

# Preschool Development Grants: Making a Difference for New Jersey's Young Learners

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

July 2017



In 2014, New Jersey was one of 18 states awarded a federal grant aimed to enhance state preschool programs, improve quality and serve more eligible children in high-quality settings. This “Preschool Development Grant” (PDG) promised to provide the state with \$17.5 million per year for four years, beginning on January 1, 2015 through December 31, 2018. Children from low-income families in 16 identified communities were eligible and would have access to the same high-quality preschool that children attending state-funded preschools in other New Jersey communities were experiencing. For these children, the program has been a tremendous success in preparing them for kindergarten and beyond. Their successes make it clear that the program funding was money well spent.

In the 2016-17 school year alone, those 16 communities served approximately 1,900 4-year olds thanks to this federal funding. Administrators and teaching staff witnessed first-hand the successes that young children achieved as a result of this strong start. School administrators overwhelmingly stated that the program is:

- Strengthening student readiness
- Supporting issues affecting “the whole child,” including children’s behavior and healthy development
- Engaging families more effectively

- Addressing the needs of the preschool disabled and English language learners population and
- Strengthening the continuum of learning between preschool and third grade

But as the end of the federal grant draws near, the fate of these programs remains unclear, particularly for future 4-year olds living in those communities. When school administrators were asked whether their districts would be able to maintain their current preschool program without the additional funds their responses were unanimous—NO. Any funding cuts would likely lead to a decrease in the number of preschool classrooms, a return to half-day programs or programs that only addressed the districts’ preschool populations.

This policy brief describes the findings and outcomes of implementing the Preschool Development Grant, the benefits this funding provides in helping at-risk children enter kindergarten better prepared and the possible consequences when the federal funding ends. The report includes data from the New Jersey Department of Education, survey results from all 16 districts and individual and group interviews with key district staff between February and May 2017.

Giving Every Child A Chance