

Quality in New Jersey's Abbott Preschool Program: A closer look across the years.

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In 1998, the New Jersey Supreme Court began a series of rulings in the *Abbott v. Burke* school finance case that led to the design and provision of state-funded high-quality preschool education for children starting at age three. The first children to receive this program were those living in 31 high-poverty urban school districts in New Jersey, known as "Abbott districts." The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) oversees this state preschool program which is provided by school districts and by Head Start and private providers contracting with districts. To support the program, the NJDOE developed high standards for quality, improved the workforce through training and certification, and invested in state-of-the-art facilities. Currently, over 53,000 students attend full-day, high-quality preschool in New Jersey through various providers.¹ From 2003 to 2017, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) conducted periodic evaluations that provide measures of quality over time in the Abbott Districts.² This brief examines changes in observed quality across the years.

Quality over time

Evaluations of quality using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS) from 2003 to 2017, show consistent improvement in classroom quality through most of this period. There was a decrease in average scores when the ECERS-3 was introduced in 2015, which aligns with previous research comparing it to the earlier version (ECERS-R).³ However, this decreasing trend continued into the last year in which all 31 districts were assessed.

A closer look at the distributions over time shows that while just 22% of classrooms scored in the good to excellent range in 2003, by 2015 that had increased to 71% of classrooms. In 2016 and 2017 (using the ECERS-3), this dropped to 40% and then to 32% by 2017. While 12% of classrooms were rated as inadequate in 2003, no classrooms were rated inadequate by 2015. This trend changed in 2016 and 2017, where an increase in inadequate classrooms (6% and 8%, respectively) raises concerns even though it is on a new version of the measure.

Changes by subscales

As with the overall scores, there was a consistent increase in quality over time across most subscales. For instance, the mean score for the Space and Furnishings subscale in 2003 was 3.97, which increased to 5.20 in 2015. The Learning Activities and Program Structure subscales also showed significant improvements, increasing from 3.56 to 5.12, and from 4.51 to 6.07, respectively.

Despite these increases, the *Space & Furnishings* subscale showed a substantial drop in the percentage of classrooms scoring in the good to excellent range with the switch from the ECERS-R to the ECERS-3. Just 16% of classrooms were in the good to excellent range in 2003, but this number reached 60% in 2015, yet fell to 31% in 2016 and further to 18% in 2017 with the ECERS-3. On the *Learning Activities* subscale, just 4% of classrooms scored in the good to excellent range in 2003, and while this number climbed to 54% in 2015, these numbers then decreased to 27% and 22% of classrooms in 2016 and 2017, respectively. *Program Structure* scores improved over time, with 43% of classrooms

Figure 1. ECERS average scores and distributions over time

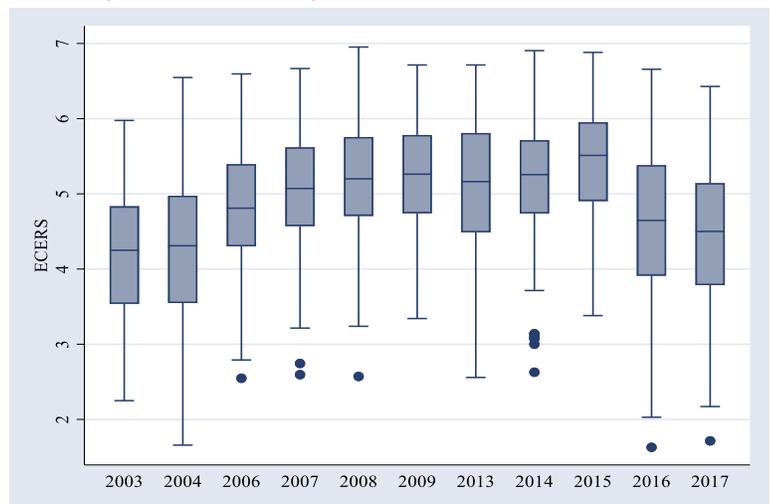
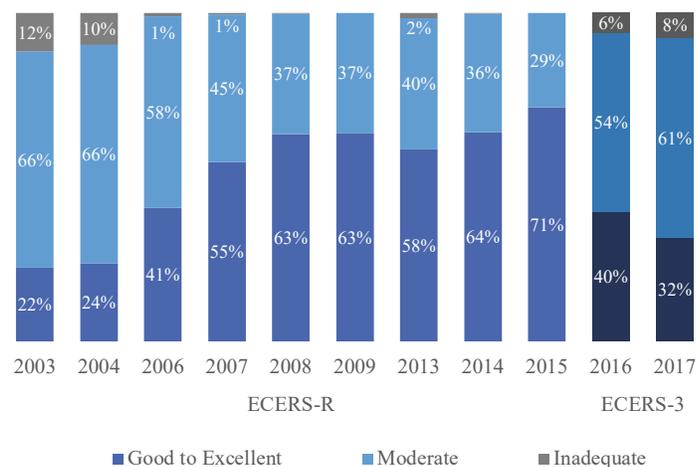


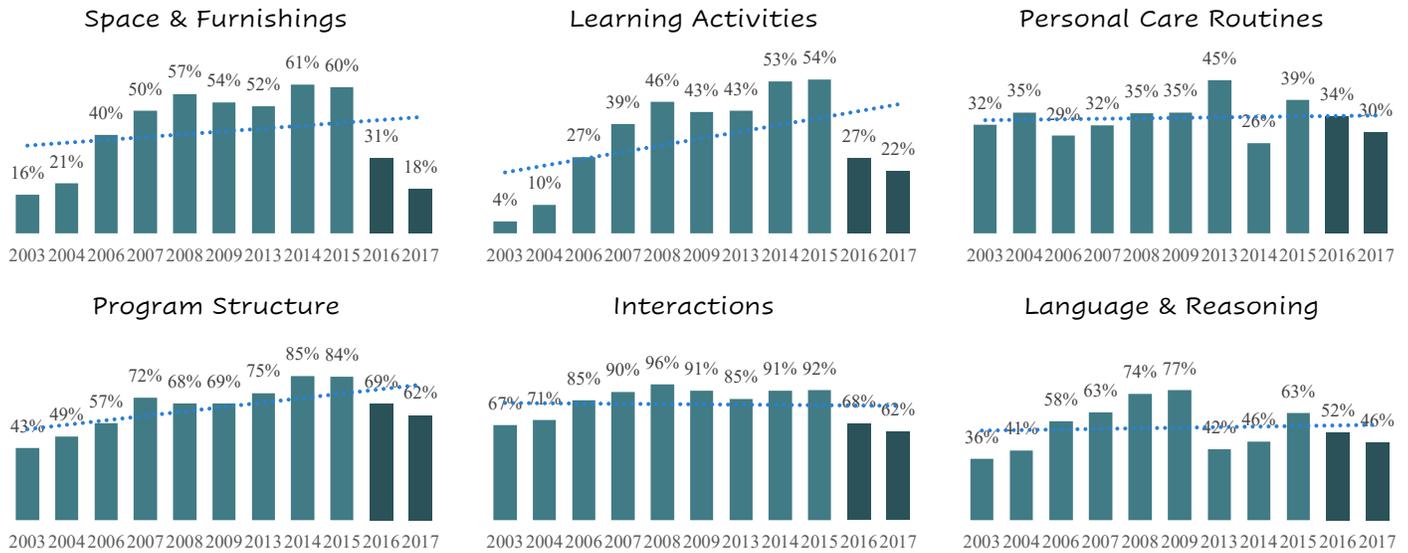
Figure 2. Percentage of classrooms scores at Inadequate, Moderate or Good to Excellent levels



meeting the standard in 2003 and 84% in 2015. These decreased under the ECERS-3 to 69% in 2016 and continued to do so in 2017.

Classrooms also consistently improved on the *Interactions* subscale, with a majority scoring in the good to excellent range, even after transitioning to the ECERS-3 in 2016. In 2003, 67% of classrooms met the good to excellent criteria for Interactions, which increased to 92% in 2015 and dropped to 68% and 62% in 2016 and 2017 with the ECERS-3.

For two subscales, change over time was less consistently positive. The *Personal Care Routines* subscale demonstrated low scores and minimal change over the years. In 2003, 32% of classrooms scored in the good to excellent range on this subscale, and this increased only slightly to 39% in 2015. When the ECERS-3 was used in 2016 and 2017, the percentages remained similar, at 34% in 2016 and 30% in 2017.⁴ The *Language & Reasoning* subscale scores averaged 4.42 in 2003 and this increased for a decade before dropping sharply in 2013 and 2014, then rising to 5.12 in 2015, but with the ECERS-3 in 2016 and 2017 falling to 4.86 & 4.70, respectively. However, the percentage of programs with high to excellent quality for language and reasoning was similar between 2013-2014 and 2016-2017.



Note: Lighter bars correspond to years when ECERS-R was utilized and darker bars to years when ECERS-3 was utilized.

Findings & Recommendations

Quality in pre-K systems can be significantly improved, and continuous quality improvement systems benefit from using classroom observations tools as part of this process. The following recommendations could further strengthen the system going forward: (i) Implement continuous quality improvement systems that incorporate classroom observation tools to monitor quality; (ii) Invest in ongoing quality monitoring efforts to address variation and promote equity; (iii) Prioritize interventions and resources for classrooms with inadequate quality and insist that such classrooms be replaced if they do not improve with time; (iv) Continue to enhance program *interactions* and *structure*; (v) Improve scores on *Personal Care Routines* by implementing targeted improvements in personal care, health, and safety practices; (vi) Target efforts to improve *Learning Activities & Language & Reasoning*, by providing resources, professional development, and teacher supports; and (vii) Take inspiration from the growth reported but do not take quality for granted.

¹ Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Barnett, W. S., Hodges, K. S., Garver, K. A., Weisenfeld, G., Gardiner, B. A., Jost, T. M. (2023). The State of Preschool 2022: State Preschool Yearbook. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. <https://nieer.org/the-state-of-preschool-yearbook-2022#profiles>

² Procedures: The datasets in the present analyses derived from annual statewide observations of classroom quality in the districts providing the program, which were conducted by New Jersey’s Early Learning Improvement Consortium and the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University. The data collection followed consistent protocols, including random selection of classrooms and training of the data collection team by NIEER personnel. Starting in 2003, over 300 preschool classrooms in the Abbott districts were observed annually, representing about 11-14% of classrooms in each district. Classroom quality was assessed using the ECERS-R² from 2003 to 2015, and the ECERS-3 in 2016 and 2017. The study only reports progress until 2017, as assessments beyond that year included preschool programs in additional districts. References: Harms, T., Clifford, R. M., & Cryer, D. (1998). Early childhood environment rating scale. Teachers College Press. New York, NY.; Harms, T., Clifford, R. M., & Cryer, D. (2015). Early childhood environment rating scale (3rd ed.), Teachers College Press. New York, NY.

³ Hestenes, L. L., Rucker, L., Wang, Y. C., Mims, S. U., Hestenes, S. E., & Cassidy, D. J. (2019). A Comparison of the ECERS-R and ECERS-3: Different Aspects of Quality? *Early Education and Development*, 30(4), 496-510.

⁴ Both the Health Practices and Toileting/Diapering items on this subscale showed a downward trend from 2003 to 2017, with fewer programs scoring in the good to excellent range on both over time.

*Acknowledgements: The data for this report were collected by New Jersey’s Early Learning Improvement Consortium and the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University. For the full report see Nores, M., & Harmeyer, E. (2023). Quality in New Jersey’s Abbott Preschool Program: A closer look across the years. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.