

**Guarini Institute for Government and Leadership
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Preface

The Guarini Institute for Government and Leadership White Paper Series (GWPS) is designed to stimulate timely and relevant discussion around key public policy topics germane to New Jersey. The series will provide contributors a unique opportunity to share their opinions related to critical public policy issues. This is the fourth paper in a series of white papers sponsored by the Guarini Institute. On behalf of the institute, we thank Drs. Luongo and Doria for their contribution.

The position/argument reflects that of the author and not Saint Peter's University or the Guarini Institute. Additionally, this paper cannot be reprinted without the consent of the Institute's Executive Director.

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Current Legislation Provides Opportunities for Pre-K Expansion in New Jersey Schools

Abstract: *This article discusses recent legislation regarding preschool educational reforms in New Jersey. This paper also provides the historical context of the Head Start program as well as recent bipartisan legislation to expand funding for New Jersey's public preschool programs. Moreover, the paper examines various school-based Pre-K, Head Start, center-based child care, family child care, and other community-based preschool programs. Additionally, the paper supports the need for strong state-level leadership for the implementation of high-quality preschool programs. If enacted, this legislation will allow more Pre-K students to have access to high quality education programs.*

Introduction

It is impossible to overstate the importance of preschool education for children from every economic and social class in our society. Former New Jersey Governor Thomas H. Kean made this point when he stated: “There are a few priority reforms we need to make to improve education in our state. One of our highest priorities should be the availability of quality Pre-K programs for all of our children. These programs offer our best hope...”¹. The New Jersey Legislature agreed with the stated need for universal Pre-K education and passed legislation in 2008 expanding these programs. However, this legislation was never fully nor properly funded.

The Federal Government also realizes the importance of Pre-K education. In 1965, it created the Headstart Program to prepare children from low income families to succeed in school and in life. The program has been in existence for more than half a century, and there have been a number of research studies conducted to assess the success of the children who participated in the Head Start classes. Research shows that children who participate in Head Start programs are better prepared to succeed in kindergarten (National Head Start Association, 2015). Moreover, Headstart students performed better on social measures, exhibiting fewer attention issues and negative behaviors. They were also found to be more likely to complete high school and attend college. These facts help to illustrate just why Pre-K education is so important.

Pre-K programs have been an essential component of the education programs for students enrolled in the 31 Abbott districts. Abbott districts were implemented by the New Jersey Supreme Court as a result of a decision in the longest-running school finance equity lawsuit in the state’s history. The suit was brought by the Education Law Center, who argued on behalf of children living in the state’s most economically distressed school districts. The plaintiffs argued that the state system of school aid finance provided inadequate funding to ensure “a thorough and efficient education” as required by the New Jersey State Constitution for children in the state’s poorest school districts. Implementation of high-quality, universal Pre-K programs in the

¹ <https://prekourway.org/our-supporters/>

Abbott districts is generally traced to the New Jersey Supreme Court's 1998 Abbott V decision, which mandated that the state provide high-quality Pre-K, full-day kindergarten, small class sizes, and other "supplemental programs addressing special needs of students in poorer urban districts."

Recently, the state of New Jersey has made progress in advancing high-quality Pre-K educational reforms. Although the 2008 School Funding Reform Act called for Pre-K expansion, fewer than 40 New Jersey school districts actually provide three-and four- year-olds with access to publicly-funded preschool programs. Upcoming bipartisan legislation plans to expand New Jersey's public preschool program to include additional New Jersey communities. Current New Jersey policymakers have designated certain steps to consolidate early education gains and build an aligned and universal system of high-quality Pre-K education. The current plan includes expanding the Abbott-designed program of two years of full-day preschool to another 17 districts. The proposal calls for a two-year phase-in, with \$62.7 million in the fiscal 2017 budget and \$103 million in the fiscal 2018 budget (Mooney, 2015).

In February 2016, two major preschool education legislative actions occurred. First, Senator M. Teresa Ruiz (Dem/District 29, Essex) and State Senate President Stephen M. Sweeney (Dem/District 3, Cumberland, Gloucester and Salem) introduced legislation to establish a five-year early childhood innovation loan pilot program. This program would encourage private investment in early childhood services to reduce public expenditures related to those services. The Early Childhood Innovation Act (S-973) would permit the New Jersey Economic Development Authority to guarantee loan agreements between lenders, eligible nonprofit organizations, and public sector entities. These agreements would allow certain nonprofit organizations to receive funding from a lender in exchange for providing preschool services to a local school district. The lender would be compensated based upon the amount of savings generated by the provision of early childhood services to the local district; moreover, the loans would be guaranteed by the State Economic Development Authority.²

Secondly, Assemblywoman Mila M. Jasey (Dem/District 27, Essex and Morris) and Betty Lou DeCroce (Rep/District 26, Essex, Morris and Passaic) along with Speaker Vincent Prieto (Dem/District 31, Bergen and Hudson) and Assemblyman Thomas Giblin (Dem/District 34) Patrick J. Diegnan, Jr. (Dem/District 18, Middlesex) introduced legislation in the New Jersey Assembly to begin the phase-in of the existing 2008 law that expanded New Jersey's high-quality Pre-K program (New Jersey General Assembly, 2016). This bill (A-2572) would allocate \$110M to school districts to plan and implement programs for its preschool children; it provides for the expansion of full-day preschool programs for three- and four-year-olds in one hundred additional communities.

² https://prekourway.org/assets/Pre-K-Our-Way_Early-Childhood-Innovation-Act_021616.pdf.

Any school district that was required to provide universal access to full-day preschool under state law would be required within two years to submit to the education commissioner a five-year plan for the full implementation of a full-day preschool program. Jasey announced, “New Jersey has the highest quality public Pre-K, recognized both nationally and internationally, but the program is not available to every child in New Jersey. Where a child lives shouldn’t determine whether they have access to high quality Pre-K... There is momentum: Pre-K is becoming a priority issue. Now is our best chance to make sure Pre-K comes our way.”³

As one can see, New Jersey State Assemblywoman Mila Jasey feels passionately about this issue. In fact, Jasey wants to take \$110 million from the Property Tax Relief Fund and use that money to expand pre-K programs around the state. Jasey claims: “I believe very strongly that we need to make the education of our children beginning with the youngest ones a priority.”⁴ Jasey’s proposed legislation would expand offerings to 100 school districts around the state where at least 40 percent of students participate in the free or reduced lunch program.

What Is Pre-K Education?

Pre-K education is a generic term used to encompass all of the learning-based programs, settings, and initiatives that children may experience before (“pre-”) entering kindergarten. This includes school-based Pre-K, Head Start, center-based child care, family child care, and other community-based preschool programs. In school districts and communities, Pre-K is used to describe services focused on 3- and 4-year old children. Pre-K can also include infant and toddler programs, settings, and initiatives. The New Jersey State Department of Education Preschool Standards⁵ outlines guidelines for preschool education programs that support and sustain children’s emergent learning skills. Pre-K programs should offer experiences that maximize young children’s learning and development, providing each child with a foundation for educational success. Additionally, preschool education provides many benefits for children, their families, schools, and communities (Pre-K Our Way, 2016).

A new advocacy group called Pre-K Our Way was launched in January 2015, and aims at expanding publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs in New Jersey (Clark, 2015) under the leadership of successful businessman Brian Maher. Pre-K Our Way (2016) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan effort that helps communities deliver New Jersey’s high-quality Pre-K education to children. Its initiative is to bring preschool programs to all of the communities who have been waiting years for the state legislature to deliver them as promised. The premise of Pre-K Our Way is that students with preschool experience do better in school over those children who did not receive; those who do not have preschool start behind and have trouble catching up. Quality preschool enables a community to give children a strong start and get them ready for a K-12 school environment. The organization hopes to motivate communities and school districts to

³ New Jersey General Assembly, 2016, para. 6

⁴ (NJTVC, 2016, para. 2)

⁵ <http://www.nj.gov/education/ece/guide/standards.pdf>

solicit support from elected officials, in the hopes that this will generate the political will necessary to attract more funding. Former New Jersey governors Tom Kean and Jim Florio are among the organization's leaders.

Successful Implementation of a Pre-K Program

In order to meet the New Jersey State Department of Education Preschool Standards (2014), educators and legislators must understand the curriculum as well as become familiar with the developmentally appropriate practices necessary to implement a Pre-K program. Senator Ruiz discusses a plan called "New Jersey: Investing in You," which will focus on six vital areas, with early childhood education being one of those focus areas one. Ruiz states that, "Research shows that quality early childhood education is one of the best investments we can make in ensuring greater academic achievement, graduation rates and future earnings for our children. New Jersey became a pioneer in preschool education, but too many families can't afford the costs. We need to identify funding opportunities within government, and the private sector, to expand early childhood education. We have to ensure we have enough seats available for all children, sufficient facilities and that we are reaching all of our young people where early childhood education programs exist" (McGrath, 2015, para. 10).

Other legislators, like Senate President Steve Sweeney, have also supported pre-K funding expansion. Sweeney states that "New Jersey's problems can be fixed, but we need a plan to do it. New Jersey has no excuse for second-rate economic growth. We have to be willing to lift our heads and work for a future that offers promise and opportunity" (McGrath, 2015, para. 2). In fact, New Jersey already has one of the best, most successful preschool programs in the country. With the upcoming legislature, more students will have access to Pre-K instruction and more children will enter kindergarten prepared for school and ready for success. Sweeney and other legislators, clearly link state economic growth with education, and in order to better prepare all children for the workforce, the state must target additional school districts that can benefit from pre-K funding.

For such a plan to be successful, the New Jersey State Department of Education (2014) has several suggestions. First, school district boards of education and boards of private providers and local Head Start agencies need to make professional development a priority and support it via necessary and adequate funding. Furthermore, strong state-level leadership is essential for the implementation of high-quality pre-K programs. Next, school administrators should provide curriculum support, resources, materials, and opportunities for staff to improve their teaching practices. Similarly, preschool directors, principals, education supervisors, and directors of special education must provide ample professional development activities for teachers. All Pre-K teachers should actively engage in the professional development activities that focus on effectively supporting children's language, reading, math, social, and emotional development (Kauerz & Coffman, 2013). The professional development can include differentiated and... Furthermore, Pre-K families should be introduced to developmentally appropriate practices and

have access to resources that promote their children's learning and development. And, finally, New Jersey colleges and universities should integrate preschool standards in their curriculum and courses to prepare early childhood educators.

Conclusion

Both of the aforementioned legislative actions provide a framework that includes succession planning to achieve the expansion of Pre-K programs. With the recent major bipartisan step taken by Assembly members Jasey, Prieto, Diegnan and DeCroce, Pre-K expansion to over 100 communities demonstrates that this is a major state priority. If enacted, more New Jersey Pre-K students will have access to high quality educational programs. Although New Jersey already has one of the best, most successful preschool programs in the country, there is still much work to be done. And even though these New Jersey policymakers have designated steps to consolidate early education gains and build a truly aligned and universal system of high-quality PreK-3rd grade education, there must be follow-through and support from all segments of the education community.

Parents, teachers, and community leaders must join together to lobby and support the extension of preschool education for all the children of New Jersey no matter where they live. "Education," wrote the poet William Butler Yeats (n.d.), "is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire." Preschool education can light that fire for the children of our state. It will light the way to a love of learning and furnish them with the proper tools to succeed in both school and in life.

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