particular curriculum models or state mandates.

Knowledgeable leaders who can support teachers on the job to improve their expertise are central to any kind of on-going educational improvement. Currently, most institutions of higher education offer only certification or doctoral programs. Educational administration is a separate degree program usually having little to do with leadership in early education. Creating a cadre of qualified leaders will necessitate instituting new programs linked to some kind of career ladder so that experienced and qualified teachers have options as to how they use their expertise to develop others in the profession. In creating this career ladder, attention must also be given to incentives that will retain a diverse leadership pool to prevent those teachers who continue to improve their qualifications from leaving the profession.

Attention must be given to quality control in the teacher development system.

The financial support provided to increase the capacity of institutions of higher education to prepare large numbers of Prekindergarten teachers in New Jersey reached its intended mark as evidenced by the 2,500 students enrolled in approved PK-3 certification programs in 2003–2004. Similarly, additional resources at the district level resulted in over 700 workshops being offered to Prekindergarten teachers in one school year alone.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the content of these programs did not always reflect what national guidelines recommend teachers should be able to know and do.¹⁶ These teacher preparation programs, therefore, may not lead to teachers developing the expertise necessary to ensure that all children within their care learn.





In its standards for initial licensure programs, NAEYC advocates that teachers should be able to deliver developmentally effective education. This involves being able to link children’s language and culture to the curriculum and “support and empower diverse families, including those whose children have disabilities or special characteristics or learning needs.”¹⁷

The PK-3 teacher preparation program in New Jersey may not be meeting this standard. A survey¹⁸ of the content offered by institutions of higher education with PK-3 programs in 2003–2004 found that coursework in addressing the learning and development of children from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds was less likely to be offered than coursework in foundational areas (e.g., child development, teaching methods, curriculum areas).

If teachers cannot access this information in certification programs, then they may build this expertise through ongoing professional development experiences. Our survey¹⁹ of district professional development opportunities in 2003–2004 showed a similar pattern to that of teacher education programs. Only 3 percent of the workshops available in 2003–2004 were targeted to working with English-language learners and children from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Not surprisingly, less than 50 percent of teachers surveyed reported feeling skilled to work with special needs students and students whose primary language was not English. Teachers’ perceptions of their ability to do a particular task have been found to relate to their effectiveness in the classroom.

These findings suggest that, when instituting a new PK-3 professional development system, policymakers consider how to monitor the programs of professional preparation and development to ensure that they are producing suitably qualified teachers. For instance, policymakers can require that the content of professional development and preparation programs demonstrate linkages to national standards.

Organizational structures to ensure coordination at all levels of the PK-3 teacher development system are crucial.

While the case of the Abbott districts in New Jersey demonstrates that it is possible to create a system of Prekindergarten

teacher development in a short period of time, there continue to be many missed opportunities for coordination across agencies.²⁰ Focus group conversations with key stakeholders indicate that increased coordination could free up resources and ensure that new Prekindergarten teachers continue to be inducted into the field and those already qualified build on their expertise. Examples of this noncoordination include different state offices responsible for differing components of teacher preparation and professional development, limited articulation agreements between two- and four-year institutions making it difficult for nontraditional students to move easily from one system to the other, limited trainings linked to college credit, and a lack of partnerships between school districts and higher education.

At the onset of implementing Prekindergarten education, policymakers should consider the potential barriers to communication and partnerships between agencies and develop strategies to minimize the impact of these barriers at the district and state levels.

New Jersey’s Prekindergarten reform effort illustrates that the right combination of carrots and sticks makes it possible to develop a system of teacher preparation and professional development that will lead to higher numbers of qualified PK-3 teachers.

New Jersey’s experience also suggests that policymakers must be mindful of both the long- and short-term goals of their policies.²¹ If the aim is to create PK-3 educational systems that provide a foundation for children’s learning in the early childhood years and beyond, then policymakers must consider how to use their authority to develop and retain a qualified and diverse pool of leaders as well as teachers. This will require consolidating resources and ensuring partnerships between agencies involved in teacher development so that the systems created will support ongoing learning for all members of the workforce. When there are qualified professionals at all levels of the system then the promise of PK-3 education will be achieved.

Endnotes

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NEW YORK, NY 10016
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