



Association for Children
of New Jersey

Inside and Out

Developing an Advocacy Strategy for New Jersey's PK3 Agenda

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Evidence continues to mount indicating that successful education programs for young children need to be comprehensive, span several years and target important education transition periods.

In order to promote such academic success, the implementation of a PK3 continuum incorporates these principles into a broader educational framework.¹ This learning concept combines the subject matter focus of grades kindergarten through 3rd grade with early education's concentration on child development.² In this way, children's learning experiences will be built on past experiences and connected to those yet to come.

While any PK3 strategy must include alignment, school organization, qualified teachers, classrooms as learning environments and accountability to parents and community, successfully implementing these components is no easy feat. Without adequate state support and guidance, understanding and buy-in by district administrators and staff and a higher education system that addresses the educational needs of

children between the ages of 3 and 8 years old, few PK3 systems will be able to independently attain the PK3 goals for academic success.

New Jersey has a unique opportunity to realize that vision. With a nationally recognized high quality preschool program in place in its poorest school districts, a relatively new and improving P-3 teaching certificate, a restructured Department of Education (DOE) that includes a Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) and a new school funding formula that will expand quality preschool to nearly 30,000 children beyond the 40,000 already being served, the stars may be aligned for the successful development and implementation of PK3 systems.

This policy brief attempts to seize on the opportunity provided by the state's preschool expansion initiative to help education advocates and school district administrators look at a broader picture beyond the development of new preschool programs. It attempts to identify steps that must be taken by the state and key educational stakeholders to both plan for preschool expansion and to successfully implement PK3 systems in schools throughout the state.

New Jersey Has a Unique Opportunity to Realize a PK3 vision.

Even with so many important components either developing or already in place, **the road towards the PK3 vision remains significant, particularly in the area of advocacy.** Issues pertinent to the long-term success of these systems remain in question, including:

- Determining whether district administrators embrace the concept of the PK3 continuum;
- Determining whether districts understand what a PK3 system entails;
- Determining whether P-3 university programs adequately prepare prospective early childhood teachers to meet the educational needs of young children and teach within the PK3 continuum;
- Determining whether the State has an adequate supply of well-qualified early childhood teachers;
- Determining whether the DECE, responsible for preschool through 3rd grade programs, has adequate staff and expertise to provide guidance and support to school districts that will be implementing PK3 systems;
- Determining whether PK3 supports will be required of districts implementing or expanding preschool programs;
- Determining the strategies necessary to advocate that the timing is right in New Jersey to implement PK3 systems—both at the state and district level and identifying the entities that can provide those supports.

NJ's PK3 History

The impetus of New Jersey's increasing commitment to a PK3 continuum stems from the *Abbott* preschool decisions. The New Jersey Supreme Court, in a series of rulings handed down since 1998, mandated that the state's poorest school districts provide high quality preschool to all 3- and 4-year olds, which included small class size, certified teachers and the implementation of a research-based curricula.

Since 1998, the education of Abbott preschoolers has changed dramatically. Children in these districts are reaping the benefits from the increased level of teacher education and the supports provided for curriculum and instruction. A recent study found that classroom quality in Abbott districts continues to improve and children's skills in language, literacy and math show measured improvement at least through the end of kindergarten. Moreover, Abbott's mixed delivery system of public preschool, community-based and Head Start classrooms scored virtually the same across almost all measures of quality teaching practices.³

Recently, the state has planned to emulate these successes for other low-income children throughout the state. New Jersey's new school funding formula will dramatically increase access to high-quality preschool for all low-income children, regardless of the district in which they live.

While the Abbott preschool gains have been tremendous, they did not happen overnight. These successes would never have been realized without the development of early childhood infrastructures at the district and state levels, as well as the state's institutions of higher education. Districts hired early childhood experts to oversee programs and support and mentor staff. The Department of Education created a Division that focused on early childhood education. The state's four-year institutions of higher education developed P-3 certification programs to meet the specialized training requirements of the Court decision.

Even with a quality program in place and the necessary supports available to sustain

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that level of quality, **an agenda that highlights preschool “in isolation” will not ensure that the gains made in early years will last.** It is true that the focus on early learning in Abbott districts has not solely been on preschool. These districts are required to implement full-day kindergarten and intensive early literacy programs. It appears that this winning early learning equation is bringing about the results intended. Findings from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that New Jersey's fourth-grade scores are among the best in the nation in both reading and math.⁴

It is uncertain, however, as to whether these successes have been because of the development of a coordinated and integrated system of learning or three separate programs that often work independently of each other. Recent reports indicate that there is much work to be done in developing such coordinated systems.⁵ Regardless of the answer, **the time is right to bring attention to the importance of implementing PK3 systems.** The following are five advocacy steps that must be taken to ensure that both the districts and the state are on their way to successfully implementing K-3 systems.

Taking Advantage of New Jersey's Preschool Expansion Initiative

New Jersey's new school funding formula calls for the largest expansion of full-day preschool for low-income 3- and 4- year olds since the *Abbott* decisions nearly ten years ago. While low-income districts beyond the 31 Abbott districts will implement the lion's share of the expansion, all other districts, regardless of community income, will be required to provide a preschool program for children who are eligible for free and reduced lunch.

While the goal of this intervention program is to close the achievement gap between low-income children and children from higher income districts, the initiative provides districts with a unique opportunity to not only implement a program that will benefit its youngest students, but to assess and plan how this new or expanded program will be linked with its existing K-3 programs.

Beginning or expanding a preschool as a “silo” program, without thinking about coordinating and aligning it to existing K-3 programs will dilute the potential long-term educational gains of the participating children.

Collaboration is key. Immediately, both the DECE, newly restructured to be responsi-

ble for programs between preschool and 3rd grade and educational leaders, including the educational associations and early childhood advocates must modify the preschool expansion conversation to include program development in the context of strengthening districts' PK3 systems. This will not be an easy task as districts grapple with beginning new programs or significantly expanding what currently exists. Understandably, their focus will be on preschool. **It is up to the educational leaders, both inside and out of the DECE, to expand the conversation to include the long-term benefits of “thinking outside the box” in building a strong PK3 system.** The first step for all stakeholders will be “getting the word out.”

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Advocating Now for PK3 Systems

Although it is likely that most educators have heard of a PK3 system, it is equally as likely that few can accurately describe one. In a recent report that examined the status of PK3 systems in New Jersey's school districts, district administrators were asked to describe how they will “ensure smooth transitions from preschool to elementary education?” The responses varied tremendously from describing specific transition “events” planned for the children to providing preschool and kindergarten teachers with opportunities to meet and discuss their respective curricula, grade-level objectives and/or articulation.⁶

Part of the problem has been a lack of regulatory guidance by the state. While New Jersey's existing regulations include some of the necessary elements that support a PK3 system, on the whole, they do not provide effective guidance in either defining or implementing such a system.⁷

Beginning or expanding a preschool as a “silo” program, without thinking about coordinating and aligning it to existing K-3 programs will not only be a missed opportunity, but will dilute the potential long-term educational gains of the participating children.

While stronger and more specific regulations are necessary, early childhood advocates, educational associations and the DECE must work collaboratively and discuss the

importance of implementing PK3 systems in the context of the preschool expansion. It is assumed that the opportunities for bringing districts together will increase in the upcoming school year, as districts have one year to plan for the expansion.

These “learning opportunities” must be used effectively and strategically. **While the nuts and bolts of preschool expansion are critical, written information and professional development programs must include information on PK3 systems.** Access to more information must be available explaining that such a system includes a sequential curricula that builds on every child’s cognitive and social development when moving from preschool through 3rd grade, and offers a continuum of learning in a consistent environment.⁸ Moreover, such information must also demonstrate that such a system will not take place just because teachers are located in the same building or preschool and kindergarten teachers meet intermittently.

Information must be available that includes examples or models of what an effective system looks like. Many district administrators may be under the misconception that they are already implementing a PK3 system in their district. In a recent New Jersey study that reviewed all the early childhood operational plans of districts implementing state-supported preschool, no district had all of the essential components of a PK3 system and a significant number had very few.⁹

The need to have “finger-tip” examples/models of the steps taken by educational colleagues in implementing the system would be an effective measure in helping other administrators understand what is entailed in such an undertaking.

Advocating the Benefits of Implementing a PK3 System

In a recent interview, former NJ Department of Education Assistant Commissioner Gordon MacInnes stated, “While it is easy to talk about and describe a PK3 continuum, it is very hard work.”¹⁰ **The development of such a system is a thoughtful and long-term process that cannot begin without leadership from the top.** While it is critical that district administrators be knowledgeable about early childhood issues, equally as important is that they understand the benefits of implementing such a system.

The research is clear that quality early learning programs for 3- and 4- year olds is a



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sound short-term investment for helping children succeed.¹¹ Such an investment in isolation, however, will not sustain and improve long-term educational outcomes. **Administrators must understand that an aligned PK3 system is a viable strategy for addressing learning issues faced by many children in their schools.** A big piece of “Getting the PK3 Word Out” must highlight these benefits.

Aligned PK3 systems can:

- Enhance the effectiveness of preschool and kindergarten programs that may have otherwise experienced “fadeout” as the children progressed through grades K-3;
- Narrow the achievement gap by increasing social readiness, literacy and math skills, promote smoother transitions between grades, lessen the need for special education and better support at-risk children;
- Help children perform better on standardized tests in reading and math;
- Provide substantial economic returns.¹²

In their attempt to meet the new preschool mandates, district administrators may not be focused on the benefits of aligning and coordinating this mandated program with what already exists in K-3. It means for them, more work at a busy time. It may be that they have to be convinced that the benefits of planning and implementing a PK3 system at the same time that they are expanding preschool, will provide them with better long-term outcomes for their students.

Even if every district administrator is convinced that developing a coordinated and aligned system from preschool through 3rd grade will benefit their students, significant support to those districts will still be required. The type of assistance necessary will include state infrastructures to be in place.

Advocating for a Strong State Infrastructure that Supports the Development of Successful PK3 Systems

In an attempt to effectively address the continuum of developmental stages in early childhood education, New Jersey’s DOE was restructured in early 2007, to include the DECE. This restructuring made the DECE responsible for the development, implementation and alignment of program components that focus on standards, curricula and assessment from preschool through 3rd grade. The impetus of this innovative change was “to protect New Jersey’s investment in quality preschool by providing high quality kindergarten through third grade educational experiences for young children.”¹³

Clearly, this restructuring is evidence of the state’s commitment to the PK3 continuum. Moreover, a DOE division responsible for educational issues affecting preschool through 3rd grade can be an asset in supporting districts in implementing preschool within the context of their K3 programs.

While the PK3 framework exists at the state level, the lack of adequate staff support within the DECE remains a problem. When the restructuring was implemented, there was no increase in funding to hire new staff to support DECE’s additional programmatic responsibilities for K-3. Now DECE will have the added responsibility of providing guidance and support to all other districts as they plan and then implement preschool programs. Lastly, without additional staffing, the DECE’s current staffing level may be unable to adequately seize the opportunity to work with districts in developing PK3 systems.

Clearly the lack of human capital will mean another missed opportunity for providing the support for effective preschool expansion and the development of successful PK3 systems within the districts. “Outside” early childhood stakeholders must strongly advocate for adequate support on the “inside.” The type of accomplishments envisioned by both the preschool expansion and the DECE’s restructuring to address PK3 systems, can only be realized with an adequate supply of knowledgeable DECE staff who can provide districts with necessary guidance and supervision.

Advocating for the Relevance of the P-3 Certificate

In 2000, New Jersey’s four-year institutions of higher education took on the unenviable task of developing and implementing Pre-school -3rd grade (P-3) certificates. These programs began in order to meet a Supreme Court requirement that all preschool teachers in Abbott districts obtain a Bachelor’s degree and specialized training in early childhood education within a four year period. While the development of these programs in just a few months was a remarkable achievement, their value in training early childhood professionals to provide children

with developmentally appropriate environments and better meet their diverse needs is immeasurable.

Even with its successes however, the P-3 certificate suffers from an “identity crisis” that continues to plague its legitimacy. Students looking for positions in kindergarten through 3rd grade often shy away from obtaining a P-3 “stand-alone” certificate, as they are told they are “less marketable” than their K-5 counterparts and school districts will not hire them.¹⁴

Now more than ever, the need is critical for an adequate supply of teachers with specialized training in early childhood education. Certainly more preschool teachers will be needed in the coming years as the expansion unfolds. Yet hiring K-3 teachers who understand how young children learn and thus, recognize the importance of coordination and alignment of curricula within those years is just as important. It is crucial that the certificate be independently recognized as a valuable asset for successfully training teachers to provide a rich, meaningful and developmentally appropriate education for young children between the ages of 3 and 8 years old.

Again, advocacy is needed from within the DECE and from early childhood stakeholders outside the government. **As the preschool expansion conversation advances,**

districts must be provided with information on the benefits of hiring teachers who have P-3 certificates, not just for preschool positions but when K-3 staff openings arise. Such information can help district administrators build a framework of a PK3 system through the hiring of knowledgeable early childhood staff.

Conclusion

New Jersey’s early learning system is poised for great change. The momentum for providing an aligned and coordinated system of early education is building. Yet, in order for such a system to successfully come to fruition, more work is needed. Collaboration between the state’s DECE, educational associations and other early childhood stakeholders is needed to educate, inform and provide necessary supports to districts as they implement preschool in the context of a PK3 continuum. No group can do it alone. Only through such cooperation can this system be successfully realized.

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¹ Reynolds, A., Magnuson, K., & Ou, Suh-Ruu. (2006). PK-3 Education: Programs and practices that work in children’s first decade. *FCD Working Paper: Advancing PK-3*. New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development.

² How can we improve the Education of America’s Children? (2007). *Introduction*. New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development. 20 November 2007 http://www.fcd-us.org/issues_more/issues_more_show.htm?doc_id=463871.

³ Frede, E., Jung, K., Barnett, W.S., Lamy C., & Figueras, A. (2007) *The Abbott Pre-school Program Longitudinal Study (APPLES) Interim Report*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research and The College of New Jersey.

⁴ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Programs (NAEP), 2007, Reading and Mathematics Assessments, New Jersey Grade 4 Public Schools.

⁵ Rice, C. (2007) *Building Strong Rungs to Build Sturdy Ladders: The Status of Pre-school-3rd Grade Systems in New Jersey*. Newark, NJ: Association for Children of New Jersey.

⁶ Rice, p.3.

⁷ Rice, C., (2007) *Embracing the Big Picture: The State of New Jersey’s Road Toward a PK3 Continuum*. Newark, NJ: Association for Children of New Jersey.

⁸ *Making the Most of Our Investments: How PK-3 Alignment Can Close the Achievement Gap from the Start*. (2007) Portland, OR: Grantmakers for Education.

⁹ Rice, *Building Strong Rungs*, p.4.

¹⁰ Rice, *Embracing the Big Picture*, p. 8.

¹¹ Kauerz, Kristie. (2007) *Making the Case for P-3*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States.

¹² *Making the Most of Our Investments*, pp.6-7.

¹³ N.J. Department of Education, Division of Early Childhood Education. Trenton, NJ: Available: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/ece/index.html>.

¹⁴ Rice, C., (21007) *Providing the Tools Towards Quality: The Status of P-3 Teacher Preparation Programs in New Jersey*. Newark, NJ: Association for Children of New Jersey.

Photos shot on location at Ironbound Children’s Center.