



# HARVARD EDUCATION LETTER

*This article is reprinted  
from the January/February  
2006 issue of the Harvard  
Education Letter.*

## Degrees of Improvement

### States push to reverse the decline in preschool teachers' qualifications

by Michael Sadowski

**B**etter preparation for elementary reading, writing, and math. Lower rates of special education placement and grade retention. Higher incomes and lower incidence of arrest during adulthood. The short- and long-term benefits of quality preschool education are well documented by research dating back decades.

Yet at a time when recognition of preschool's importance seems to be growing, the educational qualifications of preschool teachers are steadily declining. Around the country, advocates, policymakers, and teacher educators are struggling to find ways to improve the skills and credentials of those who teach our nation's youngest students.

Stephen Herzenberg, executive director of Pennsylvania's Keystone Research Center, is one voice in a growing chorus of researchers calling for higher standards for the nation's preK educators. An MIT-trained economist who has examined workforce trends in a wide variety of fields, Herzenberg says preK education stands out as a profession marked by abysmal pay and an exceptionally high percentage of workers without health care and other benefits. In a recent report for the Economic Policy Institute titled "Losing Ground in Early Childhood Education," Herzenberg and coauthors Mark Price and David Bradley note:

- Center-based preschool educators (teachers and administrators) have an average hourly salary rate of just \$10.00 per hour, slightly more than half that of all female college graduates (\$19.23).
- Only about one-third of center-based preK educators have health-care benefits through their jobs, less than half the percentage for all workers nationally.

- The proportion of early childhood educators without health insurance is three times as high as in the overall workforce (21 percent vs. 7 percent)

Although educators in school-based preschool may fare somewhat better, the researchers note that school-based preschool makes up a relatively small percentage of the profession (less than 20 percent). As for home-based preschool educators, the researchers say their pay and benefits are even lower.

**About 80 percent of preschool teachers in the Abbott districts now have a bachelor's degree and preK-3 certification.**

#### Declining Credentials

Herzenberg and his colleagues are particularly concerned about the declining professional credentials of preschool personnel. According to their report, in the last two decades the percentage of center-based preschool teachers and administrators with a bachelor's degree has declined from 43 percent (in 1983-85) to just 30 percent today, while the number of preschool educators with only a high school degree or less has risen from 24 percent to 30 percent. In particular, younger preschool teachers and administrators are significantly less likely to have a bachelor's degree than their middle- and retirement-aged colleagues, suggesting that these downward trends are likely to continue. This decline in preschool educators' level of educational attainment has occurred even as the average educational attainment of U.S. workers overall has increased.

A study currently under way at California's Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, among others, will investigate the downward trend in preK educators' educational attainment, but Herzenberg has some theories about the causes. First, he believes the field's persistently low compensation has not kept up with other career options

## For Further Information



E. Frede. "Assessment in a Continuous Improvement Cycle: New Jersey's Abbott Preschool Program." New York: National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force of the Pew Charitable Trusts. For information, contact [efrede@tcnj.edu](mailto:efrede@tcnj.edu).

W.S. Gilliam and C.M. Marcheseault. "Part 1: Who's Teaching Our Youngest Students? Teacher Education and Training, Experience, Compensation and Benefits, and Assistant Teachers," in *From Capitols to Classrooms, Policies to Practice: State-Funded Prekindergarten at the Classroom Level*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Child Study Center, 2005. Available online at [nieer.org/resources/files/NPSTeachers.pdf](http://nieer.org/resources/files/NPSTeachers.pdf).

S. Herzenberg, M. Price, and D. Bradley. *Losing Ground in Early Childhood Education: Declining Workforce Qualifications in an Expanding Industry*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2005. Available online at [www.epi.org/content.cfm/ece](http://www.epi.org/content.cfm/ece).

C. Lobman, S. Ryan, and J. McLaughlin. "Reconstructing Teacher Education to Prepare Qualified Preschool Teachers: Lessons from New Jersey." *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, in press.

for college-educated women and has thus made maintaining high professional standards difficult. (Women make up the vast majority of the preK teaching force.) Second, Herzenberg says that due to population trends and increasing numbers of women entering the workforce, the number of young children who now attend preschool has grown dramatically in the last two decades.

"When it was a smaller field, ECE [early childhood education] had a highly qualified workforce," Herzenberg says. "But as the field has tripled, it has been hard to hold on to this workforce."

### New Jersey Raises the Bar

One state that has made a massive effort to upgrade the educational qualifications of preK teachers in certain districts is New Jersey. A 1998 state Supreme Court decision in a long-standing educational equity case (*Abbott v. Burke*) required the state to fund high-quality full-day preschool for all three- and four-year-olds in New Jersey's 30 lowest-income districts. Among the provisions mandated by the court—including class size capped at 15, teaching aides in every classroom, and developmentally appropriate curricula—was the requirement that all preschool teachers have at least a bachelor's degree, specialized training in early childhood education, and state certification in the education of children from preschool through grade 3.

The court gave preK teachers working in the so-called Abbott districts four years—later extended to six years at the recommendation of early childhood education advocates—to obtain a bachelor's degree and the appropriate preK–3 certification if they wanted to continue teaching in the districts. This meant that many teachers who had not been on the other side of the desk for years—even decades—had to become college students again.

Ellen Frede, an associate professor at the College of New Jersey and former assistant to the commissioner in the state's Office of Early Childhood Education, says that prior to the court ruling, only about 35 percent of the preschool teachers in the Abbott districts had a bachelor's

degree. "And that was 35 percent of many fewer classrooms and many fewer teachers," Frede notes, pointing out that the preschool student population in the districts has grown dramatically in the period since the court ruling.

Yet a decision that might have precipitated a workforce crisis instead resulted in a transformation of the preK teaching profession. A large majority of preK teachers in the Abbott preschools took on the challenge to obtain a bachelor's degree, in part because the reward for doing so was considerable: the same salary and benefits for preK teachers as for elementary school teachers in the same district.

The state also made the degree programs accessible, both financially and geographically. Through the state's Commission for Higher Education, teacher education programs received funds to help expand their early childhood faculties and offerings, and prospective students received substantial scholarships to help them pay tuition and other expenses. In addition, about 60 percent of the colleges and universities brought classes directly to the Abbott school districts so that teachers could meet their degree requirements without having to travel far from home.

"Some of the colleges became very creative about offering the courses within the school district," says Kathleen Priestley, supervisor of early childhood education for the Orange (NJ) Public School District. According to Priestley, all but two of the preschool teachers in Orange have completed the requirements for their bachelor's degrees, and she expects the other two to do so soon.

Frede estimates that about 80 percent of preschool teachers in the Abbott districts now have a bachelor's degree and state certification in teaching preschool through grade 3. Researchers note, however, that these credentials go only so far in preparing teachers for preK and early elementary education. Carrie Lobman, Sharon Ryan, and Jill McLaughlin, three researchers in early childhood education at Rutgers University, recently studied 12 of the 14 institutions credentialing early childhood educators in New Jersey. They found that while these programs' outreach and recruitment efforts were highly effective, they were lacking in some areas in which preK teachers say they need the most help, such as special education and teaching English-language learners. More attention was also given to early literacy than to areas like math and science.

### Making a Difference

Overall, however, the Abbott initiative seems to be making an important difference in the quality of preK instruction in the state's highest-poverty cities and towns. A recent report by Frede summarizing a set of evaluations in the Abbott preschools notes "a sustained and dramatic improvement" in the quality of preschool education in those districts. By one measure, the percentage of classrooms scoring in the "very low quality" range dropped from 12 percent in 2003 to just 2 percent in 2005. The evaluation also noted substantial positive effects on children's development of key early literacy skills.

### Editor's Note

This article is part of an ongoing series on the education of children from preK through grade 3, made possible through the support of the Foundation for Child Development. For additional information, visit the *Harvard Education Letter* online resource, Focus on Early Childhood Education, at [www.hel-earlyed.org](http://www.hel-earlyed.org). Special Web features this month include:

- "The Long-Term Benefits of High-Quality Preschool"
- *Voices from the Field*: Responses from scholars, policymakers, and practitioners
- Newly updated resources on preK–3 education

## What Does Effective PreK Teaching Look Like?

The new requirement that preK teachers in New Jersey's Abbott districts hold a bachelor's degree is based on the assumption that this credential makes a difference in the quality of instruction a teacher provides. Experts differ on whether a bachelor's degree by itself can make someone a better teacher. But a number of studies have pointed to specific benefits of the degree when it is combined with specialized instruction in early childhood education.

"Children who are educated by teachers with both a bachelor's degree and specialized training in child development and early education have been found to be more sociable, exhibit a more developed use of language, and perform at a higher level on cognitive tasks than children who are cared for by less qualified adults," write Carrie Lobman, Sharon Ryan, and Jill McLaughlin, three researchers in early childhood education at Rutgers University, in a recent report on the training of New Jersey's newly expanded preK teaching force. Lobman adds, however, that the requirement of a BA and specialized training are only a "baseline," and that the quality of a preschool teacher's preparation is just as important.

### Research-Based Guidelines

In response to the *Abbott v. Burke* court decision (see main article), the New Jersey Department of Education provides research-based guidelines for high-quality preK teaching. According to these guidelines, effective preK teachers:

- demonstrate clear knowledge of child learning and development
- support "all aspects of the child" by addressing linguistic, cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development
- strike a balance between child-initiated and teacher-initiated activities
- incorporate small-group and individual activities, with a minimum of whole-group instruction
- employ strategies for working with children with special needs
- understand and address the needs of English-language learners
- involve parents and guardians in ways that enhance student learning

Frede stops short of saying that the new credentialing requirements for teachers are responsible for the changes, but she does believe that the kind of skill-building preK teachers are learning in their college programs makes a difference. "You have to have a huge bag of tricks in your repertoire to help kids develop," she says. "That's why it takes highly educated, well-trained people. They need to be paying attention to a lot of skill development issues."

Other states are joining the effort to upgrade the preK

College of New Jersey researcher Ellen Frede, editor of the guidelines for the department's Office of Early Childhood Education, says the integration of play and learning is a critical element. "Play is essential to activity-based learning and to the development of self-regulating skills," she explains. "It's all about cognitive process development."

Lobman agrees that early childhood teaching suffers when educators see learning and play as discrete activities. This problem is exacerbated by the recent emphasis on testing in the upper grades, which many early childhood educators say is seeping downward. "The focus in kindergarten has been more and more on direct instruction," she says, "and play has been pushed out."

### Continuity from PreK to Grade 3

The discontinuity between preK and elementary school instruction also concerns many early childhood education researchers. Ideally, says Frede, children's preschool and elementary classroom experiences would look more like each other and would be aligned more closely, so that children's learning could build continuously and the developmentally oriented approach of the preschool years could be extended into the early elementary grades. This philosophy is part of the reason New Jersey is requiring teachers in the state-funded Abbott districts to be certified to teach from preschool through third grade.

One approach being tried in a number of school districts around the country is the preK–3 model, whereby preK classrooms are housed within the same school system—sometimes even the same building—as kindergarten and the early elementary grades, enabling teachers and administrators to communicate with each other about students and integrate curriculum more effectively (see "Bridging the PreK–Elementary Divide," *HEL*, July/August 2005).

While the recent focus in New Jersey has been primarily on expanding access to preK, Frede says this kind of continuity would further support the state's goal of improving educational outcomes and closing early achievement gaps: "We want continuity of programming for children. Understanding where they're coming from and where they're going is critical."

—Michael Sadowski

teaching force. In Oklahoma's state-funded full-day preschool program—the largest in the United States—preK teachers receive compensation on a par with teachers of elementary-age children and are required to hold both a bachelor's degree and an early childhood credential. In California, early childhood education advocates have gathered signatures to put the Preschool for All initiative on the ballot for June 2006. The initiative would establish state-funded preschool for all California four-year-

### For Further Information



New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood Education. "Abbott Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines." Trenton, NJ: Author, February 2003, updated July 2005.

olds. If passed, it would include educational requirements for all preschool teachers equivalent to those in Oklahoma's state-funded programs and New Jersey's Abbott districts.

The fate of the Preschool for All initiative will likely hinge on the willingness of taxpayers to fund preschool for the state's huge (and growing) child population. A March 2005 RAND study puts the price tag at \$1.7 billion—but notes that this investment would yield \$4.4 billion in new benefits to California residents over the lifetimes of each cohort of children that completes a year of preschool. In New Jersey, the Abbott preK program carries an annual price tag of \$450 million—approximately \$11,000 per pupil. Frede notes, however, that preschool education in the Abbott districts still costs less than that of elementary and secondary students in the state. Furthermore, she argues, the documented gaps in kindergarten readiness between children who have attended good preschools and those who haven't make it clear that high-quality preschool—taught by highly credentialed teachers—is just as

fundamental a right as a good K–12 education.

"This [preschool] is public school," says Frede. "Why would we think it's OK for teachers who teach three-year-olds not to have the same qualifications as someone who teaches second grade?" ■

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These articles were originally published in the January/February 2006 issue of the *Harvard Education Letter* (vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 4-6). For more information, call 1-800-513-0763 or visit [www.edletter.org](http://www.edletter.org).