
ISSUE BRIEF:

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NEW JERSEY

BY TIM CASTANO



New Jersey has made significant investments in the provision of preschool education to children in disadvantaged communities for the past 15 years, the results of which have attracted increased attention as of late, with several localities and states, as well as the federal government, weighing similar or farther-reaching initiatives. New York City's Mayor Bill de Blasio championed universal pre-kindergarten during his campaign for office, with leaders in Texas, Washington, Maryland, Alabama and Michigan also having promoted preschool programs.¹²

While New Jersey's history with pre-K can trace its origins to legal proceedings, the successful implementation represents the embrace of a policy that – according to several measures – has strengthened the educational foundation supporting potentially disenfranchised children during a critical stage of development, with

Key Points

- The National Institute for Early Education Research reports “persistent, meaningful gains in achievement for children in the state’s most disadvantaged communities,” with fifth-graders who had attended *Abbott* programs performing better than those who did not in literacy and math on the 2010-2011 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge.
- The benefits of preschool reach beyond the students to the population at large, with the initiative generating taxpayer savings due to reductions in repeated years of schooling and special education.
- The Center for American Progress, noting the economic advantages granted to parents, recommends providing high-quality preschool for all three- and four-year-olds.

benefits accruing both to the individual and society. As such, the state finds itself in an interesting position in the national debate, cited as a model deserving replication³ as it comes to terms with an outstanding mandate to extend access. At a moment when New Jersey can reflect on the value of its accomplishment, the opportunity also might present itself to consider how preschool could serve broader segments of the population.

In its 1998 *Abbott v. Burke* decision, the New Jersey Supreme required the state to offer high-quality, full-day preschool education to all three- and four-year-olds in the 31 *Abbott* districts. New Jersey responded by establishing a system with a maximum class size of 15, certified teachers, assistant teachers, support services and an appropriate curriculum. Additionally, the state financed the non-*Abbott* Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA) program, which supplied funding for 96 other districts in which 20-to-40 percent of children qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. New Jersey also created in 2004 the Early Launch to Learning Initiative, which allowed all non-*Abbott* districts to apply for funds to enhance enrollment, extend program hours and improve quality.

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), New Jersey's pre-K programs enrolled over 43,000 three- and four-year-olds in 2012-2013, at a per-pupil cost of \$12,070, well above the national average of \$4,026.⁴ The returns on the state's investment appear impressive, as NIEER's 2013 *Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study* (APPLES) reports "persistent, meaningful gains in achievement for children in the state's most disadvantaged communities," with fifth-graders who had attended *Abbott* programs performing better than those who did not in literacy and math on the 2010-2011 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge.⁵ Additionally, fourth-graders hailing from low-income environments boast a level of reading proficiency exceeded only by those in a few other states.⁶

In 2008, New Jersey adopted the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA), which removed the non-*Abbott* designations, essentially combining the ECPA and *Abbott* pre-K programs. The SFRA would phase-in an expansion of the *Abbott* preschool program to all three- and four-year-olds in another 84 high-poverty districts and to all low-income children in the remaining districts statewide. When fully enacted, over 30,000 additional students would enroll. Unfortunately, the recent financial crisis has undercut the resources available for education.⁷ While Governor Christie has sustained funding for existing preschool programs, with \$655.5 million designated in the proposed FY 2016 Budget, the expansion of pre-K dictated by the SFRA has not occurred.

Impediments to advancing components of the SFRA have not diminished New Jersey's appeal as an example for preschool advocates, who also point to the positive impact generated from models around the country. Since 1998, Oklahoma has offered a free, universal, school-based pre-K program that has educated more four-year-olds on a percentage basis than any other state.⁸ Evaluations of pre-K in the Tulsa Public

Schools by Georgetown University’s Center for Research on Children in the United States reveal marked improvements in the participants’ cognitive development⁹ and “short-term effects on student achievement that remain discernable through at least grade 3.”¹⁰

Studies in support of preschool expansion do face criticism aimed at their size, timing and scope, as well as the durability of outcomes.¹¹ Analysis by Grover J. “Russ” Whitehurst of the Brookings Institution led him to conclude that the “best available evidence raises serious doubts that a large public investment in the expansion of pre-k for four-year-olds will have the long-term effects that advocates tout.”¹² Pre-K proponents counter with, among other points, the fact that “effects diminish, but do not disappear.”¹³ Even with his critique of statistical validity, Whitehurst does acknowledge that children from low-income backgrounds do profit from early education.¹⁴

In New Jersey, the quality and quantity of reinforcing data author convincing answers to questions regarding the gains. Consistently affirmative accounts, such as APPLES, echo Nobel economist James Heckman’s assertion: “Investing in disadvantaged young children is a rare public policy initiative that promotes fairness and social justice and at the same time promotes productivity in the economy and society at large.”¹⁵ As for benefits that reach beyond the students to the population at large, the initiative has “generated savings for taxpayers who pay less due to reductions in repeated years of schooling and special education that are no longer needed.”¹⁶

While New Jersey’s present preschool program and the SFRA goals target low-income residents, advocates and analysts construct worthwhile arguments in favor of pre-K for middle-class families. Important distinctions separate preschool from child care, but practical realities often blur the lines. As such, with child-care expenses swelling to 20-percent of household budgets¹⁷ and with the median household income in New Jersey having declined by 8.7 percent from 1989 to 2013, access to pre-K comparable to the *Abbott* program could alleviate immediate financial stress for families. The Center for American Progress, noting how the availability of early education “can promote parents’ economic well-being”¹⁸ and how middle-class families do not qualify for a number of programs, recommends providing high-quality preschool for all three- and four-year-olds.

As indicated, resource constraints have forestalled the expansion of pre-K in New Jersey to date. With over \$600 million dedicated annually to preschool and with full SFRA activation estimated at another \$400 million, the costs present a challenge in the current fiscal climate. The federal government has outlined its intention to aid states in offering preschool to four-year-olds through the Obama Administration’s \$75-billion, ten-year “Preschool for All” proposal. Projections indicate New Jersey would receive around \$50 million in the first year, a fraction of the state’s overall expenditure.¹⁹ Even so, the accompanying legislation – The Strong Start for America’s Children Act (HR 3461/S1697) – did not advance in the last Congress.

However unlikely the circumstances cast the expansion of preschool to a wider range of New Jersey’s families, discarding entirely such an aspiration would seem myopic. The state’s success in this area should lead to amplification and, in fact, has prompted suggestions for extension to all children, even if only for one year at age four.²⁰ Continuing to secure funding for the existing pre-K model stands as the priority, closely followed by meeting the SFRA requirements. Discovering how to enlarge the policy to include more middle-class citizens also should not be overlooked.

Notes

¹ Javier Hernandez, “Lessons for de Blasio in New Jersey’s Free Pre-K,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/nyregion/to-expand-prekindergarten-new-york-may-find-model-in-new-jersey.html?_r=0.

² Sara Mead, “Can Bill de Blasio Really Deliver on His Promise of Universal Pre-K?,” *Slate*, January 21, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/life/education/2014/01/bill_de_blasio_s_push_for_universal_pre_k_the_model_exists_and_it_s_in_new.html.

³ Ibid.

⁴ W. Steven Barnett, Megan E. Carolan, James H. Squires and Kristy Clarke Brown, *The State of Preschool 2013: State Preschool Yearbook* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2013), <http://www.nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/yearbook2013.pdf>.

⁵ W. Steven Barnett, Kwanghee Jung, Min-Jong Youn and Ellen C. Frede, “Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study: Fifth Grade Follow-Up” (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2013), <http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/APPLES%205th%20Grade.pdf>.

⁶ Sara Mead, “Education Reform Starts Early: Lessons from New Jersey’s Pre K-3rd Reform Efforts” (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, 2009), http://earlyed.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/Education%20Reform%20Starts%20Early_0.pdf.

⁷ Rajashri Chakrabarti and Sarah Sutherland, “New Jersey’s Abbott Districts: Education Finances during the Great Recession” (New York, NY: Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2013), http://www.newyorkfed.org/research/current_issues/ci19-4.pdf.

⁸ William T. Gormley Jr., Deborah Phillips and Ted Gayer, “Preschool Programs Can Boost School Readiness,” *Science* 320 (2008): 1723, http://www.columbia.edu/cu/psychology/courses/3615/Readings/Preschool_Programs_Can_Boost_School_Readiness.pdf.

⁹ Ibid., 1724.

¹⁰ Carolyn J. Hill, William T. Gormley, Jr., Shirley Adelstein and Catherine Willemin, “The Effects of Oklahoma’s Pre-Kindergarten Program on 3rd Grade Test Scores” (Washington, DC: Center for Research on Children in the United States, 2012), 4, [http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/Long-term%20Policy%20Brief_05-22-2012%20\(2\).pdf](http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/Long-term%20Policy%20Brief_05-22-2012%20(2).pdf).

¹¹ Hernandez, “Lessons for de Blasio in New Jersey’s Free Pre-K.”

¹² Grover J. “Russ” Whitehurst, “Does Pre-k Work? It Depends How Picky You Are” (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2014), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/02/26-does-prek-work-whitehurst>.

¹³ Barnett, Jung, Youn and Frede.

¹⁴ Hernandez, “Lessons for de Blasio in New Jersey’s Free Pre-K.”

¹⁵ James J. Heckman, “Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children,” *Science* 312 (2006): 1902, http://jenni.uchicago.edu/papers/Heckman_Science_v312_2006.pdf.

¹⁶ Barnett, Jung, Youn and Frede, 20.

¹⁷ Jennifer Erickson, *The Middle-Class Squeeze: A Picture of Stagnant Incomes, Rising Costs, And What We Can Do to Strengthen America’s Middle Class* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2014), http://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/MCS_3EarlyChildhood.pdf.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁹ “Increasing Access to High-Quality Early Childhood Education in New Jersey,” The White House, June 4, 2013, <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/increasing-access/nj.pdf>.

²⁰ Barnett, Jung, Youn and Frede, 21.