

New Jersey Department of Education  
Office of Early Childhood Education

**End of the Year Report:  
2003 - 2004**

One of the primary goals of the Department of Education (DOE) is to create the opportunity for all learners in all districts to demonstrate high levels of achievement through attainment of the NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards. Within this major goal, the Office of Early Childhood (OECE) strives to enhance the development and implementation of high-quality early childhood education programs that prepare children to enter school with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the *Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations: Standards of Quality* and the kindergarten Core Curriculum Content Standards. To provide this foundation, the DOE - OECE program priorities continue to fall into three broad categories: (1) increasing capacity so that all eligible children have access to preschool programs; (2) ensuring high-quality programs by establishing clear guidelines for what children should learn and how it should be taught; and (3) establishing and implementing methods that hold districts accountable for progress towards the attainment of high-quality preschool.

The OECE is charged with policy development and leadership for all district-sponsored programs for three- and four-year-olds. The Office works in conjunction with the Office of Special Education and with the offices of the regional assistant commissioners and county superintendents, to provide guidance and program oversight to districts that receive state funding in one of the three following categories:

- 30 Abbott districts
- 102 districts that receive Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA) and
- The new Early Launch to Learning Initiative described below.

The primary responsibility of the OECE, however, is implementing the Abbott preschool program.

In the FY 2005 budget address, Governor McGreevy announced an exciting new vision for preschool in New Jersey. The Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI) will increase access to preschool for four-year-olds statewide. The long term aim of ELLI is to provide access to high quality preschool for all four-year-olds in New Jersey by 2010. Districts with the following characteristics are eligible to apply: Districts that currently serve elementary aged children, districts that already offer preschool for children without disabilities may apply to expand their current program to serve more children or to offer longer hours, ECPA districts with the exclusion of Abbott districts that do not expend ECPA funding on 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> grade are eligible for funding to expand their program to full day.

## **The Abbott Preschool Programs**

On May 21, 1998, New Jersey's Supreme Court mandated that three- and four-year-old children in New Jersey's Abbott districts - the 30 highest poverty districts in the state - receive a high-quality preschool education.

In February 2004, the National Institute for Early Education Research released the first annual yearbook evaluating state-funded preschool programs across the nation. The report focuses on access, quality standards, and funding. New Jersey is the leading state in providing preschool with the highest standards to low income children. Research on the Abbott preschool program conducted by the Early Learning Improvement Consortium shows that:

- Program quality has improved significantly, especially in the area of early language and literacy, and
- Children are entering kindergarten with significantly better oral language and reading readiness abilities.

The Abbott preschool program is distinguished by several unique program characteristics. Abbott districts provide full-day, full-year preschool programs to all eligible three- and four-year-olds. In conjunction with the Department of Human Services, these classrooms now comprise a DOE-funded six-hour, 180-day component, combined with a DHS-funded wrap-around program that provides daily before- and after-care and summer programs. In total, the full-day, full-year program is available ten hours per day, 245 days a year. Abbott preschool programs are also staffed with one teacher and one aide and may not exceed 15 children. In June of 2004, the New Jersey Supreme Court granted an extension for all teachers that work in an Abbott contracted child care center that have 30 or less credits to obtain towards their bachelor's degree and a teacher of Preschool through Grade 3 P-3) certificate. The extension allows for Head Start teachers to obtain the required credentials within four years from the date of the first Abbott contract for their classrooms. Districts provide one Master Teacher who is a curriculum specialist for every 10 – 20 classrooms, depending on classroom teacher experience. Health and social services are an integral part of the preschool program, and in addition to district social workers, child-care centers provide one family worker for every 45 children to ensure parents and children obtain referral to necessary services.

### Increasing Capacity

The goal of the Abbott mandate for preschool is to prepare children to enter kindergarten with the skills and abilities necessary to succeed in school. The key to reaching this goal is to ensure that programs are high-quality and that all children are included through strong outreach efforts. To this end, the Court permitted services to be provided through public schools, Head Start agencies or child-care programs, recognizing the value of each and reducing duplication of services. During the 2003–2004 school year, the fifth year of Abbott preschool implementation, the 30 Abbott districts enrolled 38,000 three- and four-year-old children in preschool out of a possible universe of 53,000 children, at a cost of approximately \$407 million. Thirty-two

percent were served in school-based programs, 8% in federally funded Head Start centers, and 60% in private child-care centers. The OECE continues to work on two major tasks designed to increase capacity to serve the universe of preschool children: (1) developing facilities construction guidelines and (2) improving outreach and recruitment strategies.

#### Facilities Guidelines and Construction

With the Abbott mandate for preschool education, the 30 Abbott districts looked to their own available space in-district, in child care centers, and in Head Start programs to accommodate the preschool children. Guidelines for facilities construction were developed by a task force representing the Department of Education, the Department of Human Services (DHS), child-care providers, Head Start agencies and others. These guidelines have informed amendments to the *NJ Administrative Code (N.J.A.C.) 6A:26-3.11*

#### Outreach and Recruitment Strategies

Working with their newly formed Early Childhood Advisory Councils, district Parent and Community Involvement Specialists have developed many successful methods for increasing enrollment. Some of the most innovative include:

- Placing advertisements on fast food restaurant placemats,
- Distributing fliers in laundromats, pediatricians offices, churches, and other locations families with young children frequent,
- Hanging banners outside contracted community provider agencies,
- Placing advertisements on local cable TV stations and on bus and subway routes,
- Hosting recruitment fairs to disseminate information,
- Distributing buttons, balloons, pens/pencils with the program insignia at municipal events

### **Ensuring High-Quality Programs**

The long-term benefits of preschool participation are clear in the research literature, but what is equally clear is that these benefits only accrue when the preschool program is high quality. The DOE - OECE has initiated a number of activities to improve program quality.

#### Master Teacher Training

Vital to the success of the preschool program is the quality of curriculum and teaching. During the 2003-2004 school year, in order to continue increasing quality in the Abbott preschool classrooms, the Office of Early Childhood Education (OECE) repeated the highly successful, comprehensive training for master teachers who mentor and coach classroom teachers and assistant teachers in the Abbott districts. The year-long course is designed to clearly define the master teacher role and to ensure that master teachers have the skills they need to foster change and improve classroom quality. Specifically, the master teacher training focuses on three areas: (1) in-depth training in curriculum, including research-based program guidelines; (2) assessing classroom quality through the use of structured program evaluation instruments such as the Early

Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), Supports for Early Literacy Assessment (SELA), and Preschool Classroom Mathematics Inventory (PCMI); and (3) coaching and mentoring strategies for adult learners. Together, this training provides the master teacher with the necessary information and skills to train Abbott teachers in standards for curriculum and classroom quality.

### Preschool Conferences

The OECE initiated and co-sponsored a number of statewide conferences to introduce effective program strategies. Topics were chosen based on a careful analysis of program quality data and discussions with district administrators and master teachers.

On February 10, 2004, the Office of Early Childhood Education in collaboration with the Association for the Children of New Jersey and the New Jersey Education Association sponsored a “*Preschool to Kindergarten Transition*” conference. The keynote speaker was Dr. Robert Pianta, author of Successful Kindergarten Transition. This conference was open to preschool educators and administrators. Dr. Pianta’s major research based recommendations are that families need a consistent liaison to help them with the transition and that the transition must be viewed as a process not an event involving the preschool teacher, the kindergarten teacher, the family, the child and the family liaison. Districts made specific plans for how to implement strategies gained from the conference.

The Office of Early Childhood Education and Dr. Lise Fox, Department of Child & Family Studies, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute-University of South Florida designed and presented a three-day conference entitled “*Preschool Children and Challenging Behaviors*” on March 8-10, 2004. Day one of the conference included an overview of the importance of addressing behavior and social development to Early Childhood Supervisors, Master Teachers and Preschool Intervention and Referral Specialists. Additionally, Dr. Fox presented strategies for building relationships with children and families, preventive classroom strategies, techniques for teaching social and emotional skills and how to develop positive behavior support plans. A team representing each district then participated in more specific training and practice during days 2 and 3. The team is responsible to bring the information and system back to the district for implementation and to turnkey to other appropriate staff.

Also in March, Peggy Freedson-Gonzalez, a professor at Montclair State University and noted expert in both early literacy and second language acquisition, presented to three different groups of master teachers a full-day session entitled *Addressing the Needs of Young Bilingual Learners*. Ms. Freedson-Gonzalez addressed language diversity and early literacy in the context of New Jersey. She included research and data, information for program planning for optimum outcomes and for including children and families. Ms. Freedson-Gonzales stressed the importance of supporting home language development while scaffolding English language acquisition.

The Office of Early Childhood Education also collaborated with William Paterson University College of Education and co-sponsored two additional one-day institutes. The first institute held on May 20th, 2004 focused on Leadership and the second one, June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2004, addressed

Literacy. Both institutes were open to district administrators, providers, and master teachers. In addition to Drs. Holly Seplocha and Janis Strasser, Dr. Paula Jorde Bloom, Isabel Baker, Vanessa Rich, Anne Mitchell, Judy Jablon and Dr. Michael Chirichello offered workshops with such titles as Leadership through Images from the Field, Leading through Supervision, and Leadership through Effective Staff Meetings. The Literacy Institute featured presentations by such early childhood experts as Judy Schickedanz, Gretchen Owocki, Luis Hernandez, and Polly Greenberg. The day closed with a special presentation by author Vera B. Williams.

The Office of Early Childhood Education sponsored a Curriculum Showcase on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2004 partly to assist districts applying for the Early Launch to Learning Initiative grants. Representatives from curriculum model developers and districts successfully implementing those models presented overviews and practical information to participants.

### Equalizing Teacher Qualifications and Pay

Clear indicators of quality in preschool are the experience and qualifications of the teaching staff. In 2000 the Supreme Court clarified its requirement that preschool teachers must be certified in early childhood education. Recognizing the value of the experience of the existing teachers the Court allowed any then employed teacher to obtain certification by September, 2004. For the 2003–2004 school year, of the 2643 teachers employed by Abbott programs over 92% had at least an undergraduate degree. All teachers who did not yet have the provisional or permanent teacher’s license were enrolled in teacher certification programs. In June, 2004 the Court granted the DOE’s petition to extend the deadline for certification for a teacher who meets the following criteria:

- Is a student in good standing;
- Maintains the appropriate minimum GPA of 2.75 when 4.0 equals an A grade;
- Has a detailed and feasible plan for completion of the degree by September 2006; and
- Requires 30 credits or less to complete the BA degree.

These same criteria were applied for Head Start teachers with the variation that they would have four years to complete the degree after the classroom contracts with an Abbott district.

## **Implementing Methods for Program Evaluation and Improvement**

The DOE – OECE strives to work collaboratively with districts to establish and improve preschool programs. One aspect of that partnership is providing districts with information and leadership that assists in program improvement. The department has initiated the following three strategies for accountability leading to program improvement. Numerous smaller initiatives have also been implemented.

### Self-Evaluation Assessment System

High-quality educational programs undergo a continuous cycle of gathering evidence about programs in order to make informed decisions toward improvement. The Self-Assessment

Validation System (SAVS) is designed to guide the district through a systematic self-appraisal of its preschool program and to aid in program improvement. The SAVS is derived from the *NJ Abbott Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines*, as well as the *Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs Serving Children Ages 3 through 8* (National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education). During June 2003, OECE staff met with the 30 Abbott districts to explain the purpose and the process of the SAVS. The SAVS has two phases: Phase I – evaluating the program as is and establishing a plan for improvement that included revising the operational plan by October 2003; and Phase II – evaluating improvements made, which culminated with a validation team visits held in district from May throughout July 2004.

The SAVS is intended to highlight strengths of district programs and to alert districts to areas in need of improvement, which will inform revisions to the Preschool Program Three-Year Operational Plan and Budget (if applicable). Other new initiatives developed by the OECE provide documentation for the SAVS.

### The Early Learning Improvement Consortium

The Early Learning Improvement Consortium (ELIC) is a multi-year initiative in which participating New Jersey institutions of higher education assist the DOE – OECE and the Abbott districts in identifying the particularized needs of preschool children and programs. The role of the ELIC is twofold. First, the ELIC is responsible for collecting and reporting on data on children and classrooms. In the spring of 2004, faculty from the universities conducted structured program evaluations instruments - the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), Supports for Early Literacy Assessment (SELA), and Preschool Mathematics Inventory (PCMI) on 10 percent of district classrooms. In addition, the ELIC administered the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test on randomly selected kindergarten students in each district in order to give a statistically valid picture the level of receptive language of preschoolers entering kindergarten. Faculty from the universities later met with individual districts to review ELIC findings and to assist in the development of improvement plans and professional development programs related to identified areas in need of improvement.

### Early Learning Assessment System

Along with collecting and reporting on district data of children and classrooms, the ELIC with the OECE planned and developed a performance-based assessment system called the Early Learning Assessment System (ELAS) to be administered by teachers in classrooms. The ELAS is based on the latest research on development and learning in young children and is fully aligned with the *Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations: Standards of Quality*. With the ELAS, teachers learn how to observe children in the natural preschool environment on a regular basis and collect samples of work and record observations. This collected work is used to adjust the learning environment based on information about the children and to serve as a means of evaluating the skills of young children in Abbott districts on a statewide basis. In 2003-2004 seven districts piloted the ELAS and suggested revisions are underway. In 2004-2005 all teachers in Abbott preschool will learn the system.

## Fiscal Accountability

- **Selected Audits.** In addition to instituting clearer directions for districts in order to monitor cost and reimbursement to contracting child-care costs, the DOE, through the office of Compliance and Investigation, conducted audits on approximately 50 of the contracted centers, including Head Start. Providers were selected for audit using the following criteria:
  - being removed from the Child and Adult Care Food Program for fiscal mismanagement;
  - failing to submit to Department of Human Services audits;
  - violating contractual obligations to the districts such as not submitting quarterly budget statements or other important documentation (e.g., teacher certification records, proof of insurance); or
  - showing evidence of fiscal difficulties (e.g., reports of failure to pay rent or salaries);

Through a process of random section 100 providers will be audited in 2004-2005. Over the next three years the department expects all providers to be audited.

## **Early Childhood Program Aid Districts**

By state statute, another 102 districts receive Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA) funding due to high concentrations of low-income students equal to or greater than 20 percent and less than 40 percent of the total enrollment. In the 2003-2004 school year, the ECPA districts served 7,600 preschool children in programs at an approximate cost of 30 million dollars.

The DOE-OECE assist county education specialists in review of ECPA operational plans, and respond to district requests for technical assistance on early childhood programs and policies. Although ECPA districts are subject to far fewer requirements with respect to class size and teacher qualifications, they are still expected to provide high-quality programs that are developmentally appropriate and consistent with the *Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations: Standards of Quality*. They must use community resources and include parent involvement and professional development activities.

During the 2003-2004 school year, the *Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines* were developed to ensure quality. These guidelines were derived from the *Abbott Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines*. The guidelines are recommendations based on the latest research and expert opinion and are intended to inform the district's Early Childhood Program Aid One-Year Plan and Budget.

## **Early Childhood Education Initiatives for 2004 and Beyond**

During the past five years of Abbott preschool program start-up and implementation, the OECE has worked with districts to build a solid foundation with an emphasis on capacity, quality, and

appropriate assessment. As the Office of Early Childhood Education moves into the six year of program implementation and looks to the future, the program priorities remain the same. We will continue the Self-Assessment Validation System (SAVS) which will inform revisions on the operational plans in the Abbott districts. The work of the Early Learning Improvement Consortium (ELIC) will move forward, including completing the implementation of the Early Learning Assessment System (ELAS). We will repeat the highly successful “Role of the Master Teacher” seminar for new master teachers. In addition, the DOE will continue facilitating construction, outreach and expansion. Essential to expansion is the continuing and growing collaboration with Head Start agencies.

With the introduction of the Early Launch to Learning Initiative, the OECE will concentrate more time and support on districts outside of Abbott, ensuring high quality and appropriate curriculum. The long term objective of ELLI is to provide access to high quality preschool for all four-year-olds in New Jersey by 2010, thus, spreading the benefits of Abbott preschool statewide.