



Association for Children
of New Jersey

Seizing the Opportunity:

Building PK3 Systems in New Jersey's School Districts

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New Jersey's new school funding formula will provide thousands of 3- and 4- year olds from low income families with the opportunity to experience a high quality preschool program. Little debate around this new formula focused on preschool. New Jerseyans have learned from the success of its Abbott preschool program that children, particularly from low-income families benefit greatly from high quality preschool.

While New Jersey continues to be on the "cutting-edge" in implementing quality programs, recent national studies have shown that solely investing in preschool is not enough to sustain children's educational gains. Quality preschool is only the first step in a child's early learning experience. Successful education programs for young children need to be comprehensive, span several years and target important education transition periods.

During the next year, hundreds of school districts throughout the state will begin planning on how best to implement preschool for either all of their 3- and 4- year olds or for those who meet the eligibility criteria. While developing or expanding such a program is a huge undertaking for any district, building it in isolation without alignment and coordination of children's future learning experiences will dilute the intended impact.

This policy brief attempts to provide support on how the implementation of high quality preschool required by the expansion initiative can set the stage for a more expansive view of the first stage of children's education—the development of a PK3 system. By adopting a broader view of early childhood education as a period extending from preschool through third grade, the State and

districts will reap a better return on its preschool investment while attaining the outcomes envisioned by the legislation.

The New Preschool Mandate

New Jersey's new school funding formula was signed into law by Governor Corzine on January 13, 2008 and includes a significant expansion of preschool throughout the state.¹ The state currently has three state-supported programs, including the Abbott preschool program. This ten year old mandate by the New Jersey Supreme Court, requires high quality preschool be implemented for 3- and 4- year olds in the State's 31 poorest school districts. The program currently serves approximately 40,000 preschoolers. The preschool expansion initiative, which when fully implemented will enroll an additional 30,000 preschoolers and be modeled after the Abbott preschool program, includes small class size, certified classroom teachers, teacher assistants, and a research based, Department of Education (DOE) approved curriculum. During the 2008-2009 school year, districts will develop plans to meet full implementation by 2013-2014.²

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The rationale for expanding the program is clear: allow all of the state's low-income preschoolers to reap the benefits of this quality early learning experience. A recent study found that classroom quality in Abbott districts continues to improve and children's skills in language, literacy and math have shown measured improvement at least through the end of kindergarten.³ Moreover, Abbott's mixed delivery system of public preschool, community-based and Head Start classrooms has proven to be a successful way of implementing the program in multiple venues while still providing quality. In the same report, these three types of classrooms scored virtually the same across almost all measures of quality teaching practices, indicating that given the appropriate supports, school districts can successfully collaborate with their community programs in implementing high quality preschool.⁴

Getting ready for naptime at the Egenolf Early Childhood Center in Elizabeth.



Photo by Danielle Richards of Jersey Girl Stock Images

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The Planning Year

This new district requirement of either expanding or developing a new preschool program is sure to be overwhelming. Unlike the Abbott programs, eligibility requirements vary depending on a particular district's District Factor Group. The State's poorest districts, (all A and B districts, and CD districts with 40% of their students eligible for free and reduced lunch) will be required to provide a preschool program for all of their 3- and 4- year olds, regardless of family income. All remaining districts must provide the same program for only their free and reduced population.⁵ In one year, classrooms, staff and eligible children must begin to be identified and enrolled. With all that must be accomplished in such a short period of time, it would be easy for the sole focus to be on getting the preschool programs up-and-running.

Such a narrow focus however, could prove to be a lost opportunity. Investing solely in preschool is not enough. While high quality preschool does improve children's social and cognitive skills, such gains often fade as children move beyond kindergarten.⁶

As difficult as it may be, envisioning and planning beyond the preschool expansion will provide better overall program development and eventually better outcomes for children. There is a growing body of research that supports an aligned and coordinated PK3 system on children's learning and development.⁷ Using the planning year to thoughtfully prepare for such a system will ultimately provide the types of outcomes envisioned by the legislation and the overall goals of school districts.

Making the Case for Implementing PK3 Systems

The basic elements of the PK3 philosophy have existed for decades but have never been afforded the high priority given to the earliest learning years.⁸ Recent trends indicate that the current early childhood policy landscape is focused on preschool. In the 2006–07 school year, total state spending by state governments reached a record level of \$3.7 billion for preschool, with more than a million children attending state-funded programs. Twenty-two percent of our nation's 4-year olds go to state preschool programs, an increase of 20% from the previous year.⁹

Even with its phenomenal growth, preschool often remains disconnected from the

beginning of school, particularly in regard to standards, curriculum and developmentally informed and responsive instruction.¹⁰ This disconnect can prove costly both as a public investment and for children's long-term educational success. Although well-designed early learning programs assist in improving children's social and cognitive skills, the gains made in the early years may fade as children advance beyond kindergarten.¹¹

Such a disconnect does not have to happen. Recent data indicates that children continue to make educational gains in schools that "connect" preschool to kindergarten and the primary grades.¹² This evidence supports the impact that an aligned and coordinated system has on children's learning and development. Long term studies show that when compared with unaligned models, children participating in PK3 systems have increased math, reading and social skills. Such coordi-

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nation and alignment also leads to smoother transitions and better prepares children to enter school ready to learn.¹³ Improved communication between district staff and families is a byproduct of this coordination.¹⁴ A better educational outcome for children and effective public spending is a winning equation for young students and the community-at-large.

The current wave of education reform also lends itself to a PK3 continuum. Students throughout the country now begin to take their first standardized tests in reading and math in the third grade. The results of these tests can have significant consequences for these children's educational future, including the possibility of grade retention or placement in special education. Researchers contend that investing in the school years prior to third grade may minimize the need for students' social promotion or grade retention.¹⁵

What is a PK3 System?

A PK3 system acknowledges that children grow and change quickly during their early years and thrive when their education evolves with these changes. Such a system attempts to coordinate and align two very different systems—preschool and the beginning years of primary education.¹⁶ This intentional "seamless" system aligns standards, curriculum and assessment practices from preschool through third grade into a sound plan that acknowledges the developmental abilities of children from ages 3 through 8.¹⁷

A PK3 system attempts to integrate children's early educational experiences with kindergarten and the primary grades. These learning experiences would build on those from previous years and be closely connected to those yet to come.¹⁸ The key to PK3 success is sequential curricula from preschool through third grade that builds on children's cognitive and social development. This approach offers children a continuum of learning in a consistent environment.¹⁹

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The Elements of a PK3 System?

While the implementation will vary from district to district, there are five key components of a PK3 approach to education. A successful PK3 system includes the following elements:

I. Alignment

- Curricula, standards and assessments within and across preschool through third grade; Consistent instructional approaches and learning environments;
- Standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment focus not only on academic skills but social competence and self-discipline.

II. School Organization

- The availability of voluntary, full-day preschool for all 3- and 4- year olds;
- The availability of full-day kindergarten that builds on children's preschool experiences;
- The availability of both ongoing professional development for principals and teachers and adequate planning time to ensure alignment;
- Principal support in fostering teamwork between PK3 teachers for strengthening alignment;
- Principals act as liaisons between elementary schools, families and community early childhood programs.

III. Qualified Teachers

- All teachers have a minimum of a Bachelor's Degree with specialized training in early childhood education;
- All teachers are qualified to teach at every level of the PK3 continuum;

- Teachers have the ability to assess their students and use the assessment outcomes to inform instruction.

IV. Classrooms as Learning Environments

- Instruction is balanced between child-centered and teacher-directed approaches;
- Classroom staff includes a well-qualified teacher and an assistant teacher;
- Student-teacher ratios provide opportunities for each child to receive individual attention and develop strong relationships with adults.

V. Accountability to Parents and Community

- Teachers and families partner to set educational goals for children;
- Schools are responsible for reporting students' progress to families, communities, the school district and the state.^{20 21 22}

Recent analysis demonstrates the importance for children to experience multiple PK3 components. Children who experience all of the components will perform better than those who only experience half. Those who experience half will outperform those who have received none.²³ This same report studied the effects of each of the PK3 program components, including preschool, full-day kindergarten, reduced class sized, teacher and classroom experiences, parent involvement and school mobility/stability. Except for full-day kindergarten, all of the components consistently demonstrated enduring and sizable links to children's school achievement.²⁴

Challenges and Opportunities: The Status of PK3 Implementation in New Jersey

While most educators have likely heard of a PK3 system, it is as likely that they are unfamiliar with the components pivotal to that system. After reviewing the operational plans of all of New Jersey's state supported preschool programs, a 2007 report found that no one district had implemented all of the components that would lead to the implementation of a comprehensive PK3 system. In the same report, focus group responses highlighted a broad range in district planning for such a system.²⁵ Clearly, if districts are ever going to successfully implement all or most of the PK3 components, more work will be required.

Over the next year, there is no question that New Jersey's school districts will have their work cut out for them as they grapple on how best to develop or expand their pre-

school programs. Adequately planning for classroom space, staffing issues, collaboration with community-based programs and effective outreach is sure to be overwhelming. However, beginning or expanding a preschool program in isolation—without thinking about it in the context of a district's existing K-3 program will be a missed opportunity. While districts will certainly have to address all of the issues around the preschool expansion, there will be no better chance for staff members and the community to think and plan “globally” about early childhood issues, including PK3.

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First Steps in “Seizing the Opportunity”

In a recent interview, Dr. Nathan Parker, Superintendent of the Orange School District, said that Orange is building their PK3 system by using a combination of leadership, support and relationships. The key to any sustained alignment, regardless of the grade, is “tying together” the natural breaks in the educational system. “Opportunities” must either be developed or provided.²⁶ Thus, even before the designated planning year commences, districts can begin to take steps in providing or developing those opportunities for their PK3 planning. The following are a few of the steps that districts can take in their attempt to think “globally:”

1. Encourage district administrators to reach out to community programs.

While some districts may already have relationships with their community-based and Head Start programs for purposes of student transition and/or school readiness, many will not. As they have in the Abbott districts, these community programs may play a pivotal role in the future delivery of the preschool program in expansion districts. The Abbott collaborative model of public preschool, community-based and Head Start classrooms has shown that a mixed delivery system can benefit all children, regardless of where the classroom is located when the outcome is high quality.²⁷ While community programs may be potential partners in the expansion, bringing them to the table from the beginning will also help coordinate their roles for achieving

positive third grade outcomes.²⁸ One way to begin or expand this dialogue is to develop early childhood advisory councils. Ensuring that all early childhood stakeholders are included in the planning of both the preschool expansion and the development of a PK3 system will guarantee buy-in from those who will play an important role in its implementation.

2. Encourage district administrators to reach out to families.

One of the key components to a PK3 continuum is for families to partner with the schools in setting the educational goals of their children. The preschool expansion provides districts with the impetus to begin the conversation with families on how best to develop a PK3 system within their district. By collaborating in this system development, parents will be aware of what their children should be able to know and do at every year during the continuum. Ensuring family participation on a district advisory council is crucial.

3. Begin to plan for professional development for teachers and administrators.

Training for all is critical for systems building. All educational staff must be knowledgeable in curriculum, instruction and developmentally appropriate practices in order for a PK3 system to develop. Ongoing professional development can take on many forms, including classroom observations, child development training and reading instruction techniques. Regardless of the form, professional development must be ongoing and focused with the aim of providing a seamless continuum between preschool and third grade.²⁹ Such professional development is particularly important for district leadership.

School administrators often spend a large percentage of their time focusing on such issues as facilities and budgets and less time on the “what” (curriculum) and the “how” (developmentally appropriate practices) of what is being taught in the classroom. Similarly, although they may ultimately play an important role in a district's preschool expansion initiative, some administrators may not be familiar with exemplary preschool teaching and management practices. Ensuring both professional development opportunities and classroom observations are important towards developing PK3 systems.^{30 31} Building the knowledge base of both administrators and staff will foster meaningful discussions on effective PK3 implementation.

4. **Begin providing ample time for teachers to meet regularly, both within and across grades in order to implement aligned learning experiences for children.**³²

Teachers must become acquainted with the types of learning going on beyond their own classrooms and better understand the commonalities and crossovers between programs and grades.³³ Planning time must be structured to encourage teachers from these various grades to work collaboratively on issues including assessments, student progress and teaching techniques.³⁴ For example, in one elementary school in San Antonio, TX, the staff has aligned PK3 by translating grade-level standards into specific skills students should learn from grade to grade in such areas as language arts, math, science and social studies.³⁵ Staff in New Jersey's expansion districts already can begin this work. Districts will have to choose Department of Education approved preschool curriculum and then determine how to align the chosen curriculum with its existing K-3 program.

Any staff meetings, however, must be well-planned. Co-location of classrooms and teachers alone does not ensure an integrated PK3 approach. K-3 staff members often have little or no relationship with their preschool colleagues, even when preschool programs are located onsite. The problem is exacerbated when

the preschool classrooms are located elsewhere. In these cases, providing the "opportunities" must be deliberate. If there is no collaboration between the teachers in preschool, kindergarten and first through third grade, the PK3 model will never come to fruition.³⁶

5. **Begin providing ample opportunities for building principals and district early childhood experts to collaborate.**

Each building administrator comes to the table with different strengths and knowledge and all can learn from each other. By scheduling joint and regular administrative meetings which include principals and supervisors responsible for early childhood, relevant discussions can take place regarding articulation, setting mutual goals, etc. Similar types of meetings can help in providing opportunities for new professional connections and relationships with administrators whose paths, in the past, may have rarely crossed.³⁷

6. **Begin to think creatively about assessment.**

District administrators have the unenviable responsibility of balancing the needs of young children with the need to ensure that these children have the tools necessary to perform well on third-grade tests. Strong alignment, strong professional development and ongoing and creative assessment of students' achieve

ment will ensure better results for children.³⁸ There are many creative assessment tools to measure children's progress. For example, a district in Oklahoma uses multiple assessments including an early childhood screening instrument in preschool and kindergarten that provides information on students' early literacy development and basic numeric skills, a computer-based, beginning reading assessment for K-3 students, which provides teachers with a snapshot of children's vocabulary, comprehension and reading fluency at the beginning of the school year, and classrooms with multi-age grouping which supports strong language development for preschoolers through 3rd graders.³⁹

Conclusion

As school administrators begin to move forward on their district's preschool expansion, it is clear that so much more can be made of this important planning time. Many of the pieces necessary for implementing a PK3 system are in their reach. Seizing this opportunity and effectively using this planning time for preschool and beyond can surely make a difference. It will not only impact the quality of staff teaching practices, but more importantly, affect the long-term educational success of the students within their classrooms. It's an opportunity not to be missed.

FOOTNOTES

¹ N.J.S.A. P.L. 2007, c. 260.

² Ibid.

³ Frede, E., Jung, K., Barnett, W.S., Lamy C., & 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.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ N.J.S.A. P.L. 2007, c. 260.

⁶ Graves, Bill. (2006) PK-3: What Is It and How Do We Know It Works? New York, NY: FCD Policy Brief, Advancing PK-3, No. 4.

⁷ Grantmakers for Education (2007) Making the Most of Our Investments: How PK-3 Alignment Can Close the Achievement Gap from the Start. Portland, OR: Grantmakers for Education.

⁸ Reynolds, A., Magnuson, K., Ou, Suh-Ruu. (2005) PK-3 Education: Programs and Practices that Work in Children's First Decade. University of Wisconsin-Madison, A Working Paper for the Foundation for Child Development..

⁹ Barnett, W. S., Hustedt, J. T., Friedman, A., Boyd, J.S., Ainsworth, P. (2007) The State of Preschool: 2007 State Preschool Yearbook. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER)

¹⁰ Bogard, K., Takanishi. (2005) PK-3: An Aligned and Coordinated Approach to Education for Children 3 to 8 Years Old. New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development.

¹¹ Graves, p.2.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Reynolds, p. 24.

¹⁵ Bogard, p. 7.

¹⁶ Grantmakers, p. 4.

¹⁷ Bogard, p. 3.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Grantmakers, p. 4.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Graves, p. 2.

²² Components of PK-3 (2008) Foundation for Child Development. http://www.fcd-us.org/issues_more/issues_more_show.htm?doc_id=463877

²³ Reynolds, p.22.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Rice, C. (2007) Building Strong Rungs to Build Sturdy Ladders: The Status of Preschool-3rd Grade Systems in New Jersey. Newark, NJ: Association for Children of New Jersey.

²⁶ Ibid at 7.

²⁷ Frede at .

²⁸ Graves, p. 7.

²⁹ National Association of Elementary School Principals. (2006) Principals Lead the Way for PK-3: Early Investment, Strong Alignment, Better Results. New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development.

³⁰ Rice, p. 7.

³¹ National Association of Elementary School Principals, p. 2.

³² Ibid.

³³ Rice, at 7.

³⁴ National Association of Elementary School Principals, p. 3.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 2.

³⁶ Grantmakers, p. 4.

³⁷ Rice, p. 7.

³⁸ National Association of Elementary School Principals, p 4.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 5.

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