



## ACNJ Issue Brief

### Build The Future: Early Learning in New Jersey

Children are born learners. During the first five years of life, their bodies and brains grow faster than at any other time. Almost 90 percent of who they are – their intellect, personality, social skills – are developed by age five. That’s why early learning is so important.

Investments in the early years reap big dividends. A landmark, long-term study of the effects of high-quality early care and education on low-income 3- and 4-year-olds shows that adults at age 40 who participated in a preschool program in their early years have higher earnings, are more likely to hold a job, have committed fewer crimes, and are more likely to have graduated from high school.

Overall, the High/Scope Perry Preschool study documented a return to society of more than a \$17 for every tax dollar invested in the early care and education program. The study was conducted over four decades by the late David P. Weikart, founder of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation;

#### Strengthening Early Learning

Despite this high return, New Jersey invests just 3.3 percent of its total general fund expenditures on programs that help babies grow. In fact, for every dollar invested in a school-age child, just 6.9 cents is invested in a child under age two, according to *Early Learning Left Out*, a recent report by Voices for America’s Children in Washington, D.C., and the Child and Family Policy Center, located in Des Moines, IA.

New Jersey must strengthen its investment in its youngest citizens. The state needs a plan to ensure that every child in New Jersey – from infancy to age six - has quality, enriching early learning opportunities.

#### What New Jersey Should Do to Help Working Families?

New Jersey’s next governor and the state Legislature should ensure that all families have access to an effective, efficient system of early learning, including high-quality preschool and child care.

**Action: Expand High-Quality Pre-k. Invest \$30 million over the next three years to expand the Early Launch to Learning Initiative, started in 2004, to provide high-quality preschool to more 4-year-olds, as a first step toward the promise of pre-K for all by 2010.**

New Jersey is a leader in providing quality preschool to disadvantaged children. Currently, roughly 39,000 children attend “Abbott” preschools, located in some of New Jersey’s poorest school district. The programs are largely recognized to be among the best in the country. Yet, only 25 percent of New Jersey children are privy to these programs. State leaders must expand these opportunities so all children have access to high-quality pre-k.

New Jersey voters support expanding pre-k to all children, according to a recent poll, commissioned by ACNJ and Pre-K Now. The poll of likely voters showed that almost three-quarters said preschool was important. In fact, they ranked preschool as a high priority for New Jersey – as important as reducing taxes and improving the quality of K-12 education. The vast majority also said the state should help parents ensure their children can attend a good preschool.

Preschool is important for all children. While pre-k helps close the achievement gap for low-income kids, children from middle-income families also need to be ready for kindergarten. Forty-nine percent of children who do not know the alphabet when entering kindergarten are middle class or higher, according to *An Uneven Start*, a 2002 report by Education Testing Service in Princeton. One-third of unprepared kindergarteners live in the suburbs, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

In 2004, New Jersey created the Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI). This was the first step toward filling that gap, by helping middle-class, suburban towns provide or expand high-quality preschool programs. All districts were eligible to compete for a pilot and in its first year, 27 districts began providing preschool through this new program, serving an additional 980 children. State leaders must commit to expanding this program.

**Action: Expand funding for child care subsidies. Establish a pilot program in two counties to implement and evaluate a rating system for child care programs that is tied to increased**

### **reimbursements for high-quality centers.**

Quality child care for infants and toddlers is essential to giving children a good start. Roughly 62 percent of New Jersey parents with children under 5 work. These parents need safe, reliable, nurturing care for their children. In New Jersey, parents face two problems: lack of affordable programs and uneven quality.

In June 2005, 5,000 eligible families were on a waiting list for child care subsidies. Yet, state funding for child care vouchers has steadily eroded since FY 2001, with the number of children served dropping 12 percent from FY 01 to FY 06. New Jersey's leaders must make child care subsidies a funding priority.

Quality is also an issue. Program quality, which is crucial to good outcomes for children, is uneven. Low reimbursement rates, inadequate compensation for teachers and high staff turnover due to low salaries are all to blame for inconsistent quality.

Several states have developed incentives for child care centers to improve quality. These rating systems tie reimbursements to quality, so centers that meet high national standards are reimbursed at higher rates.

New Jersey currently has a two-tiered system of reimbursement. Child care centers and family child care homes that accredited under national standards, such as the National Association for the Early Education of Young Children, receive 5 percent higher reimbursement rates than unaccredited centers. But, only about 8 percent of licensed child care centers in New Jersey are accredited. Even fewer family child care homes meet national standards. Clearly, the state needs to provide stronger incentives for child care centers to improve the quality of care.

In states that have adopted this system, the overall quality of early education programs has improved, giving parents access to better child care and enabling them to make informed decisions about which programs are best for their children.

### **Action: Create an Office of Early Learning that would coordinate the now-fragmented early learning system.**

New Jersey's current early learning programs and policies are fragmented and uncoordinated. Services are either inadequate to meet children's needs, unknown to parents or difficult to access. Programs may miss those most in need. Services may overlap or have significant gaps.

Currently, about 20 different state agencies provide early learning services, such as health services, nutrition or preschool. No single entity connects these services and programs, sets goals, clarifies priorities or plans and coordinates policies and programs across the field of early learning. In short, in this crucial arena, no one is accountable to the public, policymakers or young families and children. As a result, programs are not as effective or efficient as they could be.

Housed in the governor's office, an Office of Early Learning would create a coordinated system that includes health (mental, physical and nutritional), child care, preschool, parent education and support and early intervention for children with special needs. It would also be able to blend existing funds and streamline services to increase the effectiveness of existing early learning programs. The office would focus on the early learning needs of children from birth through age five.

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**Join ACNJ's Make Kids Count campaign at [www.makekidscountnj.org](http://www.makekidscountnj.org) and help build a better future for all New Jersey children.**

The Association for Children of New Jersey seeks to inform and educate voters and candidates. ACNJ does not endorse specific candidates. For more information, call (973) 643-3876, email [nparello@acnj.org](mailto:nparello@acnj.org) or go to [www.makekidscountnj.org](http://www.makekidscountnj.org)