

Research Notes

Published by the Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National-Louis University

FALL 2004

Lessons Learned: Preschool Teacher Qualifications in New Jersey's Abbott Districts

In the *Abbott vs. Burke* decisions (1998, 2000), the Supreme Court of New Jersey ordered the 30 urban school districts which serve the state's poorest children to create systems of high-quality preschool for all 3- and 4-year old children.¹ The Court mandated that regardless of the setting (public school, Head Start, private preschool), all preschool-aged children should be taught by a certified teacher.

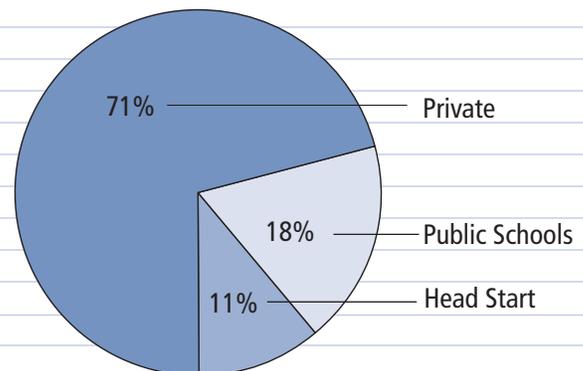
A recent report, *Getting Qualified: A Report on the Efforts of Preschool Teachers in New Jersey's Abbott Districts to Improve their Qualifications* (Ryan & Ackerman, 2004), describes the demographics, salaries, and work experience of teachers employed in Abbott preschools throughout New Jersey, as well as their efforts to obtain a baccalaureate degree and Preschool-Grade 3 (P-3) certification by the Court's 2004 deadline.² The following is a summary of the key findings of the report with implications for policymakers in other states who may be considering the implementation of large-scale preschool reforms.

Sample and Methodology

The sample for the Ryan and Ackerman study consisted of 689 certified and non-certified teachers (270 public school teachers, 94 Head Start teachers, and 325 private preschool teachers) in the 30 Abbott districts during the 2002-03 school year. To ensure that accurate predictions could be made, the sample was weighted to represent the total 2003-04 teaching population of 2,825 teachers in the Abbott districts. The findings are reported as percentages of the entire population.

As the following graph illustrates, 82% of teachers working toward a P-3 credential were from private or Head Start programs. Until the Abbott mandate, they were not required to have a four-year degree or teaching credential.

Data were collected through telephone interviews. The interview protocol asked participants about their background, education, work experiences, and professional qualifications. The interview also elicited information on whether teachers were working towards any increased qualification, including a P-3 certification, and their anticipated completion dates.



Findings

Demographics

- One-fifth of the Abbott preschool teachers (21%) are from countries other than the United States and most of these teachers work in either private settings or Head Start programs.
- Almost one-half of all preschool teachers working in the Abbott districts are Caucasian; another one-third are African-American; and 16% are Hispanic.
- A higher proportion of African-American and Hispanic teachers work in Head Start (72%) and private child care settings (58%); teachers in public school settings are predominantly Caucasian (70%).

Salaries and Teaching Experience

- Preschool teachers in the Abbott districts receive an average salary of \$37,050 for an academic school year.
- Teachers in private and Head Start settings earn approximately \$7,500 less than teachers in public school settings. Teachers in public schools earn \$41,834; teachers in Head Start programs earn \$34,200; and teachers in private settings earn \$34,400.
- While teachers in the Abbott districts have been working in the classroom on average for 10 years, more than three-quarters of the sample had been teaching at their current place of employment for five years or less.

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Meeting the 2004 Court Mandate

- One-half of the teaching population (49%) is certified and already meets the mandate. In addition, one-third of teachers who are enrolled in coursework anticipate finishing their degree requirements by the Court's deadline.
- Another 8% of teachers may meet the deadline. Teachers within this group have attained a BA but are not enrolled in a P-3 credentialing program.
- One-third of the teachers who are enrolled in some kind of teacher preparation program indicated that they intend to leave their positions once they become certified. The majority of these teachers (80%) are working in private or Head Start preschool settings.

Policy Implications

This study demonstrates that as a result of the pressure and supports mandated by the New Jersey Supreme Court's decisions, approximately 90% of the teachers in the Abbott districts will have attained their baccalaureate degree and be at least provisionally certified by 2004. This is an extraordinary accomplishment considering that only 15% of teachers in private settings had a BA in early childhood in 2000 when the Court issued its mandate.

While these findings appear quite positive in terms of shoring up the professional qualifications for teachers of preschool-aged children, there are also unintended consequences of the New Jersey mandate that other states need to consider in moving forward with preschool reforms. For example:

- Children in private and Head Start programs are likely to experience a loss of continuity of care since one-third of the teachers enrolled in college coursework in 2003 intend to leave their positions in private or Head Start programs for public school positions.
- If teachers leave the private and Head Start programs as planned and do not take positions in an Abbott school-based preschool, 23 of the 30 Abbott districts may not meet the mandate.
- Children in private and Head Start settings are less likely to have teachers that reflect their culture and backgrounds. The majority of teachers who are from diverse ethnic backgrounds work in private and Head Start settings and these are the teachers who reported they intend to leave their current positions.

The results of this study support the conclusion that while it is possible to create a certificated preschool teaching workforce within a short time-span, the long-term consequence of such a policy may actually result in a decrease in the number of teachers available and a decrease in the diversity of the teaching workforce in private and Head Start programs. To reduce workforce instability, the study recommends that, in addition to salary parity, states need to alleviate any differences in the working conditions and benefits between schools and private settings.

1. Abbott v. Burke V 153 N.J. 480 (NJ Supreme Court 1998). Abbott v. Burke VI 163 N.J. 195 (NJ Supreme Court 2000).
2. Ryan, S., & Ackerman, D.J. (2004). *Getting qualified: A report on the efforts of preschool teachers in New Jersey's Abbott districts to improve their qualifications*. New Brunswick NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

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