

# A Rising Tide:

## Classroom Quality and Language Skills in the Abbott Preschool Program

Year Two Preliminary Update, 2003-2004  
Early Learning Improvement Consortium

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This update presents preliminary findings of the second year of the ELIC study. In addition, comparisons to similar information collected by the Center for Early Education Research at Rutgers University in 1999–2000 and 2000-2001 are made to measure change over time (Barnett, Tarr, Esposito-Lamy & Frede, 2002). For a full description of the study details please see the Year One report (Lamy, Frede, Seplocha, et. al., 2004, <http://www.nj.gov/njded/ece/abbott/inch.pdf>.)

President John F. Kennedy was referring to the economy of the early 1960s when he cited the Latin axiom, “A rising tide raises all boats.” But that theory is equally applicable to preschool education here in New Jersey forty years later: There is overwhelming evidence that when quality increases in preschool classrooms, children learn more, and this enhances the progress of all children.

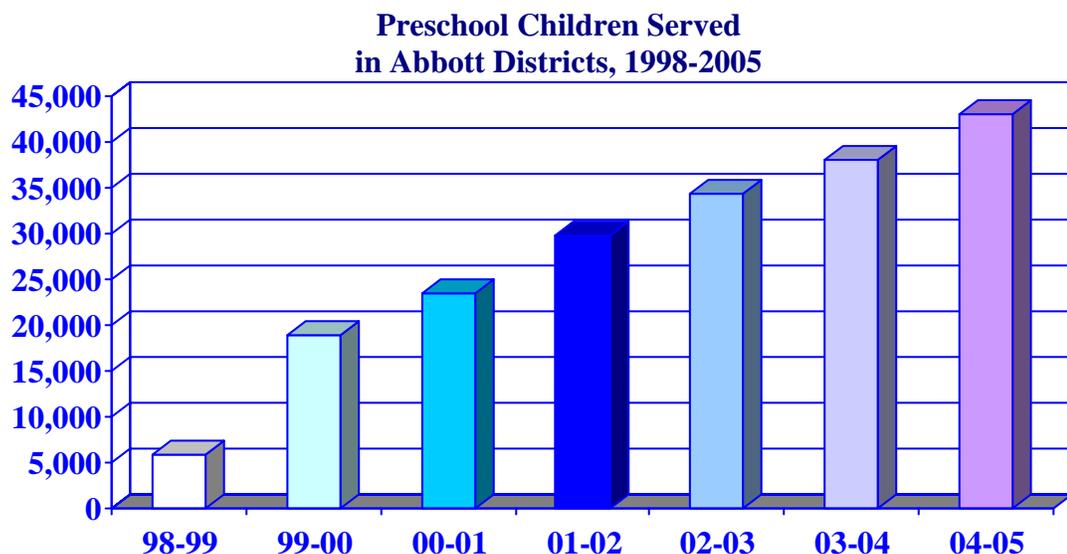
New Jersey’s Abbott preschool program has already been rated among the best in the nation in terms of its level of quality, the resources the state commits to it and the number children it serves.

The research update outlined in this paper demonstrates even greater advancement in the past few years. Classrooms in Abbott districts are increasing in quality, and children are entering kindergarten better prepared than ever and eager to learn.

On May 21, 1998, the New Jersey Supreme Court landmark decision in Abbott v. Burke mandated that three- and four-year-old children in the state’s 30 highest poverty districts receive preschool education. Both the preschool program and the 30 districts are now commonly referred to as “Abbotts.”

The goal of the Abbott preschool is to prepare children to succeed in school. The key to reaching this goal is high-quality programs that reach all children.

Expansion of the program has been rapid. In the first school year of the program, only 19,000 children were enrolled. Five years later, in 2003–2004, more than 38,000 of the 54,000 three- and four-year-olds in the 30 districts were in preschool. Projected enrollment for 2004-2005 is over 43,000 children.



### **Measuring the Impact**

To measure the effects of Abbott preschool, the Department of Education (DOE) formed the Early Learning Improvement Consortium (ELIC), a partnership between the

department, other education professionals and the academic experts at several of our state colleges and universities.

In the fall of 2002 and of 2003, in order to obtain a general picture of children’s “readiness” to succeed in school, university faculty members of ELIC administered tests of oral language and early literacy skills tests to randomly selected kindergarten students statewide. These assessments were followed by classroom evaluations on 13 percent of the Abbott preschool classrooms.

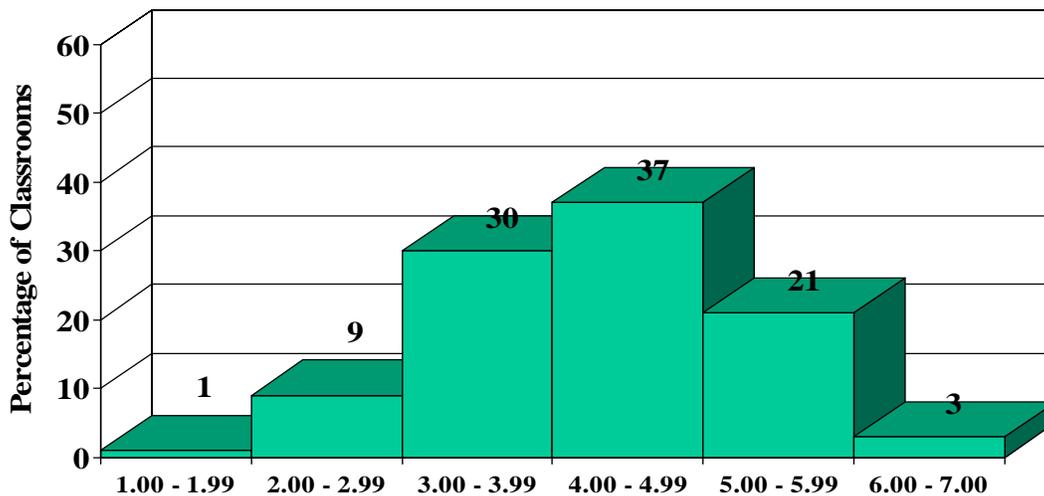
Classroom quality was measured using three instruments:

- The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R; Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998), a widely-used tool chosen to provide a comprehensive look at classroom quality.
- The Support for Early Literacy Assessment (SELA; Smith, Davidson & Weisenfeld, 2001), which provides more specific information on classroom practices that support children’s early language and literacy skills.
- The Preschool Classroom Mathematics Inventory (PCMI; Frede, Dessewffy, Hornbeck & Worth, 2001), which focuses on the materials and methods used in preschool classrooms to support and enhance children’s math skills.

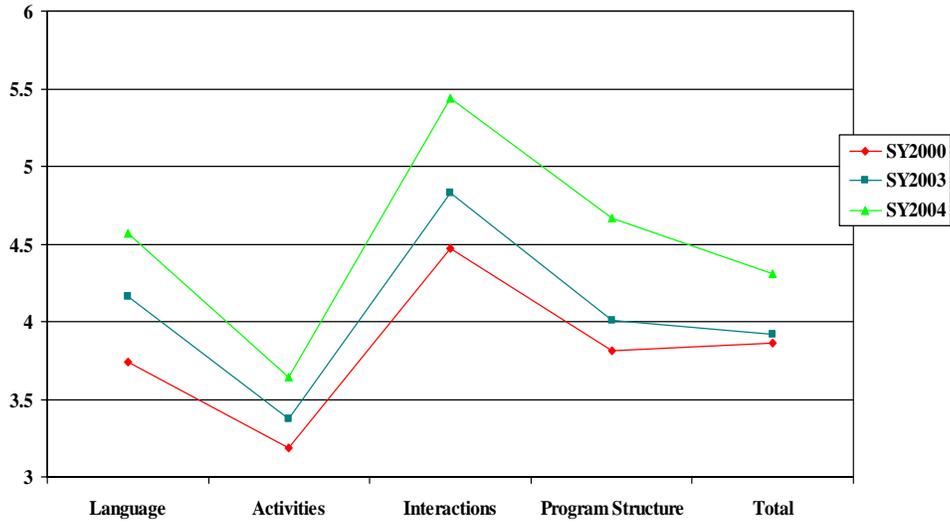
### Teaching Practices Improve

Despite the dramatic expansion of the preschool population in 2003-2004, the vast majority of classroom scores on the ECERS-R are improving, with 24% scoring “good” or “excellent” as compared to only 13% a year earlier. Gains have been particularly strong in the practices most likely to impact a child’s readiness to start school, including “language and reasoning,” “teacher-child interactions” and “program structure.”

**Total ECERS-R Score Distribution SY 2004**



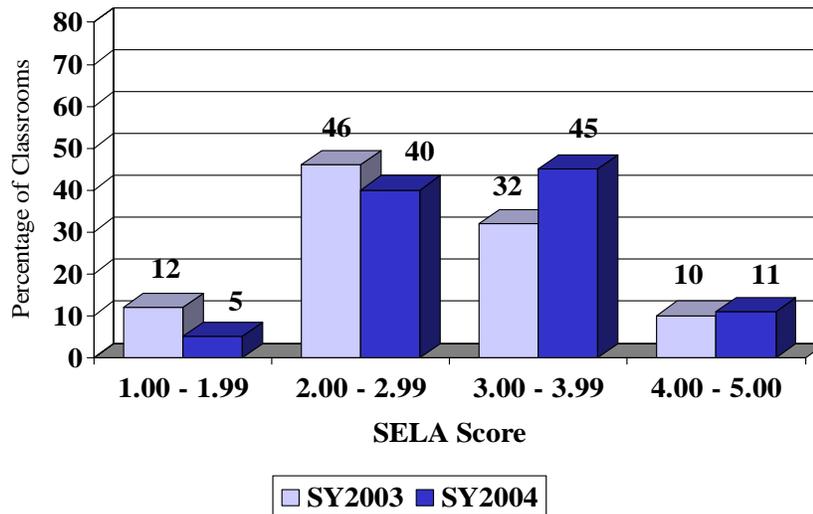
### Change in Selected ECERS-R Subscale Scores SY2000 – SY2004



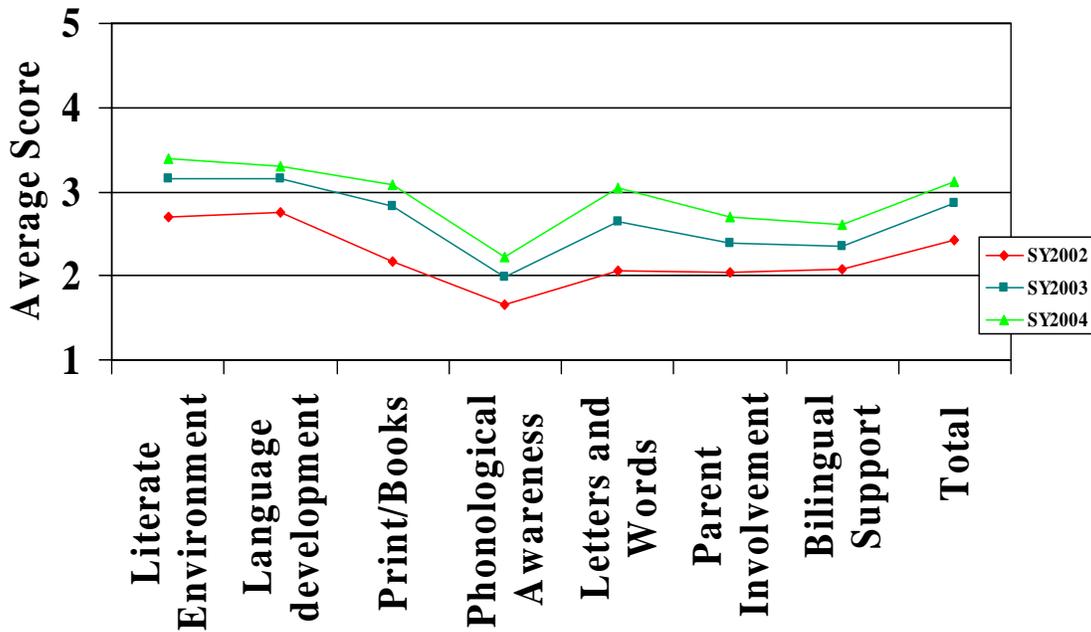
(n=252 classrooms)

The evaluators' scores regarding teaching practices proven to enhance literacy development have also increased substantially. Fifty-five percent of the classrooms scored "above adequate" compared to 41% in 2002-2003.

### Comparison of SELA Score Distribution SY2003 – SY2004



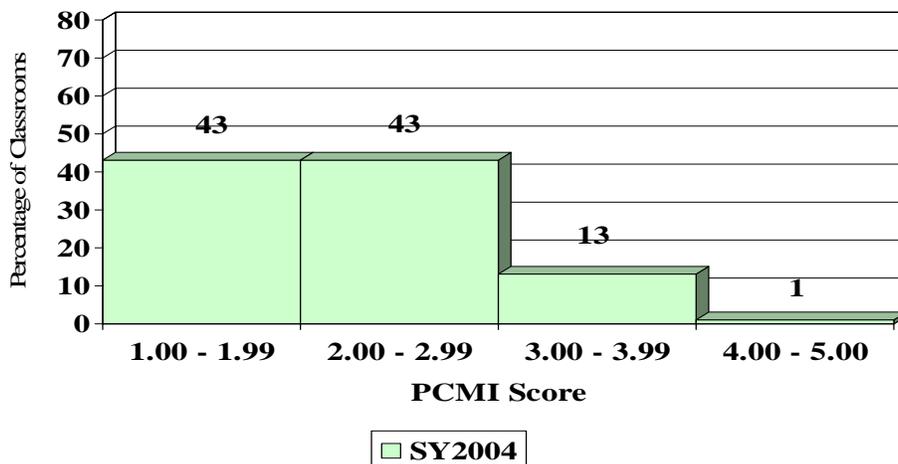
### Change in SELA Scores SY2002 – SY2004



(n=252 classrooms)

Although the recorded classroom scores in mathematics teaching are less encouraging, with most classrooms scoring “below adequate,” it is important to note that this instrument is under development. Its relationship to child outcome has not yet been established. In addition, changes in the testing instrument made after the 2002-2003 school year make year to year comparisons impossible.

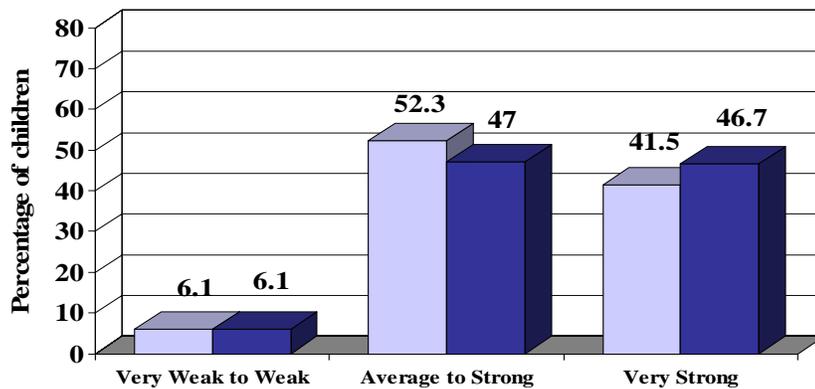
### PCMI Score Distribution SY2004



## Child Learning Outcomes

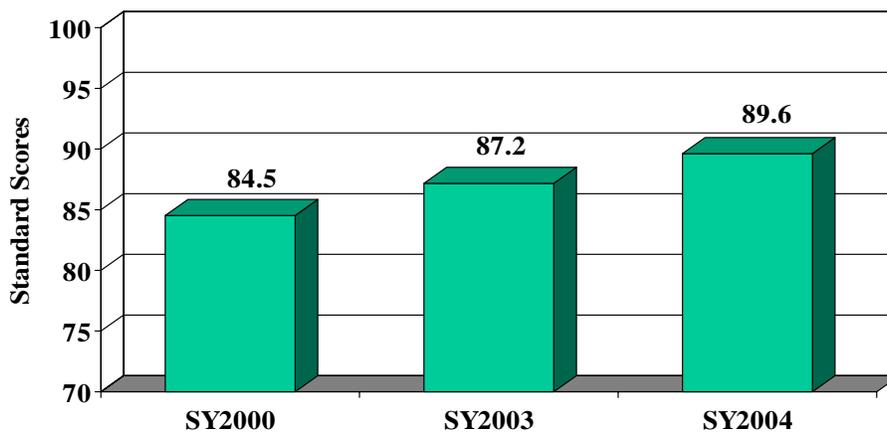
The early literacy abilities of kindergarten children in the Abbott districts in 2003-2004 showed marked improvement: The number of children scoring in the “very strong” category jumped from 42% in 2002-2003 to 47% in 2003-2004.

**Get Ready to Read Scores SY2003 - SY2004**



Language skills have consistently increased: In the 1999-2000 school year, the average score was 84.5; in 2003-2004, it was 89.6.

**Change in Receptive Language Scores SY2000 – SY2004**



Statistically significant difference between 2000 and 2004, ( $F=22.46$   $p<=.00$ ).  
Across 14 districts with data from 2000. Mean for 30 districts in 2004 is 88.91(14.16)

## **More Boats Will Rise**

As we begin the sixth year of the Abbott preschool endeavor, it is very clear that the tide of excellence is rising and bringing with it the vessels of preschool program quality and child learning.

More young children are attending preschool across the Abbott districts. The classrooms they attend are more effective vehicles for teaching and learning, and as a result, the children enter kindergarten better prepared to succeed in school and in life. Previous research has shown that they have better social skills, better communication skills, better literacy skills and better problem-solving skills. They've experienced the thrill that comes with understanding and achieving, and they are ready to move to the next level.

These preliminary results show that, although there is still room to improve, we are well on the way to meeting the mandate the court established when it publicly recognized the dramatic impact that quality preschool would have on the lives of our children and the future of our state.

The ELIC gratefully acknowledges the assistance of district and child care center administrators. We especially appreciate the cooperation of teaching staff throughout the data collection process. Most importantly we thank the children and families of the Abbott preschool program.