

SPRING 2004

# Policy Progress

## Building Blocks for New Jersey's Youngest Citizens

A publication of the Association for Children of New Jersey's Early Learning Initiative

### Key Recommendations:

- Extend the 2004 deadline to teachers making "diligent progress" towards their degree.
- Conduct an assessment and develop a plan for each teacher not meeting the deadline.
- Develop and support a long-term professional development plan for existing and future early childhood teachers in New Jersey.



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## Fulfilling the Promise of Abbott:

### *The 2004 Deadline: Supporting an Extension of Time for Abbott Preschool Teachers*

#### POLICY BRIEF

*The deadline for Abbott preschool teachers to obtain their bachelors' degrees and P-3 certifications is fast approaching. The Department of Education indicates that over 80% of Abbott preschool teachers are already in compliance. Data from a recent survey finds that potentially as many as 18% of the teachers sampled will not meet the Court's mandate for a preschool teaching certification. This means that of the approximately 2,800 teachers currently working in Abbott preschools, nearly 500 of them will potentially not be able to retain their position past the Court imposed 2004 deadline. This will potentially threaten the preschool opportunity for 7,500 Abbott three- and four-year old children currently being served.*

*Furthermore, the survey findings indicate that 33% of teachers enrolled in some kind of teacher preparation program will not remain in their current jobs once they have obtained their degree and teaching credential. The future development of a stable, well-trained workforce in the Abbott preschool programs remains at issue.*

*This policy brief outlines the rationale for highly qualified preschool teachers, provides data on the number of teachers who will meet the deadline and examines the reasons why some may lose their jobs this September. Immediate recommendations for addressing the looming potential crisis for 7,500 children will be explored, as well as longer-term recommendations for addressing the ongoing need for qualified preschool teachers.*

## Teacher Power is Key to Learning

NIEER's new research shows that teachers with a bachelor's degree and background in child development are most effective in the classroom. Kids are more excited, learn more, enjoy school more because these teachers tend to:

- have stronger literacy skills,
- design more exciting lessons,
- be better at handling behavior problems,
- individualize learning,
- identify and work on specific skill area and be more sensitive and responsive.

Source: National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), *Preschool Matters*, August/September 2003 Volume 1, No.1.

**A**lthough more than 80 percent of preschool teachers have made progress toward securing the court-required certifications, an estimated 18 percent—or nearly 500 teachers—will potentially be unable to meet the court's September 2004 deadline.

Recent data from the New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) indicates that 83 percent of preschool teachers in community-based programs in the 30 "Abbott" districts have already earned their bachelor's degree. In 2000, just 35 percent of these teachers held bachelors' degrees, according to the Center for Early Education Research at Rutgers University.

In a study released by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), it is projected that 82 percent of teachers in community-based programs will potentially not meet the Court's mandate for obtaining a preschool teaching certification. Of the approximately 2,800 teachers currently working in Abbott preschools, nearly 500 could lose their jobs, causing potential disruption to roughly 7,500 young children in their classrooms. The possible loss of teachers will come at a time when district enrollments are required to be increasing.

In addition, 33 percent of teachers enrolled in some kind of teacher preparation program indicated that they would not remain in their current jobs once they had obtained their degree and teaching credential, according to the NIEER survey.

The New Jersey Supreme Court, in a series of rulings handed down since 1998, mandated that 30 of New Jersey's poorest school districts provide high quality preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds. Currently, over 36,000 children are enrolled in these programs. Of those, approximately 70 percent attend preschools in community-based centers. These centers were not required to employ teachers with credentials prior to the *Abbott* decisions. The Supreme Court mandated that all Abbott preschool teachers be certified by September 2004. Teachers in district-run preschools already have certification.

Research shows that qualified, trained teachers are critical to helping low-income children overcome their disadvantages and succeed in school. Children taught by highly qualified teachers score better on social, emotional, linguistic and cognitive assessments. Also, children who participate in high quality programs are less likely to require special education, to engage in criminal activity, or to be unemployed 20 years later.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, children in poverty, who are at the greatest risk for school failure, are also more likely to attend lower-quality programs.<sup>2</sup>

### Barriers to Educational Attainment

Many New Jersey preschool teachers demonstrated dedication and hard work to juggle school and teaching to earn certification. A certain percentage — the exact amount is unknown — left teaching, possibly because of the more stringent requirements. A third group is still working toward attaining certification but has encountered systemic barriers that have hampered their progress. The following issues remain major obstacles:

**Limited Access to Universities:** Of the 14 universities offering the required coursework to obtain a Preschool through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade certification (P-3), only one program is located in the southern part of the state. To meet the educational needs of teachers in southern New Jersey, a few of the northern universities have developed satellite and implemented programs in the south.

These programs, however, did not evolve from a statewide higher education strategy, but rather through the work of individuals from institutions of higher education attempting to address a need. While the satellite programs have alleviated some of the access issues, they cannot provide the types of comprehensive education necessary to meet the broader needs of these teachers. The result is that Abbott preschool teachers working in southern New Jersey have had a more difficult time in meeting the Court's 2004 deadline.

**Not Enough Courses Scheduled at Inconvenient Times:** Many universities also lack an adequate number of classes, leaving students unable to get a seat in the required courses. Moreover, many of the courses are offered during the day, when it is impossible for working teachers to attend. Abbott teachers in community programs must work full-time to receive scholarship dollars. While

some preschool directors permit staff to take courses during the school day, others do not.

**Certification Backlog:** Once teachers complete their college coursework, they must apply to the New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Licensing, for either their Certificate of Eligibility (CE) or Certificate of Eligibility with Advanced Standing (CEAS). Many teachers have experienced problems at this stage. Once the application is submitted, it can take anywhere from one month to two years to obtain certification.

Many teachers have been forced to re-submit applications because of lost paperwork and follow through with multiple follow-ups, either by telephone or in-person. On many occasions, school administrators must intervene just to obtain information on a teacher's licensing status.

Teachers cannot secure their teaching license if they have not been mentored. They cannot, however, be mentored unless they have their certificate of eligibility. Some teachers, through no fault of their own, may miss the court deadline simply because of these bureaucratic problems.

**Slow Tuition Payments:** While Abbott teachers can receive scholarships from the New Jersey Professional Development Center for Early Care and Education (NJPDCE), the process of transferring those dollars to various universities has caused delays. Students have been closed out of required classes when their tuition payment has been late.

**Head Start Teachers Behind:** Prior to the *Abbott VI* decision, issued in March 2000, the DOE directed Abbott districts to leave out Head Start from their preschool programs. In this decision, the Court identified standards that would be required in every Abbott preschool classroom. Moreover, the decision stated that those standards were more demanding than the Head Start standards. The Court concluded that Head Start children could only be precluded from preschool enrollment projections when it was demonstrated that the Head Start programs met all of the standards established by the Court.<sup>3</sup>

Although districts have slowly begun to contract with Head Start programs to provide preschool, issues have arisen

around federal versus state requirements, complicating the collaborative process. The contracting delays have affected the ability of Abbott Head Start teachers to return to school and to participate in the state scholarship program. As a result, many Head Start teachers will not meet the Court's 2004 deadline.

## Policy Recommendations

**Extend the 2004 Deadline:** Since many preschools already have a difficult time attracting and retaining qualified preschool teachers, it makes sense to allow an extension to existing teachers who are working toward certification. Otherwise, districts may be unable to fill teaching positions. This will impact children already registered for Abbott preschool, reversing the progress made toward providing high quality preschool to thousands of low-income New Jersey children.

Such an extension is particularly warranted for teachers who are working toward certification, but have been unable to attain a degree, primarily because of systemic barriers. Moreover, at the time of the *Abbott VI* decision, the Supreme Court justices, in establishing the timeline, could not have envisioned the types of systemic problems that teachers faced in returning to school.

However, any deadline extension must include the following caveats:

**An extension should only be granted to teachers who have made "diligent progress" toward their degree and can demonstrate that they can complete their education before a specific date.** Data from the NIEER study indicates that most of the teachers enrolled in a degree program leading to a P-3 teaching credential who will not meet the 2004 deadline, will obtain their credentials by 2005 or 2006.<sup>4</sup> Such an extension will allow teachers to continue to teach in Abbott programs and minimize disruption for the children.

**An individual progress assessment and plan should be developed for each Abbott preschool teacher who will not be able to comply with the 2004 deadline.** It is critical for long-term planning that the DOE know the educational status and plans for program completion of each Abbott

# Abbott Preschool Teacher Requirements

(implemented in 2000)

Bachelor's Degree

+

P-3 Certificate

## Deadlines

### For new hires:

By September 2001

### For existing teachers:

By September 2004 (4 years)

### Exemptions:

- Licensed elementary teachers with 2 years experience
- Teachers w/ nursery school certificates

Source: Coffman, Julia & Lopez, M.Elena. "Raising Preschool Teacher Qualifications." July 2003

## ACNJ's Early Learning Initiative

ACNJ, an independent nonprofit agency, is the state's foremost child advocacy organization. ACNJ advocates on a broad range of issues affecting children and families including early learning, child welfare, education and health. ACNJ's advocacy is accomplished through research, legislative and media advocacy, publications, training and community outreach.

ACNJ's early care and education policy is focused on the following goals:

- Expand access to quality, public preschool for all four year olds
- Monitor and support quality of current public preschool programs (in Abbott and Early Childhood Program Aid Districts)
- Promote access to training so teachers in early learning settings are well qualified and appropriately compensated
- Improve coordination, effectiveness and efficiency of the state's early learning systems
- Improve early learning facilities
- Educate parents and the public about early learning

To reach these goals, the Association for Children of New Jersey analyzes public policy, conducts research and publishes the findings, builds broad based coalitions, mobilizes citizens and educates the public and elected officials through strategic communications.

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preschool teacher affected by the deadline. Currently, such data does not exist. In order to ensure uniformity throughout the Abbott districts, the DOE should develop educational assessment and planning instruments and provide necessary oversight to the districts.

**Even with a new deadline, the State should consider each teacher's employment status on a case-by-case basis.** Because the P-3 programs were developed quickly, some program requirements and standards were changed mid-stream. This caused great confusion for many teachers returning to school. Individual teacher assessment will identify those teachers who, because of special circumstances, need a modest amount of additional time beyond the new extension. An individual assessment is a fair way to ensure that teachers, who in good faith have worked toward compliance, will have every opportunity to continue teaching.

**The State should develop a process for districts to follow for addressing issues around teachers who will not meet the new deadline:** Three steps must be taken by state agencies to address vacancies caused by the deadline:

**DOE must develop an outreach plan to address teaching vacancies that will arise when teachers are replaced.** This should include a set of guidelines to help districts adequately prepare for such replacements and a mechanism to monitor vacancies;

**DOE must be the state leader in remedying systems issues that cut across state agencies and continue to be barriers for teachers' completion of degrees;**

and

**The State, through the Department of Human Services (DHS), must continue its commitment to provide scholarships to staff members in Abbott preschool programs.**

### **Extend the Deadline for Head Start**

**Teachers:** Abbott Head Start teachers should be afforded additional time beyond the new deadline to complete their education. In order to ensure that Head Start teachers are afforded the opportunity to complete their education, the following two caveats are critical:

**The same individual progress assessment and plan developed for Abbott preschool teachers in community based programs must apply to Head Start teachers;**

and

**Head Start teachers should be given continued access to scholarship dollars.**

### **Develop and Support a Long-Term Professional Development Plan for Existing and Future Early Childhood Teachers in New Jersey:**

While a limited extension of the deadline will address difficulties Abbott teachers have had in obtaining their bachelors' degrees and credentials, the DOE must begin to address long-term preschool professional development issues that extend beyond the Court decision. More and more school districts are recognizing the importance of quality early childhood education and are implementing such programs in their schools. In order to ensure that New Jersey has an adequate supply of qualified early childhood teachers, the state must view this issue more broadly than it has in the past. The state can begin by taking such steps as providing long-term professional development strategies to address the educational needs of non-traditional students, examining whether the current preschool through third grade certificate (P-3) adequately prepares early childhood teachers for the state's diverse population and instituting an early childhood teacher examination. These initial, long-term steps will provide all New Jersey early learners, not just children in Abbott districts, with the opportunity to be part of a quality early childhood program.

<sup>1</sup> Ryan, Sharon & Ackerman, Debra. "Creating a Qualified Early Childhood Workforce: Part I. Getting Certified "A Report on the Efforts of Preschool Teachers in New Jersey's Abbott Districts to Improve their Qualifications". 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Espinosa, Linda M. "High Quality Preschool: Why We Need It and What It Looks Like." November 2002.

<sup>3</sup> *Abbott v. Burke*, 163 N.J. 95,116 (2000) (Abbott VI).

<sup>4</sup> Ryan, at 16.