
Policy Brief



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Linking Learning: Congress Should Follow New Jersey's Lead on Early Learning

By: Cynthia Rice, Esq.

INTRODUCTION

Congress is currently considering updating the key legislation that governs K-12 public education - the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Noticeably missing from the current law, more commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), is a comprehensive early learning agenda, which span from preschool through 3rd grade.

The Obama Administration has repeatedly voiced strong support for quality early learning programs. The Administration's proposal for ESEA's reauthorization is aimed at ensuring that every child receives a world class education. The plan however, fails to address this critical time when young children should be acquiring the skills needed to succeed in school.

Once reauthorized, the new law will replace NCLB and have sweeping effects on the education children receive in classrooms throughout the nation, including New Jersey. That is why it is critical that early learning be a key priority of this plan.

To understand the benefits of quality early learning, Congress need look no further than New Jersey. Since 1998, the state has embraced preschool as a prerequisite for low-income children to participate in quality early learning programs that will help them to be successful in kindergarten and beyond.

New Jersey is also building on its preschool successes by linking learning from preschool through 3rd grade (PreK-3rd) to create consistent, quality programs in the early elementary years. Closely coordinating the PreK-3rd experience builds on the benefits of early learning from

year to year and increases the chances of school success. This winning combination of high-quality preschool that is linked with the early elementary years has been the driving force in making New Jersey's 4th grade reading scores the second highest in the nation.

The reauthorization of ESEA provides the perfect opportunity to learn from the New Jersey experience and provide all young children throughout the country with the supports critical in becoming successful in school and beyond, increasing achievement and narrowing the achievement gap.



NEW JERSEY'S NATIONAL MODEL FOR EARLY LEARNING

Since 1998, 3- and 4- year olds in New Jersey's poorest school districts have benefited from high-quality preschools. This nationally-recognized program is

Giving Every Child A Chance

35 Halsey Street, 2nd Floor, Newark, NJ 07102 • (973) 643-3876 • Fax (973) 643-9153 • advocates@acnj.org • www.acnj.org

implemented in classrooms in public schools, private provider and Head Start centers. With standards the same across all three locations, these programs include small class size and curriculum that research has shown to be effective in giving our youngest learners a strong start in school.

The program also has recognized the link between quality programs and highly-trained teachers. It provided both professional development opportunities and scholarship funds to ensure all preschool teachers, whether in a public preschool, private provider or Head Start centers, have a Bachelor's degree and certification in early childhood education.

Children who have participated in this program are reaping the benefits of our state's investment. Recent studies show that low-income children who have attended these preschools have:

- Significantly improved in language, literacy and math.¹
- Experienced a reduction in repeating a grade - cutting it in half when children have participated in the program for two years.²

These positive results led state lawmakers in 2008, to include a plan for preschool expansion in New Jersey's school funding formula. Although the state's fiscal problems have stalled funding, the plan when fully implemented would expand preschool to all low-income 3- and 4- year olds throughout the state.³

New Jersey has also recognized that in order to maximize its preschool investment, school districts must develop a seamless, well-coordinated early learning experience for young children beginning in preschool and spanning the remaining early learning years til 3rd grade. New Jersey's Department of Education has remained committed to the early learning continuum by having a Division of Early Childhood Education responsible for the PreK-3rd years, as well as collaborating with other organizations to provide professional development to ensure that district administrators have the skills necessary to be leaders in the PreK-3rd continuum.

For thousands of low-income children, the benefits of a coordinated PreK-3rd grade approach are showing significant results that begin in preschool and are being sustained into the early learning years.⁴ On the national Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), the percentage of New Jersey 4th graders reading at grade level is higher than every other state except Massachusetts. The achievement gap for disadvantaged and minority students has been shrunk in those low-income districts that have implemented intensive literacy

supports at the elementary level and aligned preschool and the early grades.⁵

New Jersey's data support the decades of research showing that high-quality early learning experiences produce long-term gains, including higher achievement levels and reduced school failure and dropouts.⁶ Any education reform should include an investment in children during these critical years.

THE BLUEPRINT FOR EDUCATION REFORM LACKS A COMPREHENSIVE EARLY LEARNING AGENDA

The Obama Administration's proposal for ESEA reauthorization falls short in providing the foundation necessary for early learning reform. The current proposal, entitled *The Blueprint for Education Reform*⁷ does outline steps that should be taken to support quality early learning, including increased professional development opportunities for teachers of young children, improvement in student outcomes and early learning assessment systems.

The *Blueprint* fails to address the real need to provide funds for the programs. This lack of commitment to actual program funding is a missed opportunity for planning and implementing this proven, successful initiative that can close the achievement gap and ensure all students graduate from high school – two main goals of the *Blueprint*.

ACNJ believes it is crucial that the *Blueprint* include policies that help school districts improve and expand access to preschool for 3- and 4- year olds, boost kindergarten quality, and improve coordination from preschool through 3rd grade.

ACNJ'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCLUDING EARLY LEARNING IN ESEA LAW

As Congress continues to deliberate on ESEA's reauthorization, ACNJ urges that the following recommendations be considered:

◆ Support a new federal PreK-3rd Incentive Fund.

The *Blueprint* currently proposes that "Title I" dollars continue to be used to fund preschool programs. These federal funds are provided to schools and school districts with high-percentages of low-income children to help them meet state academic standards.⁸

Like most school districts throughout the nation, New Jersey's districts rarely use these dollars for preschool and early learning programs. Even with the state's commitment to quality early learning, New Jersey schools continue to allocate these funds almost exclusively for K-12 programs and requirements. With an incentive fund dedicated to the early learning years, states and districts

will have a real opportunity to expand and improve the quality of these programs based on the unique needs and capacities at the state and district level.

The federal government would also be sending a clear message of its commitment to the link between ensuring that all students are “college and career-ready” and quality early learning that begins before kindergarten and continues during those first critical elementary school years.

◆ **Support districts that implement quality PreK-3rd strategies as a priority for addressing the issues of low-performing schools.**

Those low-income districts in New Jersey that provide high-quality, full-day preschool and kindergarten, focus on literacy, use data to inform instruction and align standards and assess curriculum within the PreK-3rd continuum have been most successful in closing student achievement gap.⁹ These districts had the necessary tools and funding to accomplish these gains. ESEA’s reauthorization should make it a priority to include quality preschool and full-day kindergarten within the larger early learning continuum of PreK-3rd.

◆ **Reward states with Early Childhood Advisory Councils that create quality early learning programs and align PreK-3rd systems.**

The establishment of Early Childhood Advisory Councils in every state provides a unique opportunity for thoughtful statewide evaluation and planning for improving early learning programs from birth to age 5. Linking this work with the first years of elementary education is a way of addressing children’s issues from birth through 3rd grade. Congress should consider rewarding states with increased funding when their councils consider and address issues that promote well-aligned PreK-3rd systems at the state and district levels.

◆ **Change the federal school funding formula to include children at age 3.**

While many states like New Jersey include 3- and 4- year olds as part of their public education system, ESEA’s current funding formula does not reflect that trend. Amendments to ESEA should be made to support the need for quality learning experiences for young children that begin at age 3. New Jersey data indicates that when children begin preschool at age 3 and experience two years of a quality program, they outperform their peers who have either experienced one year or none at all.¹⁰

◆ **Include all early childhood teachers in professional development programs.**

The success of New Jersey’s preschool program is due, in large part, to the professional development provided to all preschool teachers in our lowest-income districts. Teachers in Head Start and private provider programs

were given the opportunity to return to school and obtain their BA degrees and preschool through 3rd grade certificate.

Professional development opportunities continue to be made available to all preschool teachers in classrooms located in these low-income districts, regardless of whether they teach in a classroom in a public school or a private or Head Start setting. Such thoughtful and inclusive planning has systemically improved the overall quality of learning for these young students.¹¹

Following New Jersey’s lead, ESEA should provide support for meaningful educational and professional development opportunities for all teachers of young children. These steps will not only improve teacher quality but maximize the benefits to young children’s learning.

◆ **Integrate preschool data in all longitudinal data systems that measure students’ progress through college.**

Because young children often spend their days in a variety of formal and informal settings, many states and individual school districts continue to struggle with how best to link information from these settings into their own data systems. ESEA reauthorization should reflect the importance of these data and mandate and support the integration of that information into state longitudinal systems.

The reauthorization of ESEA provides an opportunity for federal education law to embrace the clear evidence that quality early learning can provide children with the skills to succeed in college and a career. We believe that all young children, in New Jersey and beyond our borders, should be afforded the same opportunity.

Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) is the trusted, independent voice putting children’s needs first for more than 30 years. ACNJ’s work results in better laws and policies, more effective funding and stronger services for children and families. Most importantly, more children are given the chance to grow up safe, healthy and better educated.

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

FOOTNOTES

¹ Frede, E., Jung, K., Barnett, W.S., Lamy C., 7 Figueras, A., (2007) The Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Study (APPLES) Interim Report. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research and the College of New Jersey.

² Frede, E., Jung, K., Barnett, W.S., Figueras, A. (2009) The Apples Blossom: Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES) Preliminary Results through 2nd Grade Interim Report. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research and the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers, The State University.

³ N.J.S.A. P.L. 2007, c. 260.

⁴ Frede, E. (2009)

⁵ MacInnes, Gordon (2009) In Plain Sight: Difficult Lesson from New Jersey's Expensive Effort to Close the Achievement Gap. New York: Century Foundation Press.

⁶ Barnett, W.S. (2008) Preschool Education and Its Lasting Effects: Research and Policy Implications. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

⁷ Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Blueprint for Education Reform, <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/ellsec/leg/blueprint/index.html>

⁸ Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies (Title I, Part A), U.S. Department of Education.

<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html>.

⁹ Barnett. (2010)

¹⁰ Frede (2007)

¹¹ Donovan, L. (J2009) Abbott Preschool: 10 Years Later, An Added Bonus: The Educational Success Story of New Jersey's Preschool Teachers. Newark, NJ: Association for Children of New Jersey.

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