

**NEW JERSEY PRESCHOOL EXPANSION  
ASSESSMENT RESEARCH STUDY (PEARS)**



## **Executive Summary**

Allison Friedman, Ed.M.  
Ellen Frede, Ph.D.  
Dale Epstein, Ph.D.  
Rachel Sansanelli, M.A.  
Debra Ackerman, Ed.D., and  
Judi Stevenson-Boyd, Ed.M.

**National Institute for Early Education Research**  
Graduate School of Education  
Rutgers, The State University

**Submitted to the New Jersey Department of Education**  
**Division of Early Childhood Education**

The research reported in this document was conducted under a Memorandum of Understanding with the New Jersey Department of Education (NJ DOE). The conclusions are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the funding agency. The authors would like to thank the advisory board (Please see Appendix A for a complete list.) and Dr. Ellen Wolock for assistance in designing the data collection and interpreting the results. Christopher Gilbert provided expert technological support.

We are grateful to the New Jersey Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies for their expert assistance throughout the data collection process. We also wish to acknowledge the generous support of The Schumann Fund for New Jersey which funded our partnership on the first phase of this study with the New Jersey Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies and helped make dissemination of this report possible.

Nationally, over two million 3- and 4-year olds attend some form of publicly-funded preschool program, including state-funded preschool initiatives, special education, and Head Start (Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Boyd, & Hustedt, 2008). Research shows that attending high quality preschool makes a difference, especially for children at risk of school difficulties due to poverty, having English as a second language, or having teen parents or parents with low educational levels. The New Jersey legislature, acting on their understanding of this strong research base, has a long tradition of funding high quality preschool beginning with the Early Childhood Program Aid districts in 1995. More recently, in January 2008, the Senate and General Assembly of the State of New Jersey enacted the School Funding Reform Act of 2008. Under this new law, all at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds in the state will be eligible to attend high quality preschool programs during their two years before kindergarten by 2013. Previous research of New Jersey's preschool programs has shown that by participating in a high-quality program, children, whether in public schools, private child care or Head Start, are improving in language, literacy, and math and that grade repetition can be cut in half by second grade.

To better prepare for the preschool expansion required by the School Funding Reform Act of 2008, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) – Division of Early Childhood Education entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) in the spring of 2008 to conduct a needs assessment of preschool programs and school districts throughout New Jersey. The results of this needs assessment will be used to inform the NJDOE about the resources, circumstances, and needs relevant to preschool quality and expansion of school districts and private preschool providers throughout the state.

The purpose of the New Jersey Preschool Expansion Assessment Research Study (PEARS) is to assess the capacity and quality of child care centers, Head Start programs, and school district preschool programs across the state that are not currently funded as one of the so-called Abbott districts (Please see the full report for an explanation of this designation). In order to accomplish this goal, information was collected on the school district, school/center, classroom, and teacher level.

Three methods of data collection were used in the study: surveys, interviews, and observations. District, child care and Head Start administrators were interviewed regarding a wide variety of issues related to expansion and current service provision. In districts that will be expected to serve all or large numbers of their preschool population we also conducted direct classroom and facility observations. Similar observations were also conducted in child care centers and Head Start programs.

Summary of Findings by Major Research Question:

- How many 3- and 4-year-old children can be offered a high quality preschool education in existing public schools, private child care centers and Head Start programs within the identified districts?

Based on our estimations, district preschool programs, child care centers, and Head Start programs in non-Abbott districts have a capacity to serve all eligible 3 and 4 year old children with potential spaces for over 180,000 children in class sizes of 15. However, the quality of these facilities does not meet the requirements set forth by the state. For example, DOE regulations require that contracting child care centers have at least 6 classrooms per site. The purpose of this regulation is to keep the site level administrative costs lower by spreading them across more classrooms. Across all centers, 27% have at least 6 classrooms.

- What, if any, early childhood education experience do administrators and center directors have?

In general, child care and Head Start administrators are much more likely than school district administrators to have specialized experience or qualifications in early childhood education with almost all Head Start administrators and well over half of child care administrators having a college degree related to ECE. However, less than one quarter of district principals who supervise preschool classrooms and not even 10% of district administrators in charge of preschool planning have similar specialization.

Administrators in child care centers are not required to hold bachelors degree; however, close to 90% have completed at least an undergraduate degree.

- What are the educational backgrounds, credentials and experience levels of the current child care, Head Start and public school preschool teaching workforce in these settings?

Under the preschool expansion, lead teachers will be required to have a bachelor's degree and a preschool through grade three certification. As expected, all district lead preschool teachers had earned at least a bachelor's degree. New Jersey child care licensing does not require lead preschool teachers to have a minimum degree; however, almost half (47.4%) of the teachers reporting holding at least a bachelor's degree and another 8% are currently enrolled in a program to earn a bachelor's degree. This is considerably higher than has been found in other studies of the workforce. More than half (58.6%) of the Head Start lead preschool teachers had earned at least a bachelor's degree and an additional 16% are enrolled in a program to earn a bachelor's degree.

Although all district lead preschool teachers should be appropriately certified in early childhood education, we found that only 86% have preschool certification or the equivalent. Slightly less than 20% of all child care center lead preschool teachers and almost 30% of Head Start lead preschool teachers have preschool certification or the equivalent.

- What is the basic environmental quality of these classrooms, as measured by the Basic Classroom Climate and Materials Checklist (NIEER, 2008)?

The Basic Classroom Climate and Materials Checklist (NIEER, 2008) assesses minimal standards for classroom quality and environment. This information can provide a baseline

for determining the need for technical assistance, professional development and materials costs. We found that in general classrooms are adequately supervised and that teacher-child and peer interactions are warm and respectful. This is a good basis upon which to build an educational intervention. Although most classrooms are conveniently equipped for routine care, in general child care classrooms are somewhat less likely to be organized to foster basic learning; e.g. materials or areas of the classroom might be less well-organized. All classrooms provided some consistency in their daily routine; however, Head Start and child care classrooms were more likely to give children time to play outside daily. A consistent daily routine with an opportunity to play outside daily is a basic element of quality in preschool programs.

We also examined the cost of fully furnishing and supplying preschool classrooms in district preschool programs, child care centers, and Head Start agencies. We inventoried furniture and materials that are important and appropriate for high quality preschool programs and estimated costs based on current prices. The total cost to fully furnish and equip a preschool classroom with all of the furniture and items on the recommended list would be over \$18,300. However, existing classrooms bring resources with them, and, indeed we estimate based on our data, that on average the cost to fully furnish and equip the classrooms is just over \$7600. The need for supplemental furnishing and materials varies considerably by auspice, however. Child care center classrooms, on average, require the most money to be fully furnished and equipped, approaching \$9000. District preschool and Head Start classrooms are closer to each other with district classrooms on average needing \$5800 and Head Start classrooms, being better equipped than district classrooms and requiring just over \$5000. Clearly, contracting with Head Start and child care classrooms could result in considerable savings in start up costs compared to equipping new classrooms in school district buildings. On an individual classroom level, the savings would range between \$10,700 and \$13,300.

- What are common issues that need to be addressed to improve the quality of current pre-k classrooms?

The New Jersey Department of Education has promulgated regulations that detail program standards and require districts to provide evidence that plans are in place to meet these requirements. We investigated the readiness of the districts and their potential child care and Head Start partners to meet these standards.

### Class size

Interestingly, across all settings, preschool class size just exceeds the mandate of 15 children per classroom with an average enrolled class size of 15.1. In district schools, 53 percent of classrooms served no more than 15 children. In child care centers, 70 percent of classrooms served no more than 15 children. In Head Start centers, 42 percent of classrooms served no more than 15 children.

### Implementation of State Recommended Curriculum Models

NJ DOE regulations on preschool provision require that districts choose one of the five state recommended curricula for preschool. Almost 60% of the districts report implementing one of the recommended curricula. Virtually all Head Start programs use one of the recommended curriculum models but in contrast almost none of the child care centers do. Our results indicate that centers are not using a curriculum that has been researched and validated and may not be developmentally appropriate for preschool-aged children.

### Classroom Support through Teacher Coaching and Technical Assistance

Current research on effective professional development is fairly clear that in-class support is critical for improving teaching (Klein and Gomby, 2009). Information was collected on whether or not the districts provided any type of coaching or technical assistance to teachers in preschool classrooms. Of the districts asked this question, more than half provide some type of assistance or coaching. The majority of districts (64.3%) provide ongoing, regular assistance, while 6.3% report providing assistance only 1-5 times a year.

### Preschool Children with Disabilities in Preschool Programs

Serving children with disabilities in general education classrooms with their age-appropriate peers whenever possible is required by federal and state law and regulation. Respondents from districts, child care centers and Head Start agencies were asked about their experiences working with and serving children with special needs. Fifty-eight percent of the districts provide services for at least some of their preschool children with disabilities in inclusive settings. Almost two thirds of child care centers and virtually all Head Start centers reported having experience serving children with special needs in the regular classroom environment.

### Preschool English Language Learners in Preschool Programs

The number of young children in this country who come to school speaking a language other than English is rising dramatically (Garcia and Frede, in press). Preschool is an effective time to provide supports for these children. However, few programs offer appropriate programs for English Language Learners (ELL). Districts that were most likely to serve preschool children were asked whether they had a specific program for English Language Learners (ELL) and if they support the maintenance of home language in their schools and prekindergarten programs; 63.6% said that they do not have an ELL program and 73.5% said they do not have any programs in place to support the maintenance of home language. Over three quarters (76%) of child care center directors, reported experience serving ELL children with 37.4 percent having established methods for promoting maintenance of children's home language. Almost all Head Start centers (98.5 %) reported having experience serving ELLs, and 84.8 percent reported that they have established methods for promoting maintenance of children's home language.

### Provision of Family Engagement Programs

Mutual and supportive partnerships with families in preschool programs can be important for the overall well-being and success of a child. As part of the preschool expansion, districts are required to have a “wide range of family involvement and educational opportunities” (p. 10 NJ Preschool Teaching and Learning Standards of Quality, 2009) including involving parents in the governance of the program, creating workshops, classes and structured activities to enhance parents knowledge of the program and parenting skills, and creating policies to encourage more parent participation in the preschool program. Over 95% of all district preschool, Head Start and child care programs offer opportunities for family involvement. The intensity of this involvement varies widely, however.

- What are the district’s plans for preschool expansion, including plans for collaboration and plans for overcoming perceived barriers?

In the current, highly successful Abbott Preschool Program over 65% of the children are served in private non-profit and for-profit child care centers and Head Start agencies. Given the lack of space and ECE expertise in the expansion districts described elsewhere in this report, and in order to take advantage of the early childhood expertise, facilities, and human resources available in other districts and early care and education programs, districts should consider collaborations with neighboring districts and local private ECE providers. At the time of the interviews, most districts reported being at an early stage of planning for preschool expansion. Few districts responded that they are considering collaboration as one of the solutions for lack of space. Slightly more than 20% plan to subcontract with a local child care agency, only 9% plan to subcontract with Head Start and slightly less than 17% will collaborate with a nearby district. Less than one percent is planning to use temporary classroom units (trailers). More than 50% of the district administrators reported lack of space and concern for a lack of funding as their primary concerns regarding preschool expansion.

District officials speculated that there might be a number of barriers for parent participation in the preschool program. The most frequent concern is a perception that parents want their young children at home with them or that 3 years old is too young for school. Many responded that they believed the hours would not be compatible for working families and that transportation would be a problem. However, 13 percent of interviewees reported that they were not aware of any reasons that parents wouldn’t want their children to participate in preschool.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation 1:** The state should proceed with funding preschool expansion. For the most part, districts and their potential partners are prepared and willing to serve 3 and 4 year olds in high quality preschool. Based on research we would predict that this investment will lead to improved achievement, reduction in school failure and savings to society.

**Recommendation 2:** Incentives should be provided to districts to contract and work collaboratively with child care centers and Head Start agencies to provide services. These private providers bring facilities and human resources to the collaboration. In particular, child care and Head Start administrators are much more likely to have formal qualifications and experience with preschool than do their district counterparts. In addition, using private provider classrooms will save an estimated \$10,700 and \$13,300 per classroom in start-up costs for furniture and equipment.

**Recommendation 3:** Construction funding for new and upgraded facilities is clearly needed if schools and their private partners are to meet facility standards. During the first few years of expansion it will be necessary to relax facility standards and provide waivers for the requirements on a case-by-case basis. Districts and private partners should be required to submit plans for how and when they will meet the requirements, and no new facilities should be approved that do not meet the standards.

**Recommendation 4:** The Division of Early Childhood Education in the Department of Education is already active in providing early childhood professional development for leaders in districts and other agencies. Given the responses to our interviews, some specific areas of continued focus are recommended:

- Choosing and implementing state-recommended preschool curriculum models.
- Providing in-class support to teachers using a continuous improvement cycle.
- Equipping classrooms with appropriate learning materials.
- Serving children with disabilities in regular education classes.
- Identifying, and providing appropriate instructional support to, young children who speak a language other than English at home.
- Implementing appropriate child assessments that inform instruction.
- Advantages of and methods for collaborating with other districts, child care agencies and Head Start centers