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Committed to Reform: Preschool Expansion Moves Forward Despite Financial Obstacles

By Laura Fasbach Donovan

INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade New Jersey's schools have served as a national model for providing high-quality early childhood education programs to thousands of low-income children, including an ambitious plan approved by the Legislature two years ago to reach even more 3- and 4-year-olds by September 2013. The preschool expansion plan would build upon the success of early learning programs in the state's 31 Abbott school districts, which were created in 1998 to ensure educational parity through a series of landmark decisions in the New Jersey Supreme Court case, *Abbott v. Burke*. Under a new school funding formula, non-Abbott school districts with high concentrations of low-income students would be required to expand or create preschool programs with the goal of serving an additional 30,000 youngsters across the state over the next three years.

New Jersey's continued commitment to preschool is in line with a growing body of research that shows an investment in such programs produces both short-term and long-term gains for children, their families and their communities. In fact, a series of studies from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) in 2007 and 2009 found that children who attended Abbott preschool programs showed great progress in language, literacy and math and were substantially less likely to have to repeat grades. Other research reveals that children who attend high-quality preschools are also less likely to become pregnant as teenagers or get in trouble with the law. What's more, for every dollar spent on high-quality preschool, there is up to a \$16 return on investment by saving government spending on education, the criminal justice system and public assistance.

PRESCHOOL ASPIRATIONS FACE FINANCIAL HURDLES

But as the realities of the nation's fiscal crisis hit home last year, educators throughout New Jersey's schools were forced to work quickly, diligently and often creatively in an effort to ensure economic challenges didn't derail the state's successful track record of building a solid educational foundation for our youngest learners. Consider only a year after the Legislature voted to create the new school funding formula requiring non-Abbott schools to expand or create preschool programs, the FY 2010 budget approved last spring included virtually no funds to make it happen. Only four school districts were eligible – and fortunate enough -- to receive funding from the state Department of Education to expand their preschool programs. While more than 100 school districts were originally targeted as "universal districts" to carry out the state's preschool goals, the absence of funding has brought most expansion planning to a halt. It soon became clear that if school districts wanted to bring more preschoolers through their doors, they would have to find a way to pay for it on their own.

Though schools still have three more years to expand or create their preschool programs under the legislation's original deadline, at least 10 districts throughout the state opted to begin expansion last September despite the lack of funding. This policy brief examines how school officials from these districts overcame financial challenges and obtained community support to deliver high-quality preschool programs that are already reaping rewards.

“I really admire these districts for going ahead with it because it’s not easy to do in this economic climate,” said Ellen Wolock, director of the Department of Education’s Office for Preschool Education. “We did a lot of public relations efforts showing how terrific these programs could be to help ameliorate the disadvantages these kids were starting out with. I think we sold a lot of schools on the program because they saw the value and they decided to do it anyway.”

THE SEARCH FOR FUNDING

Educators from the 10 districts acknowledge that building early learning programs wasn’t easy without additional state funds, let alone the current economic climate. Many said the task of cobbling together money for preschool expansion was at times daunting. Districts exhausted a variety of funding options to ensure they could serve more preschoolers, including combing through school budgets to come up with spare dollars, using federal stimulus money when available and even charging tuition to families who could afford it.

Some districts, such as Linden, stretched the Early Childhood Program Aid they already receive from the state for existing preschool programs to help expand. “We’re like every other district. We’re in a tough spot financially,” said Gail Fazio, Linden’s supervisor of Pre-K Education. “We get some ECPA funds and the district paid for the rest.” Last fall, Linden expanded its preschool offerings to include 12 full-day classrooms for 4-year-olds, up from 9 half-day programs the year before. The district also offers five half-day programs for its 4-year-olds as well as one half-day program for 3-year-olds.

Money from Washington helped at least two districts jump-start preschool expansion when state dollars didn’t come to fruition. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) helped the Lindenwold School District pursue preschool expansion in September. The Camden County district increased its preschool offerings from two half-day programs to five full-day programs. The expansion also included adding transportation for preschoolers to increase accessibility to more families, said Colleen Moran, supervisor of Early Childhood Education for Lindenwold’s schools. “Adding transportation eliminated a huge barrier,” Moran said.

Administrators in Logan Township combined the ARRA dollars they secured with money their district receives through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to grow the preschool program last fall, said Patricia Meiluta, Logan’s director of Special Services. “The funding was the big thing,” Meiluta said. “We were just concerned about asking taxpayers to fund (expansion) in these tough times.” Although Logan taxpayers did not have to come up with extra money last fall, the school

district has considered possibly asking families to pay a nominal tuition for preschool should additional funding be necessary in years to come.

The Clark School District used a combination of federal stimulus money and tuition to create a preschool program last fall. “Without the funding, I do not believe it would have happened,” said Renae LaPrete, Clark’s interim superintendent. Fortunately, federal funding came through and the district was able to use it for start-up costs to help create three preschool classes last fall. In addition, the district opted to charge families \$7,000 a year for preschool tuition.

The Florham Park School District decided to charge tuition last fall to ensure it could create a high-quality preschool program for its general education population without having to depend on outside sources. “We wanted to be self-sufficient,” said Steven Caponegro, Director of Special Services. “We were ready to go and we thought of the possibility that the state couldn’t fund it.” Caponegro said the district didn’t want to find itself in the position of creating a preschool program only to have to scrap plans at the last minute because of a lack of funding. “We obviously tried to be as proactive as possible,” Caponegro said. For the 2009-2010 school year, the Morris County district charged families \$975 a month for preschool tuition. In 2010-2011, the district plans to charge families \$600 a month for preschool. The tuition fee was higher this school year because of start-up costs that had to be factored in, Caponegro said. The new preschool program for both 3- and 4-year-olds serves nine children in one classroom. The district plans to serve as many as 16 children next fall.

In Sea Isle City, district administrators decided to carry out plans to expand preschool without state funding because they had already received buy-in from the community and had told eager parents they would have additional spots open for more preschoolers.

“Once you create a program and notify the public and say you are going to do something, it’s not acceptable to go back,” said Superintendent Michael Schreiner. “I don’t think you want to take parents down a road that creates expectations. Once you do that and find that there is enthusiasm that goes beyond casual interest, I think we have an obligation to meet that need if it can be done reasonably.”

Last September, the small shore community in Cape May County increased its eight-year-old preschool program to include 3-year-olds for the first time. It also increased the number of 4-year-olds from eight children to 10. In all, the district serves 17 children in both full-day and half day programs. The district saves some money because parents provide transportation for their 3-year-olds, rather

STATE FUNDING CRITICAL FOR PRESCHOOL EXPANSION'S LONG-TERM SUCCESS

Not long after New Jersey lawmakers passed a new school funding formula that included a plan to reach thousands more low-income preschoolers, the State Department of Education sought applications from school districts looking for full-funding to help expand their early learning programs. School districts were required to submit in-depth applications, including how additional funding could propel their preschool programs to the same high-quality level of standards offered in New Jersey's 31 Abbott school districts.

Only four school districts were eligible – and fortunate enough -- to receive a Preschool Expansion Grant from the DOE to grow their preschool programs in September 2008. While more than 100 school districts were originally targeted as “universal districts” to carry out the state’s preschool goals for all 3- and 4- year olds in these districts, the absence of funding forced most of them to place their expansion plans on hold. Local tax dollars, federal grants and even tuition can only go so far in paving the path for preschool expansion. By contrast, the recipients of this much-needed state funding – Fairfield Township, Red Bank, Little Egg Harbor Township and Woodbine school districts – clearly show that money can go a long way in helping schools meet their preschool expansion goals while ultimately giving early learners from low-income families the high-caliber introduction to school they deserve.

Consider Red Bank where state dollars allowed the school district to expand its preschool population by 57 percent. In September 2008 the district opened its doors to 105 4-year-olds, up from 90 the previous year. During the same time period, the district also increased the number of 3-year-olds it teaches from 15 students to 60. “We are the most appreciative of this funding,” said Superintendent Laura Morana, whose district’s application to DOE included a five-year plan for preschool. “It has enabled us to do so much for our kids. We have seen a difference the program is making.” The Monmouth County district uses what’s known as a mixed-delivery system to deliver preschool to children by teaming up with a local Monmouth Day Care, The Tower Hill School and Community YMCA. Because four of the preschool classrooms are off-site in three locations, Red Bank was able to overcome space constraints in its elementary schools. School districts are responsible for monitoring all classrooms for quality,

regardless of classroom location. Private providers must also employ certified teachers or instructors working toward their certifications and adopt the same research-based curriculum used by the school district. “We emphasized that by us working with the private providers, it didn’t mean we were turning our kids over to them,” Morana said. “We actually view our work with the private providers as a partnership.”

The district plans to serve an additional 25 4-year-olds and an additional 45 3-year-olds in the fall, which would not be possible without the state funding. It also means that Red Bank will be meeting 100 percent of its universal preschool population. In Red Bank, 75 percent of students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, making preschool an important program in the district. “It is not an option, it is not a choice,” Morana said. “It is a must for every one of our children.”

In Woodbine, where 80 percent of children are eligible for free and reduced lunch, the school district was able to double its preschool population last fall thanks to full funding for its early childhood education program. In all, the district preschool program now serves 45 children, both 3- and 4-year-olds, in three full-day classes. Previously the Cape May County district only offered one full-day classroom for 18 4-year-olds. “This is a huge bonus for our school district,” said Superintendent and Principal Lynda Towns. “Our at risk kids don’t get that extra leg up that children from middle class families and upper class families get automatically.”

Towns said one of the highlights of receiving the preschool funding was experiencing first-hand the job-training that DOE held for school administrators in early childhood education leadership. She said receiving the funding means her district can now reach more at risk children, identifying them for possible speech or behavioral problems, for example. Part of the state funding also requires districts to hold workshops with parents to help improve their participation in their child’s education and development. “It has given parents a lot of opportunities to become part of the program,” Towns said.

In the Fairfield Township School District parents also feel they have a lot at stake when it comes to the success of their children’s preschool program.

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than hiring an additional bus to bring the children home in the middle of the school day. Both the full-day and half-day programs are housed in one classroom, offering additional savings. As a result, 3-year-olds are combined with 4-year-olds, an arrangement that Schreiner said has worked out well for the children and the budget. “We really did not incur any additional expense,” he said. “I can tell you it would have created an issue if it were necessary to create another classroom. I don’t know if it would have received support at the school board level.”

Schreiner, a veteran educator, said his district began expansion plans in 2008 with the assumption that the state would not be able to offer funding. But even without additional dollars, Schreiner said the state’s preschool expansion initiatives turned out to be positive for his district. “We were talking about expanding before it became a mandate,” he said. “It gave us impetus to say maybe there is a need here aside from what the state said we should do.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY BUY-IN

A critical part of preschool expansion, administrators said, was selling the program to the community and making sure the district received the necessary buy-in from families, local leaders and taxpayers.

Sea Isle City school officials mailed surveys to all registered voters in their community to collect public input on preschool expansion. By targeting registered voters and not just parents of school-aged children, the school district felt it got a true picture of the public’s opinion about preschool. Schreiner, the superintendent, said the response was overwhelmingly supportive of expanding the program. “One of the benefits of being a very small district is it’s relatively easy to communicate with the population as a whole and receive feedback,” Schreiner said. “We found out there wasn’t only an interest, but there was a need to include 3-year-olds in our program.”

The Linden school district created public service announcements and ran advertisements in local newspapers to educate the community about its expansion plans. The school district also sent fliers home to parents to generate interest.

Educators from the Pinehill School District invited parents into their schools to see for themselves the progress preschoolers were making. Last fall, the district began offering two full-day classrooms for four year-olds as part of its expansion plans. The district’s two elementary schools serve 60 preschoolers in the general education population. Prior to expansion, Pinehill offered four half-day programs for four-year-olds. “We’ve received positive feedback from parents and students

about the program,” said Superintendent Kenneth Koczur regarding expansion.

When the Clark school district was looking to create its preschool program, LaPrete, the interim superintendent, formed a unique partnership with township leaders to make it happen. The Union County district did not have enough room to house preschoolers in its elementary school, prompting Mayor Sal Bonaccorso to offer school officials space in a municipal building at no charge. The district jumped at the chance. The municipal building is now home to a new full-day preschool program that serves 42 early learners, both 3- and 4-year-olds. “When you have a partnership and all stakeholders are looking to achieve the same goal, it can work out beautifully,” LaPrete said. Once the school year started, it didn’t take long for families to realize the program’s high quality. “When you have a brand new program, people are suspect,” LaPrete said. “Now the word is out that the teachers are outstanding educators. The preschoolers are learning and they love to come to school. More and more parents are calling to inquire about the preschool program for the 2010-2011 school year.”

Not to be overlooked is making sure teachers are on board with plans districts may have to build a new preschool program or expand. Deborah Snyder, superintendent and principal of Eagleswood Elementary School, said some teachers were a little apprehensive about taking on diapering when the Ocean County district began plans to expand its program to include 3-year-olds. “Teachers were in the (fours) program and now the job description was changing,” Snyder said regarding the concerns. In September, the school opened its doors to seven 3-year-olds. The school’s existing program for 4-year-old serves 11 students this school year, for a total of 18 children. The children attend full-day. Previously, the district offered both a half-day and full-day option. Because the curriculum for 3-year-olds focuses less on formal academics and more on socialization, Snyder spent time educating her staff as well as parents on the importance of learning through play. “We’ve done a lot with the entire staff,” Snyder said. “For some, seeing is believing.” As part of her school’s efforts to maintain staff buy-in, Snyder continues to have teachers observe one another in the classroom. “They share with one another what works,” she said. “They see how children learn how to count by playing with blocks or handing out snack. The teachers have an ‘a-ha’ moment.”

BENEFITS OUTWEIGH THE CHALLENGES

In the end, all of the school officials interviewed for this report agreed that any initial reservations they may have encountered about preschool expansion have been outweighed by the community support they have received

and ultimately by the progress preschoolers are making every day in the classroom.

“It’s been a huge process,” said Fazio, Linden’s preschool coordinator. “But it’s really working so well for the kids, so it’s worth it.” One advantage of children entering the public school system as preschoolers is they are able to take advantage of all of the supportive services the district has to offer such as working with speech therapists, Fazio points out. Children that attend preschools that are not affiliated with public schools or no preschool at all may not be identified as having a problem until kindergarten when they enter the public school. “We screen every child in preschool 20 days in to ascertain whether there could be a learning disability,” she said. “The earlier we identify a problem or special need, the better.”

This network of support can have a positive impact on preschoolers, helping to build their comfort level in a school setting, educators said.

“The preschoolers become part of the school family,” said Alice Krihak, superintendent of Winfield Township Schools in Union County, which expanded its preschool this year to serve 17 children. “They can be exposed to more because the opportunity is there.”

Because of the high concentration of poverty in their communities, many of the educators interviewed said a lot of the children they serve might not attend a preschool program if the public school didn’t offer it.

“Our children need this,” said Moran, Lindenwold’s preschool supervisor. “The research is so compelling showing that children who have high-quality preschool experiences transition to kindergarten better.” A lack of exposure to school at an early age can have negative repercussions, Moran said, adding that she’s seen first-hand how easily children can get discouraged if they enter kindergarten without going to preschool. “It’s overwhelming for them and they frustrate easily,” she said. “Their school experience starts out negative for them.”

IMPLEMENTING QUALITY PROGRAMS

Much of what makes the Abbott preschools so successful – whether they are housed in school classrooms, Head Start, or private day care centers -- is that the standards are the same across the board. Teachers in Abbott preschool programs must be certified or working toward certification and the curriculums must be researched-based and approved by the Department of Education. Like the Abbotts, DOE had planned to require expansion districts to implement researched-based curriculums. But because funding did not come through for the 10 school

districts featured in this policy brief, they did not have to meet this requirement.

Yet nearly all of them chose to adopt a DOE-approved curriculum when they expanded last fall. Beverly City, Clark, Eagleswood, Florham Park, Lindenwold, Pine Hill, and Winfield Township all opted to use Creative Curriculum; Linden chose Tools of the Mind; and Logan Township adopted High Scope. District administrators from these towns said they wanted their preschool programs to be up to speed with the state requirements despite the lack of dollars they received.

“The students get the prerequisite skills they need,” Caponegro of Florham Park said. “They can hit the ground running.”

The Clark district hired an education consultant to help its teachers learn the ins and outs of Creative Curriculum. Lindenwold’s preschool teachers were trained by Teaching Strategies, the publisher of the curriculum. In addition, Moran of Lindenwold, said the district hired additional preschool teachers who all had prior experience using Creative Curriculum in other districts. “Overall, our teachers and I are thrilled with the progress we’ve seen in our preschool students,” Moran said. “They have shown tremendous growth in the areas of language, self-regulation, cognition, and social and emotional development. I credit their progress to a full-day program with an evidence-based curriculum that has been implemented by skilled, caring teachers.” Linden’s preschool program prior to expansion did not use a researched-based curriculum. Fazio, the program’s supervisor, said making the switch to Tools of the Mind has been fabulous for the children and the teachers. The district held professional development seminars for teachers with Tools of the Mind instructors. “We wanted to do it right,” Fazio said. As for the children, she added, “They are writing. They are reading. The parents notice a difference.”

A PRIMER FOR PARENTS

Preschool can also be an invaluable primer for parents on how to become advocates for their children in the earliest stages of their schooling.

“A lot of parents who didn’t have a positive school experience themselves are very hesitant to get involved in school,” Moran said. “They may be intimidated.” But because parents of preschoolers are often more protective of their children because they are so young, Moran said a close communication tends to form between teachers and parents. “Parents feel good about it,” she added.

At Eagleswood Elementary School, teachers work very closely with parents of preschoolers to ensure there is a

bridge between home and school life. “You’re really working hand in hand with the parent,” said Snyder, the school’s superintendent. “If their first impression is a good one then it continues through the years. The parents really feel part of the school community.”

CONCLUSION

New Jersey’s preschool expansion plan is at a critical juncture. With the state’s latest early learning initiative, public schools have the opportunity to help continue to build strong educational foundations for as many as 70,000 low-income preschoolers over the next three years. The 10 school districts featured in this policy brief show how determination, creativity, and community support are key factors in creating and expanding successful preschool programs. Their efforts are to be commended and may even serve as a road map for other districts looking to deliver preschool to more students on limited budgets. Still, funding -- particularly for low-income children -- remains the crucial vehicle for getting all school districts where they ought to be. Local tax dollars, federal grants and even tuition can only go so far in paving the path for preschool expansion. State funding for high-quality preschool remains as important – if not more important -- as when the state created preschool programs throughout the 31 Abbott districts more than a decade ago to ensure poor students were given the same educational opportunities as their wealthier counterparts. Lawmakers got it right when they approved the latest school funding formula two years ago to build upon Abbott’s success. It is imperative that they get it right again by allocating state dollars for preschool expansion in the coming months and years. By just looking at the educational achievements of thousands of Abbott preschoolers, it is clear that state funding for quality preschool has been a sound investment. Providing funding to ensure educational equity to all low-income preschoolers throughout New Jersey is the next step.

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Deborah Snyder, Eagleswood Township Elementary School

Lynda Towns, Woodbine School District

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STATE FUNDING CRITICAL FOR PRESCHOOL EXPANSION’S LONG-TERM SUCCESS

Last fall the Cumberland County district began offering six full-day classrooms for 40 4-year-olds and 50 3-year-olds, including one classroom with mixed-ages. Although the district couldn’t be happier about the funding, Richard Dawkins, supervisor of the early childhood program, said no one is taking the Preschool Expansion Grant for granted. Because the district is not affluent, some members of the community expressed concern about what would happen if the district proceeded with expansion plans and then was forced to pull back because funding didn’t come through. “That will always be a general concern because you see how effective the program is and how our students are making progress in kindergarten,” Dawkins said.

In Little Egg Harbor Township, receiving the Preschool Expansion Grant allowed the district to offer all of its young learners full-day preschool. Last fall, the school district welcomed 141 3-year-olds and 196 4-year-olds – a total of 24 additional students from the previous school year. Although the district’s population did not increase dramatically, the grant allowed the district to expand beyond a combination of both half-day and full-day classrooms to all full-day classrooms. The district in Ocean County was concerned about how they would expand if they did not receive funding. “Without the funding, we would not be able to provide a safe, secure, and quality preschool program for our students,” said Assistant Superintendent Barbara Smith. Like Red Bank, Little Egg Harbor partners with Head Start to meet the demand of its large preschool population. The district houses 22 classes within its public school while two classrooms are housed within Head Start.

“Parents and educators support the program and understand the benefits it provides the students,” Smith said regarding community buy-in. “Our older population questions educating children at such an early age and the validity of the program.”

Little Egg Harbor officials have worked diligently on educating the public about preschool’s importance to ensure that the community understands how invaluable it is for the district’s young children, Smith said. “The preschool expansion funding will enable us to keep our program running as it is today,” Smith said. “If the funding disappears, we will do our best to continue to try to provide the necessary early intervention education our students deserve.”