

# Research Notes

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## **From Policy to Practice: Learning from Center Directors in New Jersey's Mixed-Delivery Abbott Program**

In an effort to close the achievement gap, the Supreme Court of New Jersey mandated in 1998 that all disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds in the state would be offered high-quality preschool education. Since then, New Jersey's Abbott Preschool Program has demonstrated that privately run preschool classrooms participating in the program have improved in quality and have become comparable to classrooms run by school districts. Further, children in both types of Abbott classrooms demonstrated gains through kindergarten in their school readiness skills.<sup>1</sup>

After nearly a decade of implementation, the Abbott Preschool Program is held as a national model from which other states can learn about the promises and challenges of a mixed preschool delivery system. Since the majority of children (63%) are served in classrooms located in private child care and Head Start centers, center directors are largely responsible for turning New Jersey's innovative policy into practice. A recent study has examined how the directors view the Abbott Preschool Program.<sup>2</sup>

### **Sample and Methodology**

In 2007, 98 directors were interviewed about their experiences in the Abbott Preschool Program, the strength of the program, and areas for improvement. These directors were selected from the 270 eligible directors of either single-site centers or the persons responsible for overseeing multiple-site centers. The interview included both structured and open-ended questions.

The sample was predominantly female (87%), with a mean age of 50.4 years. Approximately 55% of the directors identified themselves as African American; 22% identified themselves as White; 11% identified themselves as Latino or Hispanic; and 11% identified themselves as Other. Their highest educational level was AA/some college (13%), BA (47%), or MA (40%). The organizations represented in the sample included 287 center sites with a total of 1,131 classrooms, including 768 Abbott classrooms.

### **Findings**

#### **Rationale for Participating in the Program**

Becoming an Abbott site meant reaching children in their communities that were not previously enrolled in center-based programs, including children with special needs. One director described the opportunity as being able to "open their doors to all children."

The Abbott Program offered a solution to the chronic problem of a workforce that was under-qualified and poorly compensated. The Abbott Program requires that all teachers hold a B.A. degree with P-3 certification. A state-funded scholarship program was developed to offer teachers support for continuing their education. Teachers were given a 4-year grace period to complete their degrees. In 2002, the court ordered all community-based Abbott preschool teachers to be paid on par with local school district teachers. As one director reported "it gave us the ability to hire quality staff; to pay people what they're worth."

#### **Impact of Being an Abbott Preschool Site**

Directors reported that this comprehensive approach to improving teacher education and salaries helped address many long-standing problems. While some directors reported that substantial staffing changes did occur initially, they also reported that:

- The 4-year grace period was considered a motivator not a hardship.
- They were able to recruit and retain well-qualified staff and no longer lost as many teachers to school districts.
- Non-Abbott staff and assistant teachers saw the direct benefits of improving their education thus having a quality improvement ripple effect across the entire center.
- Professional development for teachers contributed to a richer staff learning environment.
- Teachers' classroom skills improved allowing programs to not have to rely as much on outside consultants.

Despite these positive outcomes, directors stressed that the inequities in benefits between school district teachers and community-based teachers needs to be addressed to continue to help them retain staff.

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*Ensure that leadership preparation is on the agenda from the beginning when developing a publicly funded preschool system.*

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## **Supporting the Professional Development of Abbott Preschool Directors**

Operating a preschool program requires the management of day-to-day business operations and an ability to provide instructional leadership and supervision to teachers. A director's ability to retain and support teachers in providing high-quality programming is directly related to their education and experience.<sup>3</sup>

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The Abbott Preschool Program does not require specific educational requirements for directors, but instead requires all directors to participate in a Director's Academy. Nearly all the directors sampled found the Academy to be helpful. They specifically mentioned:

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- Information about the rules guiding Abbott Preschool Program implementation
  - Training that focused on administrative practices as well as working with school districts
  - The opportunity to network and learn from other directors
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About 25% of the directors recommended that more education and scholarships be made available to them. Directors suggested that the Academy and the Abbott Preschool Program could better support them by:

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- Linking the Academy to credit-bearing institutions and providing tuition scholarships
  - Offering different levels of training commensurate with directors' experience and education
  - Structuring training with a more rigorous focus on curriculum, child development, day-to-day center operations, fundraising, and budgeting
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## **Working with School Districts**

Since Abbott Preschools are overseen by school districts, directors were asked about these relationships. Nearly 75% of directors felt that their relationships were positive and reported that they were satisfied with the technical assistance they received from districts. To strengthen the program, directors recommended that districts:

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- Provide expanded services and more timely information on program rule changes
  - Recognize the expertise of community-based directors and move to collaborative decision-making
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## **Improving the Abbott Preschool Program**

Directors were asked to report on their biggest challenges in implementing the Abbott Program. For 75% of directors the biggest challenges concerned budgeting, paperwork, and program regulation. About 50% of directors reported conflicting expectations between the Abbott Program and their other funding sources. Directors recommended that:

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- Directors be given flexibility in budget allocations
  - Different publicly-funded programs align reporting, auditing, and program delivery expectations to avoid duplication of efforts
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## **Conclusion**

The Abbott Preschool Program offers a national model for a mixed-delivery, high-quality preschool system. However, merging funding streams, governance systems, and preschool delivery systems is complex. The authors conclude with several recommendations.

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- Assure collaboration among state agencies, between state agencies and school districts, and between school districts and community-based centers to avoid duplication of efforts and conflicting program expectations.
  - Develop funding streams (e.g., quality set-aside dollars) to minimize inequities in wages and benefits between teachers within centers.
  - Offer ongoing professional development and mentoring for directors about staff development and equity issues within centers.
  - Ensure that leadership preparation is on the agenda from the beginning when developing a publicly funded preschool system.
  - Set standards for school district leadership positions and center directors.
  - Provide scholarships and supports to center directors seeking to advance their knowledge and skills.
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## **References**

1. Frede, E., et. al. (2005). *The Abbott Preschool Longitudinal Study (APPLES)*. Brunswick, NJ: NIEER and The College of New Jersey.
  2. Whitebook, M., Ryan, S., Kipnis, F., & Sakai, L. (2008). *Partnering for preschool: A study of center directors in New Jersey's mixed-delivery Abbott Program*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.
  3. Helburn, S. (1995). *Cost, Quality, and Child Outcome Study*. Denver, CO: University of Colorado at Denver.
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