

New Jersey's Preschool Expansion Districts: Progress and Evaluation Results After One Year



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Background

New Jersey has a history of successfully creating and maintaining high-quality early childhood programs in communities throughout the State. As a result of the 1998 New Jersey Supreme Court decision in *Abbott v. Burke*, the State remedied educational inequities between low-income urban districts and wealthier districts by mandating, among other things, access to high-quality, standards-based preschool education for three- and four-year old children in thirty-five school districts throughout the State.

With the award of the Preschool Expansion Grant in 2015, New Jersey began taking next steps toward the goal of serving preschool children from 17 additional high need communities using the same model of high quality early education. New Jersey was successful in reaching the enrollment target of 1636 children. To achieve this goal, New Jersey developed five ambitious and achievable plans that are based on the same system that was used to create and expand the High-Quality State Preschool Program. The five plans and associated primary goals are as follows:

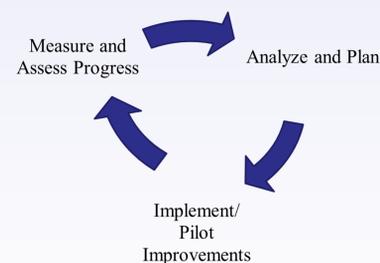
- **Ensure High Quality in Preschool Programs**
- **Expand and Improve High-Quality Preschool Programs in Each High-Need Community**
- **Ensure That Each Sub-grantee is Effectively Implementing High-Quality Preschool Programs**
- **Establish Alignment Within a Birth Through Third Grade Continuum**
- **Support a Continuum of Early Learning and Development**

Key Components of Quality

- Certified teacher and assistant for each class of 15 children;
- Developmentally appropriate, comprehensive curriculum;
- District/provider collaboration (district/provider contracts);
- Full-day (6 hour educational day), 180-day program;
- Coaches for in-class follow up;
- Preschool children with disabilities are included;
- Support for home languages of English language learners;
- Support for preschool children with potential difficulties
- Supports for families (parent involvement spec., family workers);
- Fiscal monitoring and supports (fiscal specialists)

Continuous Improvement Cycle

*Data is collected annually to evaluate the quality of New Jersey's Preschool Classrooms over time. Data is then used by DECE as part of the continuous improvement cycle.



Levels of Continuous Improvement

- ⇒ Although resources matter, quality depends on action
- ⇒ Requires aligned standards and assessments of practice with feedback from experts.
- ⇒ Takes place at multiple levels with multiple measures
 - ▷ Self assessment
 - ▷ External assessment
 - ▷ Indicators of child well-being as well as practice

External Evaluation Method

Statewide Quality Evaluation

In the first year of implementation in 17 expansion districts, quality data was collected in all 122 classrooms in fall 2015 and spring 2016, to examine changes in quality over the course of the school year.

Measures

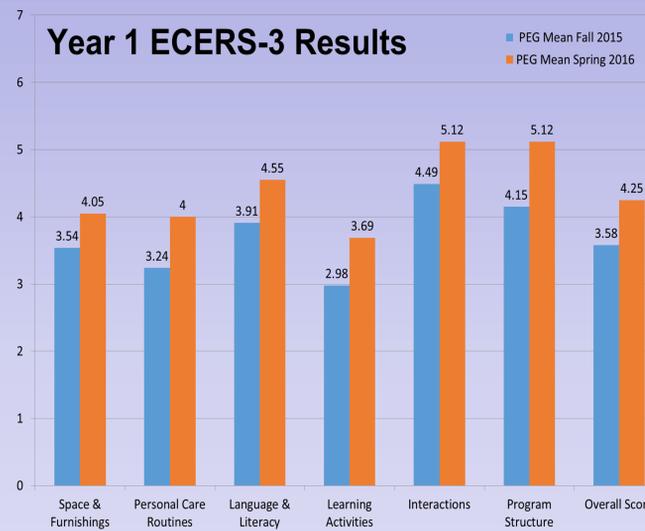
Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Third Edition

Measures general environmental quality in classrooms for 3- to 5-year old children. ECERS-3 score represents an average of the scores on 35 items (listed below). A rating of 1 indicates inadequate quality, 3 indicates minimal quality, 5 indicates good quality, and 7 indicates excellent quality

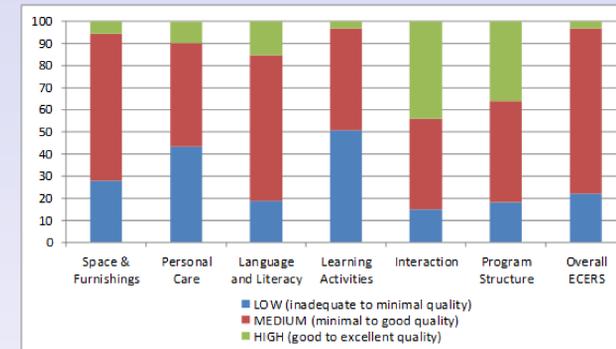
- | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Space and Furnishings</i> | 1. Indoor space
2. Furnishings for care, play, and learning
3. Room arrangement for play and learning |
| <i>Personal Care Routines</i> | 4. Space for privacy
5. Child-related display
6. Space for gross motor play
7. Gross motor equipment
8. Meals/snacks |
| <i>Language and Literacy</i> | 9. Toileting/diapering
10. Health practices
11. Safety practices
12. Helping children expand vocabulary
13. Encouraging children to use language
14. Staff use of books with children
15. Encouraging children's use of books
16. Becoming familiar with print |
| <i>Learning Activities</i> | 17. Fine motor
18. Art
19. Music and movement
20. Blocks
21. Dramatic play
22. Nature/sciences
23. Math materials and activities
24. Math in daily events
25. Understanding written numbers
26. Promoting acceptance of diversity
27. Appropriate use of technology
28. Supervision of gross motor |
| <i>Interaction</i> | 29. Individualized teaching and learning
30. Staff-child interaction
31. Peer interaction
32. Discipline |
| <i>Program Structure</i> | 33. Transitions and waiting times
34. Free play
35. Whole-group activities for play and learning |

External Evaluation Results

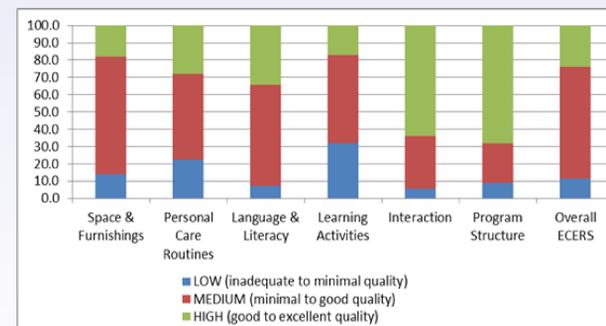
ECERS-3 Average Scores from Fall 2015 to Spring 2016



Percentage of Classrooms Scoring Low, Mid, High in Fall '15



Percentage of Classrooms Scoring Low, Mid, High in Spring '16



Summary & Discussion

Summary of Results & Discussion

Over just one year of implementation, the quality of New Jersey's preschool expansion classrooms has improved immensely. This is based on findings from an external evaluation of all 122 classrooms in 17 districts:

- Average ECERS-3 score was just 3.58 in fall 2015, when the external evaluation began. This indicates a minimal level of quality.
- By spring 2016, the average score on the ECERS-3 was up to 4.25, which is close to what is defined as good quality.
- Average quality in each subscale also improved over time.

The improvement in quality can be attributed to a few things:

- The continuous improvement cycle,
- DECE's intensive efforts to use data for program improvement,
- the external evaluation which allows for objectivity,
- the relationship between NIEER and DECE which is iterative, with strong communication and respect between entities,
- the positive response and collaboration from programs, which have become more welcoming and has paved the way for constructive feedback.

For any type of improvement cycle to be effective, strong communication between all entities (schools, departments, and researchers) is recommended. In order for schools to be open to evaluation and feedback for improvement it is necessary that they are approached unobtrusively and that they are taken seriously in any concerns that might arise.

The quality of New Jersey's preschool expansion programs will continue to be tracked over time with the ECERS-3. Once high quality programs are established, assessments with children will be added to the evaluation. This will allow for an examination of the association between high quality preschool and children's outcome gains. Research continually shows that high quality pre-k can substantially improve the life course for disadvantaged children, thus it is important to hold the expansion districts accountable not only for sustaining high quality programs, but also for having positive long-term effects on children.

