To: Members, New Jersey State Board of Education
From: Cynthia Rice, Senior Policy Analyst
Association for Children of New Jersey
Date: August 15, 2007
Re: Adopting a New Praxis II Test for Early Childhood Education

The Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) has been a consistent, independent voice for the children of our state for over 150 years. As a statewide, nonprofit child advocacy organization, ACNJ is dedicated to improving government policies and programs for all of New Jersey's children, particularly those who are disadvantaged or dependent on the state for their well-being. Our efforts have been directed at a variety of issues involving children, including child welfare, juvenile justice, health, nutrition, family support as well as early care and education.

Since the 1998 Abbott v. Burke decision, ACNJ has been an active voice in ensuring the implementation of the quality early childhood standards outlined by the Supreme Court. One of the critical focuses of ACNJ's work since this decision is to address issues regarding the Court's requirement that all Abbott preschool teachers obtain a Bachelor's degree and an appropriate endorsement. In 2004, ACNJ successfully collaborated with both the State and the Education Law Center in returning to the Supreme Court to request an extension of time for Abbott early childhood teachers who would not meet the Court's deadline.

ACNJ has advocated strongly for A-3361 and S-2292 which establishes a universal credit equivalency program to provide seamless transfer of college credits by institutions of higher education. Transfer problems were a major stumbling block for Abbott preschool teacher transferring from community colleges to four-year universities. This legislation unanimously passed by both the Assembly and the Senate, only awaits the Governor's signature and will remedy the transfer barriers previously experienced by prospective early childhood teachers.

ACNJ has also written several reports that have addressed other issues confronting these teachers, including problems linked with the P-3 certificate. One of the major identified problems has been the lack of a Praxis II test for early childhood education. For this reason, ACNJ fully supports the adoption of a new Praxis II test for Early Childhood Education. It has been a long time coming.

Although required by the Court, the development of the P-3 certification by the state and P-3 programs by the individual institutions of higher education recognized and legitimized this specific period of learning for young children.

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Unlike the former N-8 certificate, the P-3 certificate and the higher education programs that developed because of it, acknowledged that children between the ages of 3 and 8 learn differently than 11 or 12 year old children. In order for teachers to be effective, they must be trained to address these varying learning styles and then certified accordingly. The end result has been that teachers in Abbott preschool programs are better educated, are implementing developmentally appropriate practices within their classrooms and the skills of participating children are improving in language, literacy and math at least through the end of the kindergarten year.[1]

While the development of both the P-3 programs and the certificate were positive steps for the education of young New Jerseyans, the lack of a required Praxis II examination has undermined and marginalized the importance of this special type of education and of the certificate itself.

In an upcoming ACNJ report, *Providing the Tools Towards Quality: The Status of P-3 Teacher Preparation Programs in New Jersey,* the findings indicate that the P-3 certificate currently suffers from an "identity crisis" that plagues its legitimacy. Because P-3 teachers are currently not required to take a Praxis II examination, many district administrators are hesitant to hire these teachers for fear that they do not meet the "highly qualified teacher" definition of *No Child Left Behind.* Combined with inadequate information on the P-3 certificate, the lack of a required Praxis II examination supports many district administrators' view that the P-3 certificate does not hold the same weight as other certificates.

Moreover, the lack of such an examination gives fuel to the notion that teaching young children does not require the same level of skills required for older students. This is absolutely not true. It is crucial that the higher educational programs and the certificate be independently recognized as valuable assets for successfully training teachers to provide a rich, meaningful and developmentally appropriate education for our young children between the ages of 3 and 8 years old. By adopting the Praxis II Test for Early Childhood Education, the state is affirming its commitment to this recognized period of early learning and providing the needed support in validating the P-3 higher education programs, the P-3 certification, and most importantly, acknowledging the educational accomplishments and the importance of highly educated early childhood teachers.

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[1] Frede, E., Jung, K., Barnett, W., Lamy, C. (2007). *The Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES)* New Brunswick: National Institute for Early Education Research.