

Policy Brief



Linking Learning

September 2010

Building Quality Kindergarten in New Jersey

By: Laura Fasbach Donovan

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 11 years, New Jersey has made significant investments in its public preschool programs. These high-quality preschools have given thousands of children a strong start on the path to school success.

To build on these gains, kindergarten programs need to be of the same high quality, as kindergarten is the critical “linchpin” that binds children’s preschool experience and elementary school years.

While high-quality programs and standards have made New Jersey’s public preschools one of the state’s best education success stories, kindergarten programs have more work to do to attain those same high standards.

Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) recently examined the status of kindergarten throughout the state and found that for these programs to become that strong linchpin for our young students, programs and standards must be strengthened and better coordination must take place between preschool and grades 1st through 3rd.

Over the last year, ACNJ conducted a survey of school administrators and held three focus groups for kindergarten teachers. Key findings include:

- **Weakened importance of kindergarten due to lack of mandate.** The fact that New Jersey is one of six states that does not mandate kindergarten¹ weakens its importance within the early elementary years, teachers said, adding they lack strong support and connection with other grades. This makes it more difficult to

build connected quality programs for their students, they said.

- **Full-day v. half-day kindergarten.** The majority of districts responding to the survey had full-day kindergarten. In districts still offering only half-day programs, administrators said a lack of facility space and funding were the main reasons that a full-day program was not in place. Teachers in half-day kindergarten programs said they felt pressure to adhere to the same rigorous academics expected in a full-day classroom – an impossible task because of time constraints.
- **Addressing PreK-3rd issues.** Kindergarten teachers said lack of time and being in different locations were the two main reasons why it was difficult to discuss and collaborate with colleagues on PreK-3rd issues. They said they frequently felt isolated from their colleagues who teach preschool and grades 1st through 3rd.
- **Need for guidelines.** Teachers expressed the need for clear kindergarten guidelines. In describing their programs and the lack of guidelines, it was clear that curricula varied greatly from district to district and often within a district.
- **Administrative leadership.** Ninety-three percent of survey respondents said building administrators were responsible for providing

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support and supervision to kindergarten teachers. However, kindergarten teachers said their supervisors often lacked expertise in early childhood. This hampered their ability to support and lead the development of a coordinated PreK-3rd system within their building or district.

- **Professional development for teachers.** Kindergarten teachers said their professional development often lacked relevance to issues specific to teaching young children.

To ensure that kindergarten becomes the strong linchpin between preschool and children’s early elementary years, New Jersey should:

- Make full-day kindergarten mandatory.
- Complete and implement kindergarten guidelines to create the highest quality programs for young children.
- Increase professional development for district administrators on early learning that supports the PreK-3rd continuum.
- Bolster professional development for kindergarten teachers that will enable them to grow professionally and improve learning outcomes for children.

SURVEY RESULTS

Last fall, ACNJ sent a survey to all New Jersey school districts to obtain a clearer picture of New Jersey’s kindergarten programs, the type of curricula and learning environments used, number of districts offering full- and half-day kindergarten and the level of supervisory support offered. In all, 142 school districts responded, out of approximately 600 districts. While the respondent base is small, it offers a valuable snapshot of kindergarten around the state from small shore communities to large urban areas.

Of the districts surveyed, 103 offered full-day programs, while 39 offered half-day programs. Lack of facilities space (81%) and funding (73%) were cited as the two main reasons for not offering full-day kindergarten.

When asked to describe the kindergarten learning environment, a little more than half - 59 percent - said classrooms contain a variety of interest areas, such as cozy reading spots, dramatic play areas, art and science space and play areas with a wide variety of materials for child choice time. Research shows that children learn

through social interactions with peers and adults, as well as through the use of appropriate classroom materials.²

Of concern, 37 percent said classrooms have tables or grouped desks, with just one or two interest areas and some materials for children to choose from. A few even stated that their classrooms are set up with desks or tables in a traditional elementary arrangement, rather than in a way that is more conducive to learning for these young children.

Support for kindergarten teachers came primarily from the building administrator (usually principals), with 93 percent of respondents saying the administrator is responsible for this role. Only 32 percent have a literacy coach that assists kindergarten teachers, while 26 percent have literacy supervisors and 22 percent employ math supervisors.

FOCUS GROUPS

To hear directly from teachers, ACNJ held three focus groups in May 2010 in the north, south and central regions of the state. Some 65 kindergarten teachers from 27 school districts participated in these discussions. Of these, 21 were teachers in full-day programs and six were half-day kindergarten. To ensure participants would speak openly about their experiences in the classroom, ACNJ is keeping the names of participating teachers and school districts anonymous.

The focus groups centered on several areas of interest including:

- Preschool through grade 3 connections
- Curriculum and assessment
- Administrative support and professional development

PRESCHOOL THROUGH GRADE 3 CONNECTIONS

While a growing body of research shows building a strong continuum from preschool to 3rd grade leads to increased school success³, focus group participants said the connections between kindergarten and the other early learning years were tenuous, often leaving kindergarten isolated from both preschool and grades 1st through 3rd.

While many administrators encourage communication among kindergarten teachers, some focus group participants said it was often impossible to have regular conversations with their colleagues, both due to a lack of time and the fact that they are often housed in different buildings.

“It’s encouraged but it’s sometimes hard to find the opportunities,” one teacher said. “Sometimes faculty meetings are so structured and it’s hard to find the time.”

Some schools, however, make this a priority by setting aside time each week so kindergarten teachers can engage in “common planning.”

Teachers further explained that the schools they work in focus more on what is going on in upper grades and often fail to incorporate kindergarten into the planning. Many teachers said there is a lack of communication among kindergarten and 1st grade instructors, making it difficult - if not impossible - to develop a system of meaningful transitions for children from grade to grade.

One teacher worried that kindergarten wasn’t “bridging the gap” in the Pre-K through 3rd continuum. “I’m concerned about the transition between kindergarten and first,” the teacher said. “First grade teachers are complaining that the kindergarten kids are not coming to them prepared.”

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Kindergarten teachers said they need more meaningful training to be more effective in their classrooms. “We certainly wish there was professional development that targeted kindergarten,” one teacher said. Training “rarely, if ever, has to do with the kindergarten level,” another teacher said.

A minority of respondents reported that they participate in “Professional Learning Communities,” in which teachers and school administrators work and learn collaboratively and participate in shared decision-making to increase their effectiveness.⁴ The teachers who participate in these communities say this approach has addressed their specific issues, but very few actually had access to these “communities.”

SUPPORT AND SUPERVISION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

Teachers stated that while their administrators were generally supportive, they often lacked expertise in early childhood and were unable to provide meaningful supervision for both kindergarten teachers and for coordinating the early learning years. “They listen but they don’t always understand our needs,” stated one teacher.

KINDERGARTEN GUIDELINES ON THE HORIZON

The Department of Education, along with early childhood experts, has been working on kindergarten guidelines that will map out how to build a successful kindergarten environment to improve the quality of those classrooms for children around the state.

These *Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines* are designed to give administrators, teachers, coaches and teacher educators guidance and resources to effectively

implement the components of a high-quality kindergarten program. These guidelines are based on research and best practices in the field and are informed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The *Guidelines* clarify appropriate kindergarten structures, practices and environments.

“We’ve been heavily focused on preschool and have had a lot of success in creating high quality preschool programs,” said Ellen Wolock, director, Office of Preschool in the DOE’s Division of Early Childhood Education.

“Kindergarten teachers need support in providing more optimal classrooms for their students,” Wolock added. “The best way to do that is to provide them with a structure and framework for what it takes to provide a good kindergarten classroom.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

For thousands of New Jersey children each year, kindergarten should be the linchpin binding their preschool experiences with their elementary school journey. While high standards and high expectations have made preschool one of the state’s greatest education success stories, ACNJ’s close examination of kindergarten programs shows New Jersey needs to bring these programs up to the same caliber as its public preschools.

By embracing a cohesive early learning policy agenda, New Jersey lawmakers, policymakers and educators can give these young students the strongest start in that academic journey.

► Make full-day kindergarten mandatory

While New Jersey is known nationally for the quality of its schools, it is one of six states in which kindergarten is not required by law. Although nearly all school districts currently offer kindergarten, legislatively mandating it would cement the critical role kindergarten plays in every child’s early learning experience. Making kindergarten mandatory in these uncertain economic times would also eradicate any risk of kindergarten programs being cut from school budgets.

It is also critical that all districts offer full-day programs. Research shows that children who attend full-day kindergarten gain stronger literacy, math and social skills during this linchpin year, compared to their peers in half-day sessions.⁵

► Complete and implement guidelines for high-quality kindergarten.

ACNJ supports the education department’s plan to develop and adopt guidelines for New Jersey’s kindergarten programs. They will help minimize the huge

variations of curriculum implementation identified in both the surveys and the focus groups.

The new guidelines are slated to be released by the end of the 2010-2011 school year, according to state officials. Having effective guidelines in place will serve as a strong foundation for building better kindergarten classrooms across the state. These guidelines should address all critical areas, including curricula, classroom space, teacher and administrator development and coordination with preschool and grades 1st through 3rd.

► **Increase professional development for district administrators on early learning.**

School administrators need to better understand early learning and how to effectively support and supervise staff from preschool through 3rd grade.

Gaining insight in this area will help administrators make well-informed decisions about academic planning as it pertains to kindergarten and the early learning continuum and provide meaningful support to teachers that will help them help their students.

Some steps have already been taken to address this issue. During the 2009-2010 school year, ACNJ, the New Jersey Department of Education and the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association collaborated in developing and implementing a “Preschool – 3rd Grade Leadership Training Series.” This series, attended by nearly 200 district administrators throughout the state, provided professional development and technical assistance on key PreK-3rd issues. The series will be repeated in the fall, along with an advanced series for participants in the first trainings.

► **Increase opportunities for relevant professional development for kindergarten teachers.**

Teaching kindergarten is a unique experience that focuses on academic instruction, as well as the social and emotional development of these young learners. Kindergarten teachers need training opportunities that directly improve their classroom effectiveness. General trainings that leave kindergarten out of the conversation are a disservice to kindergarten teachers and their young students.

CONCLUSION

New Jersey must adapt its kindergarten practices to ensure they are aligned with the high standards and quality found in its public preschool classrooms and can link with the elementary school grades. At the state, district and school level, kindergarten must be seen as the key linchpin in a child’s early learning years. This will go a long way toward ensuring that our youngest learners are put on the path to school success.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Kauerz, K. (2010) *PreK-3rd: Putting Full-Day Kindergarten in the Middle*. New York, New York: Foundation for Child Development.

² Tufts University Eliot- Pearson Department of Child Development (n.d). *Eliot-Pearson Children’s School Curriculum Guidelines*. Retrieved July 22, 2011 from <http://ase.tufts.edu/epcs/documents/aboutCurriculumGuidelines>

³ Graves, B. (2006). *PK-3: What Is It and How Do We Know It Works?* New York, NY: FCD Policy Brief, Advancing PK-3, No. 4.

⁴ Astuto, T., Clark, D., Read, A-M., McGree, K. & Fernandez, L. (1993). *Challenges to dominant assumptions controlling educational reform*. Andover, MA: Regional Laboratory for the Education Improvement of the Northeast and Islands.

⁵ Elicker, J., & Mathur, S. (1997) *What do they do all day? Comprehensive evaluation of a full-day kindergarten*. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12(4), 459-480.

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This policy brief was funded through a grant from the Foundation for Child Development.

For additional information contact Cynthia Rice at crice@acnj.org or (973) 643-3876.

Advocates for Children of New Jersey is the state’s leading child action organization, working to give every child a chance to grow up safe, healthy and educated.

Advocates for Children of New Jersey
35 Halsey Street
Newark, New Jersey 07102
(973) 643-3876 Fax (973) 643-3876
advocates@acnj.org www.acnj.org