

May 2021

## Early Education Matters: Connecting High-Quality Pre-K to K-3 Classrooms

Gordon MacInnes, Senior Distinguished Fellow

Early education has long served as a crucial asset to families across the Garden State. Thanks to years of state investment, New Jersey leads the nation in providing high-quality pre-kindergarten aimed at making kids from low-income families ready for school. *What's missing is the essential connection to the K-3 years.*

Investing in the early education of kids, particularly those growing up in neighborhoods with high poverty rates, is one of the best policy choices a state can make. When kids are young, their brains are afire — they learn faster than they will when they're 13 or 35. Given the connection between wealth and economic outcomes later in life, investments in early education are a great way to provide opportunities to kids living in poverty that they otherwise wouldn't have. **Decades of research, test results, and economic analysis make clear that kids who grow up with college-educated parents have a huge head start on those who live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty.** So, New Jersey should be proud that we lead all states in the quality of and investments in our pre-kindergarten program.<sup>i</sup>

Since 2017, the state has sought to extend its Supreme Court-ordered pre-K to districts that did not benefit from the 1995 *Abbott* ruling. That decision ordained the addition of two years to the K-12 structure, a wise choice that has helped the state lead the pack in education. In the last five years, pre-K has been extended to a very diverse 121 districts, 38 of which mirror the social-economic profiles of the *Abbott* districts, with most of their students qualifying for free or reduced meals.<sup>ii</sup>

However, pre-K by itself cannot have the complete impact that we need, particularly for kids from low-income families. *What's missing is the bridge to link pre-K's benefits to the K-3 years of public schooling* — the essential connection to producing highly literate third graders, thereby granting them a significantly greater chance at a successful life. This is especially important in the districts where a significant proportion of kids come from families where the primary language spoken isn't English, to ensure they share in educational gains and benefits. The Union City example that follows below captures the focus and complexity required to master this issue.

One feature of the New Jersey Supreme Court’s 1998 landmark *Abbott V* decision is that pre-K was open to any child living in the *Abbott* districts. The Court required there be no more than 15 children in a classroom — the lowest in the nation — with a teacher certified to teach in the pre-K to 3<sup>rd</sup> grades, plus an assistant.<sup>iii</sup> These same standards are in place for the pre-K expansion to 113 districts that was launched in 2017.

In a state with 610 school districts, it’s unsurprising that the political, educational, and judicial leadership lost sight of how concentrated educational problems are. For example, in the 2005-06 school year, the then 31 *Abbott* districts enrolled 18.2 percent of all New Jersey students, but accounted for 48.2 percent of those eligible for free lunch, one of the best measures of deep poverty.<sup>iv</sup> What’s more is that those districts continue to contend with 55 percent of all New Jersey students who are eligible for English Language Learning.<sup>vvi</sup>

Test results, program evaluations, academic studies, high school graduation, and college attendance rates all document that concentrated poverty remains the toughest condition confronting educators and policymakers. Thanks to all of these conditions, no state matches New Jersey’s investment in time, dollars, and patience as we try to break through the consequences of poverty. New Jersey students who are eligible for free or reduced meals perform better on national tests than comparable students in almost every other state.<sup>vii</sup> Encouraging as that is, it must be better. New Jersey’s judicial, political, and educational leadership has no excuse for erasing improved literacy from the state’s high-priority list.

While high-quality pre-K programs significantly benefit the early learning of young students, if it is not connected to equally high-quality instruction in the K-3 years, those benefits disappear. A 2017 report by a panel of scientists published by Duke University determined:

Pre-K can thus be viewed as powering up early learning, for which the elementary grades need to provide essential charging stations that *sustain and amplify the learning gains made by children in pre-K*. Absent re-charging, progress will likely be stalled, and the benefits from *any boost provided by pre-K education may be lost*.<sup>viii</sup>

Hence, what really makes the difference in literacy is a pre-K “graduate” transitioning into an intensive, effective early literacy program. This is especially critical since able third-grade readers are even more likely to graduate high school and attend college than their less literate peers.<sup>ix</sup>

These results are not surprising. The nation has decades of evidence that establishes and reconfirms that the educational status of one’s parents and the economic status of one’s classmates are the most important determinants of how students perform. Until 2015, New Jersey tested using “District Factor Groups” (DFG) to reflect socio-economic conditions (“A” were the poorest, “J” the most affluent). More than half — 57 percent — of Latinx/Hispanic students and 51 percent of Black students were tested in DFG A and B versus 10.7 percent of white students. And no early letter group outperformed a later letter.<sup>x</sup>

It is fair to assert that New Jersey’s quarter-century program triggered by the *Abbott* decisions represents the most aggressive effort by any state to disrupt the predictability of outcomes for kids from poor families, particularly those in low-income districts. In fact, given these obvious benefits, *it’s time for Governor Murphy, the Legislature, and the New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) to supplement their attention to preschool education by supporting its essential linkage to intensive literacy programs in the K-3 grades.*

There’s nothing easy about seeking improvements to early education. While executive memos, teacher training sessions, and DOE regulations are important, they also add to the complexity of managing education. As such, a deeper commitment to and investment in early education is necessary to improve student outcomes.

Increasing our attention to and investment in this area is necessary because implementing *Abbott*’s addition of two additional years of schooling was and continues to be more complicated than expected. To start, about 53 percent of preschoolers attend non-profit or Head Start classes that are frequently not closely coordinated with the kindergartens that their “graduates” will attend.<sup>xi</sup> For example, last year 60 percent of Newark’s 4,666 pre-K students attended 56 non-profit and charter schools, leaving the balance in 37 district public schools.<sup>xii</sup> Teachers in the K-3 years must adjust their teaching for entering five-year-olds who have mastered much of what was previously introduced in pre-kindergarten. They must also contend with the added difficulty that about 20 percent of kindergarteners in the ex-*Abbott* districts never attended pre-K.<sup>xiii</sup>

## The Sterling Example Set by Union City

Districts that give sustained, high-priority attention to producing literate 4<sup>th</sup> graders are the districts that perform best, not only on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade tests, but also on attendance, graduation rates, and college enrollment. A sterling example is Union City, a dense Latinx/Hispanic-majority city of about 80,000 residents. Union City is one of the nation’s best-performing urban school districts and also one of the poorest. It is one of the few New Jersey school districts where the mayor appoints the board of education and controls the school budget without a public vote. Motivated by wanting to avoid a state takeover given what happened in neighboring Jersey City in 1989, successive Union City mayors focused on improving the performance of Union City students (Jersey City would not regain full autonomy for 28 years).<sup>xiv</sup>

Union City has benefitted from stable, capable leadership, a focus on providing effective, high-quality education, *and* a willingness to acknowledge what does not work. It’s hard to think of another district in New Jersey with such a unique makeup: 96 percent of its students are Latinx/Hispanic, over 85 percent are eligible for free or reduced-lunch, and 27 percent are classified as “limited English-proficient.”<sup>xv</sup> These features can bring daunting challenges to educators, but Union City has been able to achieve a low dropout rate (92.5 percent of 9<sup>th</sup> graders are still enrolled four years later as seniors) and a high number (70 percent) of graduates attending college.<sup>xvi</sup>

One reason for this success is that the district's educational leaders accepted what was already widely known in the 1990s but rarely acted on. Even before the New Jersey Supreme Court mandated high-quality pre-K, Union City worked to prepare three- and four-year-olds for kindergarten.<sup>xvii</sup> Educators began working with the operators of day care centers, be they found in church basements, living rooms, or storefronts. Most of those operators were Spanish speakers, interacting with parents and children who knew only Spanish. Presciently, the district gave Spanish-language picture and storybooks to day care operators with the request that they read to their children for 15 minutes twice a day.<sup>xviii</sup>

After a year or two, kindergarten teachers reported that more of their students arrived decidedly more familiar with language and vocabulary. The district began working with kindergarten and then 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers, increasing the time devoted to reading and writing from thirty minutes for each to daily periods of 111 minutes and, then to 120 minutes.<sup>xix</sup>

Even more, Union City introduced assessments of all students every eight weeks, sharing the results quickly with teachers about the particular needs of individual students accompanied by suggestions for how to bring them along, including extra tutoring time during lunch or after school.<sup>xx</sup> Teachers in the same grade level worked collaboratively with one another when their students were off to art, music or exercise activities.

As improved reading took hold by 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Union City decided that the usual commercial textbooks and workbooks for subjects in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and up were too limited and uninteresting for both students and teachers. With the active participation of teachers, it chose a more varied and provocative approach, an example being a curriculum that wove together science, history, and writing by tracking Darwin's voyage to the Galapagos Islands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when introducing the theory of evolution.

Given that 75 percent of Union City's students return to low-income homes where English is not the primary language spoken, the academic performance of its students is remarkable. On New Jersey's 3<sup>rd</sup> grade language arts test in 2019, among the 31 ex-*Abbott* districts, only three more affluent districts' students scored higher.<sup>xxi</sup> More impressively, on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts test, Union City had the second highest scores among the ex-*Abbott* districts.<sup>xxii</sup> Not surprisingly, thanks to such incredible success, Union City has gained a national reputation for academic performance.

When the state DOE formed a division in 2002 to work solely on implementing the *Abbott* rulings, Union City became its inspiration. The Union City mayor and superintendent agreed to grant a leave to Fred Carrigg, who led the effective innovations described above. He organized an office of early literacy, hired experienced literacy specialists to work with the 31 *Abbott* districts, and collaborated with the pre-kindergarten leader, Ellen Frede. And while the Court mandated 34 services, programs, and positions, the *Abbott* division emphasized the pre-K-early literacy combination, in part, by holding

annual meetings customized for each district to provide comparative data and discuss next steps to focus on making every 4<sup>th</sup> grader a competent reader.<sup>xxiii</sup>

### **New Jersey's 1995 charter law primarily affected *Abbott* districts, leaving the toughest educational problems concentrated in district schools.**

Given New Jersey's high-performing suburban schools, the charter law was a near-perfect fit for dissatisfied parents, students, and charter enthusiasts in city districts. Across all *Abbott* districts charter enrollments increased fifteen-fold from 3,081 in 1998 to 47,586 in 2020 constituting 87 percent of all charter students.<sup>xxiv</sup> Charters are concentrated in Newark where slightly more than a third of public school students are charter students. Camden has seen 29.5 percent of its students enroll in charters; Plainfield has lost 23 percent, Trenton 17.5 percent and Jersey City 19 percent.<sup>xxv</sup>

Charter school growth leaves district schools with much greater concentrations of students with more severe disabilities and with the great preponderance of students who are not proficient in English. Newark's charter schools, for example, attract 34.5 percent of all public school students, but only 2.3 percent of them are English language learners (446 of 19,374 charter students) compared to 16.8 percent of the 36,676 students in district schools. Similar modest ratios are found in Jersey City (4.5 percent) and Plainfield (0.8 percent).<sup>xxvi</sup>

Unsurprisingly, there are no charter schools in Elizabeth, Union City or West New York, three of the highest performing of the 31 ex-*Abbott* districts.

The hasty enactment of the School Finance and Reform Act (SFRA) in January 2008 and its preliminary acceptance by the Supreme Court marked the end of *Abbott's* mandated services and personnel except for the pre-K program, school construction, and security guards. Three years after the SFRA's enactment, the Legislature and Governor complied with the Court's 2011 *Abbott XXI* decision and restored \$447 million in aid to the *Abbott* districts in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 budget bill, funding which has been sustained in subsequent budgets.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The combination of the Great Recession that erased 15 percent of the state's revenues, the end of the Supreme Court's protection of most *Abbott* programs in 2008, and the shift in state house and DOE leadership, all but obliterated the essential connection between pre-K and early literacy. While the pre-K requirements and DOE's early education office survived but barely, the experts who were essential to connecting the benefits of pre-K to early literacy instruction were eliminated along with the *Abbott* division by June 2008.<sup>xxviii</sup>

In effect, the lessons learned from Union City — and West New York, Elizabeth, Vineland, and Orange — were judicially and statutorily nullified and ignored.

## Rebuilding the Bridge Between Pre-K and Early Literacy

Rebuilding the bridge between pre-K and an intensive early literacy campaign for the ex-*Abbott* districts, and for recently approved pre-K districts with concentrations of students from low-income families, may appear incredibly challenging in this time of pandemic and recession, but the costs are so modest — and the benefits so vast — that this is precisely the time to restore DOE’s leadership and capacity to take on the mission.

Building on Governor Christie’s initiative enacted in 2017, his last year in office, the Murphy administration has pushed pre-K expansion to a wide variety of districts. The grants require that the *Abbott* standards of no more than 15 children to a class with a teacher certified for pre-K through K-3 and an assistant prevail. In four years, 113 districts have been approved for pre-K programs, with \$26 million for additional districts in Murphy’s 2022 budget proposal.<sup>xxix</sup>

Even amid an economic downturn, New Jersey would be wise to launch the effort to re-connect pre-K education to early literacy. Given that the Biden administration’s rescue package is in place to help the state address pandemic-related issues, we can afford the modest investment and should accept it for its potentially massive benefits. DOE’s Division of Early Education has suffered a decade-long decline in the resources needed to work effectively with a growing number of pre-K-funded districts, and while the elevation of its director to Assistant Commissioner is welcomed, it is a modest step in the grand scheme of things. While the division’s mission is to connect pre-K with the K-3 years, its capacity to do so is presently non-existent. So, what would it take to restore literacy to the pre-K-to-Kindergarten-to-3<sup>rd</sup> grade mission? Here’s a simple, chronological list:

The first requirement is to weld the enthusiasm for pre-K to the necessity for a powerful K-3 early literacy effort, especially in districts with the greatest concentrations of poverty. Yes, the governor, legislative leaders, and the education commissioner are devoted to pre-K and expanding it to many more children. To date, however, no public connection has been drawn by any of them to the necessity and pay-off from ensuring that the pre-K “graduates” emerge four years later as highly literate 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. Without that connection, the impact will be less than it could and should be.

Second is to appoint an experienced, energetic early literacy specialist to DOE’s Division of Early Education who will recruit and organize a team of practitioners to work with districts, school administrators, and K-3 teachers. This can be accomplished by amending the Governor’s budget to include at least \$750,000 to begin rebuilding the Division in the fiscal year 2022 beginning July 1. Within four years, with 12 to 15 specialists on board, that number would grow to around \$2 million.<sup>xxx</sup>

Additionally, the Division of Early Education should conduct a survey of the 31 ex-*Abbott* districts that have over 20 years of experience with pre-K and early literacy to identify districts that are producing the most literate 3<sup>rd</sup> graders and those that are struggling. The challenge will be to convince those



districts with struggling 3<sup>rd</sup> graders to enter, with DOE's help, a lengthy partnership among administrators, principals, teachers, supervisors, and families.

Finally, the Division of Early Education should adopt a different approach for the 113 districts that have initiated or are about to initiate a pre-K program. Almost half of them are either P-6 or P-8 districts, which are a mix of extremely low-income and quite affluent districts. And almost half the districts enroll fewer than 1,000 students (20 enroll fewer than 500), which means that experienced supervisors are in short supply. For these districts, just launching new pre-K classes represents a challenge, never mind introducing an intensive early literacy program in the K-3 years.

When the complexity of connecting the benefits of a costly but beneficial pre-K program to an effective and intensive early literacy program encounters such a wildly diverse group of districts, the challenging mission for the Division of Early Education must be recognized and supported financially and organizationally. If New Jersey is to realize the potential payoff that would result from its heralded pre-K program being connected to early literacy programs that have succeeded in districts of extensive poverty and language diversity, the governor, legislative leaders, and the commissioner of education must provide enthusiastic support.

## **The Goals: Expand Pre-K, Connect it to K-3 Classrooms, and Improve Delivery**

Given New Jersey's challenging financial situation and its best-in-the-nation pre-K, the Murphy administration and the DOE should seek to increase the efficiency of its investments in pre-K. One step is to explore expanding the maximum class size for 4-year-old pre-K to 18 children, an increase that can be accomplished without an increase in the costliest expense — teachers and assistants. Educators, legislators, advocates, and scholars could also carefully explore several key questions:

- Would all, most, or any existing pre-K *classrooms* be able to physically accommodate a 20 percent increase in students?
- Assuming such an increase in furniture (one-time), meals, toys, and books, what would be the increase in costs?
- Has any research been done to evaluate the results of the federal Preschool Development Grants in 19 New Jersey districts that required class sizes of 18 students for 2015 and 2016?

The most efficient way to address these important questions is for the new Commissioner of Education to form a task force that includes scholars, advocates, educators, and legislators to answer the above questions and to do so soon with adequate staffing and a tight deadline.

Protecting the nation's highest-quality pre-kindergarten program and continuing its expansion will be very important to securing a vibrant and prosperous future for New Jersey and its students. Now, the state must be certain to connect strong pre-K programs to a productive and intensive early literacy effort, particularly in districts with concentrations of students from low-income families.

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<sup>i</sup> See AH Friedman-Krauss, WS Barnett, GG, Wesenfeld, R Kasmin, ND DiCrecchio, M Horowitz “The State of Preschool 2017,” National Institute of Early Education Research, 2018, pp. 121-2

<sup>ii</sup> Author’s calculations using [https://prekourway.org/assets/Pre-K-Our-Way\\_District-List\\_2020-2021-School-Year.pdf](https://prekourway.org/assets/Pre-K-Our-Way_District-List_2020-2021-School-Year.pdf) + <https://www.nj.gov/education/results/reports/1516/Spring/ELAO3.xlsx> 38 districts were DFG A/B

<sup>iii</sup> NIEER’s “State of Preschool, 2017” p.219

<sup>iv</sup> Author calculations from New Jersey Department of Education’s 2005-06 district enrollment, found at <https://www.nj.gov/education/data/enr/enro6/district.htm>

<sup>v</sup> Author calculations from New Jersey Department of Education, “DOE Data, Fall Survey Collections, Enrollment 2019-20-2020”

<sup>vi</sup> The ex-Abbott districts: Pleasantville, Garfield, Burlington City, Pemberton Township, Camden, Gloucester City, Bridgeton, Millville, Vineland, East Orange, Irvington, Newark, Orange, Harrison, Hoboken, Jersey City, Union City, West New York, Trenton, New Brunswick, Perth Amboy, Asbury Park, Keansburg, Long Branch, Neptune Township, Passaic, Paterson, Salem City, Elizabeth, Plainfield, Phillipsburg.

<sup>vii</sup> Author’s review of state scores for students eligible for free and reduced meals from [nationsreportcard.gov/reading/states/groups/?grade=4](https://nationsreportcard.gov/reading/states/groups/?grade=4)

<sup>viii</sup> DA Phillips, MW Lipskey, KA Dodge, R. Haskins, D. Bassok, MR Burchinal, CJ Duncan, M Dynarski, KA

Magnuson, C Weiland, “The Current State of Scientific Knowledge on Pre-Kindergarten Effects: A Consensus Study,” in *The Current State of Scientific Knowledge on Pre-Kindergarten Effects*, Duke University, 2017, p. 25

*Italicized emphasis provided by the author.*

<sup>ix</sup> For a clear documentation see Donald J. Hernandez, *Double Jeopardy: How Third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation*. (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012)

<sup>x</sup> Author’s calculations using NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION’S [https://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/results/njask/njask14/njask3/demographic\\_reports.pdf](https://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/results/njask/njask14/njask3/demographic_reports.pdf) for 2014 grade 3 results

<sup>xi</sup> Author calculation using NIEER’s “The State of Preschool 2018” count of total Pre-K enrollees (42,288) and New Jersey Department of Education’s enrollment data for 2017-2018 (20,014)

<sup>xii</sup> New Jersey Department of Education, Office of School Finance, February 14, 2020, 2019-2020 Statewide Preschool ASSA.xisx

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xiv</sup> See Margaret Dolan, “State Takeover of a Local District in New Jersey: A Case Study,” Consortium for Policy Research in Education, Rutgers University, April 1992. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED345370.pdf>

<sup>xv</sup> <https://www.nj.gov/education/data/enr/district.htm> for 2018-2019.

<sup>xvi</sup> Author calculation of New Jersey Department of Education “Enrollment Data” for years 2014-2019 <https://www.nj.gov/education/data/enr/district.htm>

<sup>xvii</sup> The pre-Abbott V decision history is based on numerous visits and interviews with the Union City mayor at the time, the superintendent, assistant superintendent, early childhood directors and curriculum supervisors.



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<sup>xviii</sup> For an excellent description of Union City’s educational successes, see David Kirp’s *Improbable Scholars: The Rebirth of a Great American School System and a Strategy for America’s Schools*. (Oxford, 2013)

<sup>xix</sup> Based on extensive interviews with the then-Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, the Pre-K-K3 Director and the Director of the literacy program.

<sup>xx</sup> The Union City narrative is captured in G.MacInnes, *In Plain Sight: Simple, Difficult Lessons from New Jersey’s Expensive Effort to Close the Achievement Gap*, (The Century Foundation Press, 2009) see pp. 35-39 for a summary of its approach and in Kirp’s *Improbable Scholars*, op cit. .

<sup>xxi</sup> The districts were Hoboken, Garfield and Jersey City  
<https://www.state.nj.us/education/schools/achievement/ELA03.NJSLA.DATA.2018-19.xlsx>

<sup>xxii</sup> <https://www.state.nj.us/education/schools/achievement/ELA08.NJSLA.DATA.2018-19.xlsx>

<sup>xxiii</sup> Disclosure: the author was the Assistant Commissioner of Education for Abbott Implementation, 2002-2008. The division was eliminated by the enactment of the SFRA school finance law in 2008. The story is told in the already cited *In Plain Sight* footnote.

<sup>xxiv</sup> The charter enrollment numbers are author calculations from New Jersey Department of Education’s data site  
[https://www.state.nj.us/cgi-bin/education/data/enr\\_dist1plus.pl](https://www.state.nj.us/cgi-bin/education/data/enr_dist1plus.pl)

<sup>xxv</sup> Author’s calculations from the New Jersey Department of Education’s 2020 data report.

<sup>xxvi</sup> New Jersey Department of Education, 2019-2020 Enrollment Data.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Abbott v. Burke* (XXI), 206 N.J. 332 (2011)

<sup>xxviii</sup> Disclosure: the author’s reign as the first and last assistant commissioner of the Abbott division ended with SFRA’s enactment.

<sup>xxix</sup> For a complete list of recipient districts see <https://www.nj.gov/education/ece/psguide/State-Funded%20School%20District%20Preschool%20Programs%20-%20New%20Jersey%201-1-2020.pdf>

<sup>xxx</sup> Author’s estimate based on New Jersey Department of Education’s 2021 budget that provides \$1.925 million for 17 staff in the Early Education division.