Securing Pre-K's Legacy: Issues and Opportunities for New Jersey's Next Governor

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Executive Summary

For more than two decades, New Jersey has been recognized as a national leader in preschool education. Built on the landmark Abbott v. Burke NJ Supreme Court decisions, the state's pre-K program set a new standard for high-quality public preschool education. Rigorous research documents that NJ Pre-K improves school readiness and raises long-term achievement, particularly for students in districts with high concentrations of poverty, the former "Abbott districts."

Yet today, the foundations of NJ Pre-K's success are at risk. Rapid expansion to more than 300 districts—while laudable—has outpaced the state's capacity to provide the oversight, technical assistance, and sustained quality improvement needed to ensure strong results. The preschool funding formula has not been updated since 2008, leaving some districts with insufficient funds to fully meet standards while others accumulate substantial unspent balances. Enrollment shortfalls in some former Abbott districts leave too many children without the preschool boost that would increase their achievement and reduce the need for grade retention and special education. Program quality depends on strong implementation of NJ Pre-K's innovative and proven continuous improvement system, but leadership in new districts often lack the knowledge and experience required to implement that system effectively, NJDOE has insufficient staffing to support districts in its implementation, and the broader evaluation studies needed to inform the system have not been continued.

Governor-elect Sherrill and her team can restore NJ Pre-K to its status as the crown jewel of New Jersey's best-in-the-nation education system by taking several urgently needed actions. These are:

- Strengthen state and district capacity for oversight and support of high quality preschool.
- Rebalance funding, using a cost study to identify current costs and then construct a funding formula that reflects those costs and their variations across districts.
- Provide incentives and supports to prioritize enrollment of the most vulnerable children across district and private provider settings.
- Support the development and implementation of evidence-based effective strategies to promote full enrollment and prevent chronic absenteeism.
- Revitalize NJ Pre-K's unique, proven continuous improvement system from the classroom to the district—including statewide evaluation— to ensure continued program quality and impact.

Background

New Jersey has had one of the nation's strongest preschool programs. Created in response to the Abbott v. Burke rulings, NJ Pre-K has over the past two decades primarily served children in 31 school districts that are home to about 25% of the state's children with high concentrations of low-income, Black, and Hispanic children. Recently, the program has expanded to serve children in hundreds of additional districts with the goal of eventually becoming truly universal for the entire state. The program begins at age 3 and serves children for a full school day. It has high expectations for young children's learning and development and high standards for the program (e.g., maximum class size of 15, fully qualified teachers, research-based curriculum). A guiding principle for program funding was to first determine the resources the program required to meet its goals and then to calculate the funding need to pay for those resources. This procedure was followed initially, but cost has not been re-examined in almost 20 years even though both contexts and districts providing the services have changed dramatically.

NJ Pre-K is designed as a mixed delivery system with full funding from the state flowing to districts, and districts operating both classrooms in their own buildings and contracting with private child care providers and Head Start, all meeting the same standards. Mixed delivery helps minimize the need for new facilities construction while strengthening the child care system overall by increasing and stabilizing funding. By contrast, inadequate support for mixed delivery can destabilize the child care system as it loses children and funding.

A strong continuous improvement system is implemented at all levels from the individual classroom, to the center/school, and district. As the program initially matured, research documented that the quality of education young children received was transformed, moving the entire distribution of program quality from poor to mediocre in 2002 to good to excellent by 2008. Especially for children who attended NJ Pre-K for two years, the National Institute for Early Education Research's (NIEER's) rigorous longitudinal study of the program found large gains in school readiness followed by persistent increases in educational achievement through 10th grade, well as decreases in grade retention and need for special education. Gains for children who attended for two years are large enough to close a third or more of the achievement gap for children in low-income families. NJ Pre-K is one of the major reasons that New Jersey consistently ranks at the top nationally for its education system and education outcomes.

Subsequent years have seen changes that have impacted NJ Pre-K. First, state capacity to support the continuous improvement system has eroded as has the state's capacity for oversight of quality, enrollment goals, funding adequacy, and mixed delivery. Second, in the last eight years, the program has expanded to more than 300 districts, greatly increasing access as the state moves toward making NJ Pre-K available to all children. However, the state did not simultaneously expand its capacity to support and manage Pre-K. These changes give rise to problems that threaten the very foundation of NJ Pre-K's success in both the former Abbott districts and the new expansion districts. These problems require immediate attention if New Jersey is to continue to be a national leader in education and to reap the benefits of high quality pre-K for children's literacy and numeracy, school success, and economic productivity.

Below we detail five specific issues that present opportunities for Governor-elect Sherrill to resolve problems that will return NJ Pre-K to its place as the jewel in New Jersey's education crown.

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Preschool Imperatives and Opportunities

1. **New Jersey state-level capacity to support NJ Pre-K has declined while the demands of an expanding program have increased.**

Issue. NJ Pre-K success depends on the strong continuous improvement system (CIS) that was developed to ensure high quality across all programs. The state's role in this system is to support Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in understanding and implementing the CIS. In the past, the Division of Early Childhood Services (DECS) worked closely with district Early Childhood Education (ECE) administrators and superintendents individually and as a learning community to support the CIS with great results. However, DECS is no longer staffed with the number of ECE content specialists required to support LEAs to ensure that continuous improvement efforts are implemented and that LEAs are held accountable. In addition, the robust partnership with higher education has waned and statewide evaluations that once provided information on successes and problems have declined. As a result, preschool program quality is falling in the former Abbott districts and is not reaching the desired levels in the expansion districts, and enrollment is falling below required levels. At the same time, information needed to identify problems (and successes) and solutions is no longer available. In part, this is because of a lack of capacity to make use of the vast amounts of data collected by schools.

Opportunity. Assess the level of additional support required to fully implement the CIS and to conduct statewide evaluation and provide adequate technical assistance for Pre-K. Then determine how this might be best provided. Options include: (a) increasing the staffing at DECS; (b) providing support through state higher education institutions; and (c) creating a new cabinet level agency such as an Office of Early Childhood Care and Education that combines staff from NJDOE, NJDCF and NJDHS to support quality across both pre-K and child care. Expertise needed includes subject matter experts relating to dual language learners, preschool special education, and research-based curricula and data analytics for program improvement. Some states have created dedicated units in state institutions of higher education (IHEs) that support their Departments of Education with evaluation and data analysis capabilities that are difficult for state agencies to maintain. With resources to improve data collection at the state-level, IHEs can provide analyses to help the state make policy decisions to improve program access and quality.

2. **Leadership in new districts taking up NJ Pre-K lack experience/expertise in ECE resulting in implementation inefficiencies, missteps, and lower quality and effectiveness.**

Issue. Districts are joining the program with little or no experience/expertise in the education of children under the age of 5. As noted above, DECS does not have enough staff to provide the level of assistance these districts need to implement the program following state standards.

Opportunity. Implement a robust system to provide technical assistance to districts in the start-up stage. Provide training for DOE county office staff in ECE or add county office staff with specialization in ECE. County-based staff can facilitate collaboration among small districts and private providers that may produce efficiencies. Also, the state can engage with higher education to develop and implement a leadership academy to train district staff in best practices.

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This could be combined with facilitation of networked improvement communities (NICs) in which districts work together to address common implementation challenges and share their findings with the larger NJ Pre-K community.

3. **Outdated rates for Pre-K funding negatively impact program implementation and quality.**

Issue. The per pupil rates used to determine preschool funding amounts have not been revised based on actual data since 2008. In some subsequent years, funding did not advance to keep up with inflation or increases in costs as programs matured. In addition, changes in the relative costs and ability to pay across districts have not been taken into account and have created inequities in funding that were never intended. As a result, some districts are amassing large amounts of preschool carryover funding, while other districts do not have sufficient funding to comply with regulations, maintain program quality, or ensure they are fully enrolled.

Opportunity. Develop and implement a cost study based on data collected from districts and private providers to estimate current costs and how these vary among districts. This information can then be used to inform a process to develop a new approach to paying for NJ Pre-K. Historically, the state paid 100 percent of costs. The state recently implemented a "pilot" of a district share for newly expanding districts, but there are few takers, so it is unlikely to generate useful information. The cost study can be the first step toward a conversation and analysis to generate a more sustainable and equitable funding system for NJ Pre-K. At the same time, the state can reinstate enrollment audits for districts receiving state preschool funding to ensure they do not under enroll to increase the effective reimbursement rate. The state also can lower Preschool Education Aid allocations to decrease carryover to a more reasonable amount for districts with a large reserve of preschool carryover funding.

4. **Significant under enrollment is pervasive in many districts and enrollment of those who would benefit most is not prioritized.**

Issue. Based on data available from 144 districts, 123 were under enrolled in the 2024-25 school year. On average, these districts were under enrolled by 20%, meaning that thousands of eligible children went unserved and that the state is paying for unfilled seats. As some districts approach or even exceed the target, others have enrollments far below the average. This includes some former Abbott districts. When large percentages of students do not enroll, this jeopardizes large benefits to the children who don't attend and even reduces benefits to those who do attend because of negative peer effects. In addition, districts are not required to prioritize enrolling children from the lowest income families or those with home languages other than English even though the benefits are greatest for these children. When enrollment is near universal, prioritization is not an issue, so these two problems are related. Also related is a problem with chronic absenteeism amongst state-funded preschoolers. The state program can only have positive effects for children if they attend regularly. According to the 2023-24 NJ School Performance Report, preschoolers have a chronic absenteeism rate of 33%. Although preschoolers may be expected to have a higher rate of absenteeism than older children, this is far too high.

Opportunity. Launch an initiative to develop and test new approaches to recruitment and outreach that will boost enrollment to the 90 percent target, as well as approaches to lower rates

of chronic absenteeism. Some districts already succeed. Other districts have explored approaches to addressing the problem with varying success. State leadership and support to solve the problem would have a high payoff and unexpended funds associated with under-enrollment can be used to support this work. District and state data should be used to track success in enrollment and who is enrolled (e.g., reporting enrollment by income, home language, etc.), as well as rates of absenteeism, as a means to understand the kinds of families who are not enrolling in, or consistently sending their children to, public preschool. With this information, the state can identify the obstacles and challenges preventing some families from taking advantage of NJ Pre-K and take steps to address those issues.

5. **State policies insufficiently incentivize school districts to partner with child care providers, leaving missed opportunities to serve more children, even as expansion proceeds more slowly than desired.**

Issue. To reach universal access to state-funded preschool, NJ Pre-K will need to add almost 7,000 more classrooms. A mixed delivery model that incorporates existing child care providers offers the fastest and least expensive route to this expansion because it maximizes the use of existing resources, such as experienced program staff and classroom space, as well as private sector flexibility for growth.

The Abbott v. Burke NJ Supreme Court decisions required Abbott districts to partner with any child care center and Head Start agency (private provider) that was "willing and able" to meet the state's standards for public preschool once additional support and resources were provided. Currently, over half of the children served in the Abbott districts (over 53%) are served in private provider locations. However, the requirement to partner with private providers does not extend beyond the Abbott districts and, as a result, only 19% of state-funded preschoolers in non-Abbott districts are being served in private provider locations and 70% of non-Abbott districts do not partner with private providers at all.

Opportunity. Require and/or incentivize districts to partner with private providers to increase the number of seats available for state preschool across the state while also helping to stabilize the child care industry by ensuring that private providers can maintain their existing seats for three- and four-year-olds. Increased use of private providers can assist with rapidly addressing the under-enrollment problem. Also, following strategies that resulted in successful collaborations during the expansion of the Abbott preschool program is critical. Districts need permission from the state to contract with private providers while their teachers work towards certification, and teachers need scholarship funding and coaching support to obtain a state teaching certificate.

Conclusions

New Jersey's investment in preschool has transformed the early education of children and established the state as a national model while bolstering our claim to be the best in nation for education. However, as the state has expanded NJ Pre-K, it has not invested in the infrastructure that is foundational for the program's success. As a result, significant challenges have emerged that threaten NJ Pre-K's effectiveness and the return on the state's investment in this program. The problems facing the program: under-enrollment, outdated funding formulas, uneven quality, missed

opportunities for partnerships, state staffing shortages, and lack of evaluation—are serious, but practical solutions are readily available and waiting for leadership to move them forward.

Governor-elect Sherrill has a critical imperative and important opportunity to recommit to preschool as the foundation of New Jersey's education system and lead the way forward to ensuring every child in our state receives a strong start. The choices made in the coming years will determine whether New Jersey secures its pre-K legacy, puts every child on a path to high levels of educational success, and remains a beacon to the nation for how best to educate young children.

Acknowledgments

About NIEER

The [National Institute for Early Education Research](#) (NIEER) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, conducts and disseminates independent research and analysis to inform early childhood education policy.

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