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

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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.¹ 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 standards as existing districts with state-funded universal preschool.

In the 2016-17 school year, 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. 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.

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 responses from all 16 participating districts as well as individual and group interviews with key district staff members collected between March and May 2017.

Preschool in New Jersey: High-Quality but Limited Access

For nearly 20 years, thousands of 3- and 4-year-olds in New Jersey's poorest communities have benefited from a high-quality early learning experience.



As part of two New Jersey Supreme Court decisions, the state was required to provide quality preschool in 31 low-income towns so that young children had the best opportunity to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

The components of a high-quality setting include:

- Full-day program
- Program implementation through a “mixed delivery system” of public preschool, Head Start and private provider classrooms
- 15 children in each class
- Certified teachers/assistants with comparable salaries to district teachers
- Implementation of a research-based curriculum
- Comprehensive services
- Inclusion of children with disabilities²

Within a few years, it was clear that the investment was money well-spent. Three studies by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) found that children who attended the state-funded preschools showed significant progress in language, literacy, math and science and were substantially less likely to repeat grades.³

Giving Every Child A Chance

The studies' promising outcomes led to the inclusion of preschool expansion as part of the state's school funding formula in 2008. However, only four additional districts actually received expansion funds, culminating to a total of 35 communities with universal, state-funded preschool.

After that, not much happened.

Since 2008, the school funding formula has never been fully funded and up until July 2017, no additional state dollars had been provided to expand preschool beyond those 35 districts. In the last nine years, thousands of young children from low-income families have missed out on this early learning experience because there was no state funding to pay for it.

In 2014, the federal government provided opportunities for states to apply for funding to develop, improve and/or expand quality preschool in low- and moderate-income communities. New Jersey was the recipient of one of 18 grants. The Preschool Development Grant would be available to 4-year-olds whose families were at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line (about \$49,000 for a family of four). Through a "mixed delivery system" of public preschool, Head Start and/or community child care provider classrooms, all preschool settings would be required to meet the same standard of quality.

"The Sweet 16:" Who Are They, What Are They Providing and Who Are They Serving?

The 16 PDG funded school districts are located in nine counties throughout the state, with Atlantic County being home to five of those school districts. All are implementing quality programs based on the same standards as the existing 35 state-funded full-day preschools.

The grant pays for new slots for both "un-served" and "under-served" children. These districts also receive funding to address the needs of the "whole child," including administrative and staff training and professional development. These services, offered by the New Jersey Department of Education, Division of Early Childhood Education and Family Engagement and *Grow NJ Kids*, the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System, included supports for English language learners, inclusion and diversity.⁴

Districts Participating in Preschool Development Grants	
County	District Name
Atlantic	Absecon City, Atlantic City, Egg Harbor City, Galloway Twp., Hamilton Twp.
Burlington	Mont Holly Twp.
Camden	Bellmawr Boro, Lindenwold Boro
Cumberland	Upper Deerfield Twp.
Gloucester	Clayton Boro, Paulsboro Boro
Monmouth	Freehold Boro
Ocean	Berkeley Twp., Lakewood Twp.
Passaic	Clifton City
Somerset	Bound Brook Boro

Prior to PDG funding, both student access to the programs and supports for quality were a significant struggle for all the districts. While all 16 communities offered some form of preschool, four had programs that only met the needs of their preschool disabled population. Most provided preschool to some of their four-year olds and several only offered half-day programs. Moreover, covering the costs was not easy; nearly three-fourths of the communities used a mix of federal, state and local funds to pay for the program. Supports that would provide for higher quality were often out of reach.

Taking Advantage of an Opportunity: "Providing Students an Early Learning Start both Educationally and Socially"

When asked to identify the reasons why they applied for the funding, responses from school administrators were nearly unanimous. "Improving program quality" was identified in 15 out of the 16 districts as the primary reasons for their participation. One of the survey respondents stated,

"We knew our half-day preschool program was not reaching [all] the children who would benefit [the most], from a preschool program."

Nearly all districts also cited the following reasons for applying for the grant:

- To strengthen kindergarten readiness skills
- To strengthen social/emotional learning
- To better meet the needs of families and communities
- To allow more district 4-year-olds to participate

The Benefits: A “Win-Win” for Students and Staff

The federal preschool expansion funding is clearly making a difference for participating students and their teachers. When asked to identify some of the benefits experienced since receiving the funding, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. The responses included:

- **Strengthening Student Readiness:** Survey respondents said preparing students for kindergarten and having the funding for materials, supplies and equipment to support learning were the biggest benefits from their preschool expansion dollars. It is clear why readiness skills were identified as being so important to the educators. Research shows that access to high-quality preschool is central to school readiness for kindergarten but also for students’ future academic success.⁵ During conversations with administrators, one stated that the program has kids “ready for kindergarten” and even reading on grade level earlier in the school year.
- **Addressing Issues of “the Whole Child:”** District officials indicated that the funding support provided tools that help them better meet the needs of the “whole child.” Self-regulation, which is a child’s ability to pay attention, follow instructions and demonstrate self-control and cooperation, was overwhelmingly identified as a positive outcome. This indicates that classroom practices provided a greater focus on not just academics, but also developing students’ social and emotional skills. One administrator stated that the kindergarten teachers have been so impressed with their preschool graduates, noting that in the past, many kindergarteners lacked self-regulating skills at the start of the school year, which affected their progress in class.

- **Engaging Families More Effectively:** Family engagement and “improved services and supports for district preschoolers” were also identified as benefits. Such supports can reduce risk factors associated with academic issues experienced by children from low-income families including family hardship and health-related problems.⁶ Administrators stated that because families had a positive preschool experience, they became much more comfortable with the school environment and kindergarten transition was smoother for both the children and the parents.

- **Addressing the Needs of Preschool Disabled and English Language Learners:** Administrators also saw gains among children who are preschool disabled as well as English language learners. The increased number of classrooms made inclusion of preschool disabled students in those classrooms much easier. Furthermore, in one district, thanks to additional ESL services, the need for bilingual services dropped from 41 to 23 percent as students progressed.
- **Strengthening the PreK-3rd Continuum:** Nearly all respondents said they now recognize the importance of looking at the entire early learning continuum, beginning with preschool and through third grade. One district administrator stated that they are closely following their preschoolers through third grade to track the impact that the program is having on third grade proficiency. Another district is examining their “code of conduct,” shifting the focus of the early learning code from punishment to the development of better social skills.

Benefits Districts Have Experienced Because of PDG Funds

Thanks to funding through another federal grant that supports *Grow NJ Kids*, New Jersey’s statewide, state-sponsored initiative to raise the quality of child care and early learning, staff are benefiting from supports and resources that were previously beyond reach.⁷ Nearly all survey respondents stated that their access to increased staff supports has been wonderful. In addition, they said that the quality of their classrooms have improved because they are now able to purchase materials and supplies that they were not able to buy in the past, such as age-appropriate furniture, developmentally

appropriate supplies for classroom centers and materials that reflect classroom diversity.

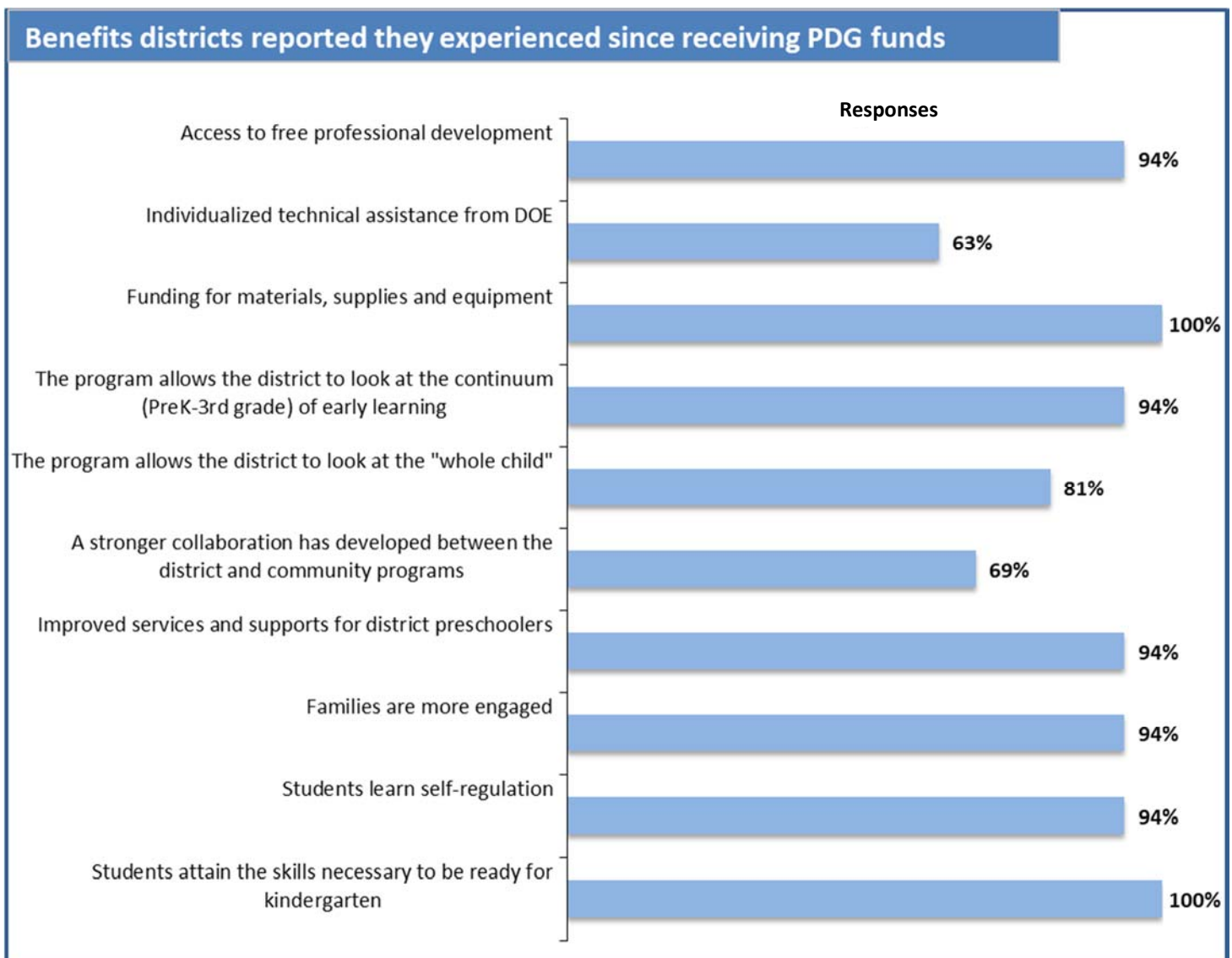
However, overwhelmingly, respondents felt the professional development component provided by *Grow NJ Kids* met their needs and was the most beneficial support.

"The staff are receiving a whole different level of professional development. Now there are coaches and master teachers in the districts, and most did not have them before," said Beth Gardiner, Director of Preschool Expansion at the DECE.

Master teachers help classroom teachers strengthen their skills and effectiveness.

No Program Is Perfect

While two-thirds of the respondents stated that their district had not experienced any barriers to implementation since receiving the PDG dollars, unfortunately, the additional funding still does not cover the costs of serving all their 4-year-olds and schools continue to struggle with inadequate space. Currently, five districts are implementing their preschools by providing some of their classrooms in local Head Start programs (See page 5).



Source: Advocates for Children of New Jersey Preschool Development Grant Survey, March - May 2017.

Working Together to Benefit Children: PDG's Mixed Delivery System

Of the 16 school districts benefiting from the Preschool Development Grant (PDG), five—Clifton, Freehold, Galloway, Hamilton and Lindenwold, are implementing their programs through a “mixed delivery system.” This model, mirrored after the system used by most of New Jersey’s state-funded universal preschool districts, provides young children with preschool using a mix of classrooms including public preschool, Head Start and private provider child care programs. Although in different locations, the high-quality standards are the same.

On the whole, this collaboration has been a huge success, and a “win-win” situation for all involved.

All five districts are currently working with local Head Start providers to implement their preschool programs. While several worked with Head Start in the past on early intervention and inclusion issues, their relationships have taken on a whole new meaning since the preschool collaborations began. Both the districts and Head Start agencies have learned that each entity brings expertise to the table, and that has led to better quality programs benefiting teachers, families and of course, children.

“We have nothing but good things to say about our collaboration with Gateway Head Start,” said Colleen Bretones, Early Childhood Supervisor from the Hamilton School District in Atlantic County. She noted that because Head Start has been caring and educating very young children for a long time, their team provided the district with supports in areas in which the district staff were less familiar. This included classroom set-up, ways to best serve family-style meals in the classroom and supporting better teeth brushing amongst the youngsters.

In Freehold, Jennifer O’Shea, the district’s early childhood supervisor stated that the district preschool teachers are looking at examples set by their Head Start colleagues to best interview and work with parents.

District communications with families of young children is now beginning earlier thanks to the preschool collaborations. Freehold district officials now spend a day at

“We have nothing but good things to say about our collaboration with Gateway Head Start.”

--Colleen Bretones, Early Childhood Supervisor
Hamilton School District, Atlantic County

Head Start for registration. Much of the student population is from bilingual families and Head Start has staff that can help with translation during the registration process. Because Head Start already has relationships with these families, O’Shea acknowledged that those relationships are helping the overall transition process from preschool into kindergarten for children and families.

Working together has provided additional experiences for children and families. In one district, the Head Start was able to hold a parent recognition dinner, which could never have taken place without a team effort. In Freehold, Head Start children attend all district assemblies. “Everything we do in our classrooms, we treat the Head Start classrooms the same,” O’Shea said.

And it’s not only the districts that are benefiting. Bonnie Eggenburg, Vice-President of Gateway Early Head Start Program in Bridgeton, stated that when districts and Head Start “work as one,” children experience a much smoother process, particularly for children with disabilities. Her team is also benefiting from access to additional trainings which now take place with their district colleagues. Such trainings are directly linked with improving classroom quality.

The collaboration is also helping her retain staff. Research has shown that a stable workforce is a key indicator to program quality. Historically however, Head Start staff have been paid low wages which have led to higher rates of turnover. The grant has allowed Head Start staff to receive higher compensation, lowering program turnover and providing preschoolers with more stable educational environments.

And There's More to Do

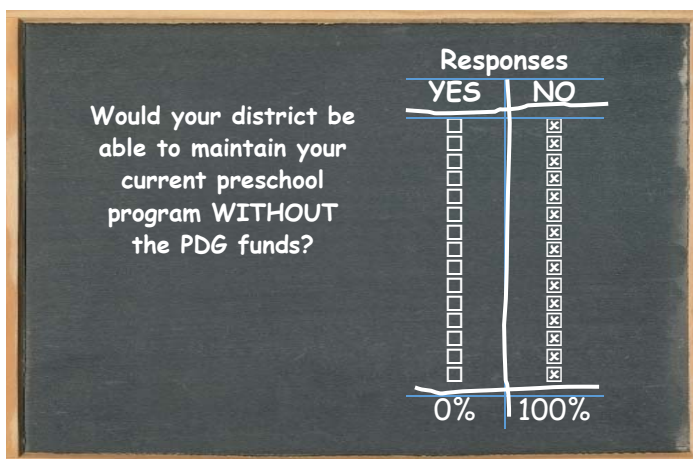
When asked about future program goals, better access and continued quality improvement were mentioned by all. Survey respondents said that they hoped that they could eventually build on the successful implementation of quality preschool in their districts and serve all their 3- and 4-year olds, mirroring the 35 state-funded, district-run universal preschool programs located throughout the state.

“[We hope to] strengthen the preschool program so readiness skills are firmly in place when students move to kindergarten,” said one respondent. Quality improvements would also include strengthening inclusive classrooms so that both typically developing children and children identified with special needs can thrive.

Several districts were looking to better align early learning grades with their children's preschool experience. This included better curriculum alignment between preschool and third grade, as well as monitoring the progress of preschool students through third grade to track the benefits of their early learning experience.

The Ticking Clock on Federal Funding

December 31, 2018 is just around the corner and on that date, the preschool federal funding will end. When PDG administrators were asked whether their districts would be able to maintain their current preschool program without federal funds, their responses were unanimous—NO.



When asked to describe what districts might do if the federal funds were no longer available, every response indicated a reduction in educational services for young children.

Most districts stated that they would return to the programs that existed before the funding was provided. The two most likely recourses that districts would take to adjust to reduced funds would be to decrease the number of classes and/or return to half-day preschool programs. Other types of cuts would possibly include eliminating key staff such as master teachers and reducing the preschool program to only children identified as preschool disabled.

These possible scenarios have administrators very concerned. One administrator stated, “I will cry so hard if this funding ends. This is one of the best programs in our district and is the perfect example of how when resources are provided, kids are more successful.”

What Next? Possible Solutions

It is clear that reverting back to the type of preschool program offered before the federal funds were made available should not be an option in these 16 districts. The research clearly supports the benefits of quality preschool, and these districts have seen first-hand how a strong start plays an essential role in the academic and social development of their four-year-olds. In short, district officials believe that investing in quality early education has been money well-spent.

As the federal grant ends with no indication that dollars from Washington will continue, there is no reason to begin packing up classrooms' legos just yet. The following highlight a few of the reasons why all is not lost for these programs:

- 1. ***Preschool Expansion is already included in the state's school funding formula:*** In 2008, a new school funding formula became law and included a significant increase to preschool access throughout the state. The formula includes state funding for high-quality, full-day preschool for all low-income 3- and 4- year-olds, regardless of where they live.⁸ Full funding, however, has never been provided and thousands of New Jersey children continue to miss out on this valuable early learning experience. Nonetheless, this formula remains the law guiding how New Jersey's schools are supposed to be

funded. The law is in place to allow preschool to expand beyond what currently exists. All that is needed are the dollars.

2. ***There is currently a statewide preschool expansion campaign.*** In 2014, *Pre-K Our Way*, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, privately-funded campaign was established to help communities bring New Jersey's high-quality preschool to 3- and 4-year olds living outside the 35 school districts that provide universal preschool. In addition to raising awareness and strengthening preschool advocacy efforts in communities, *Pre-K Our Way* is working with both the legislature and the governor's office to make preschool a priority in future budgets. Through effective advocacy, *Pre-K Our Way* has been instrumental in placing preschool at the forefront of our state's priorities.⁹
3. ***The New Jersey Legislature has been very interested in early childhood education and preschool expansion.*** Last year, there were bills introduced in both the New Jersey Assembly and Senate to fund preschool expansion and for the first time, the Senate Education Committee held a hearing on early childhood education. At meetings in communities throughout the state, legislators acknowledged the benefits of expanding quality preschool in more low-income neighborhoods to ensure kindergarten readiness. Both the Assembly Education Committee and the Senate Select Committee on School Funding Fairness have recently held hearings throughout the state on the School Funding Reform Act. During those hearings, there was strong support for preschool expansion from individuals testifying as well as participating legislators. As a result of this advocacy, a major first step to expand preschool took place in July 2018. For the first time in nearly a decade, the 2018 state budget included \$25 million to expand preschool.
4. ***New Jersey's gubernatorial candidates are talking about preschool expansion.*** During the gubernatorial primary, a majority of the candidates, both Republican and Democrat, indicated that the expansion of preschool would be part of their overall vision for New Jersey's children. This broad support demonstrates a higher priority in the new Governor's policy initiatives—regardless of who is elected in November.

Where Do We Go from Here? Looking Towards the Future

There is no question that a quality preschool education can result in substantial gains in children's learning and development. The dilemma remains as to how we provide such access for all young children—and particularly for low-income children who could benefit the most. This is a complicated issue but what remains clear is that we cannot move backwards. In our state, there are nearly 2,000 4-year-olds in 16 communities that will enter kindergarten with the foundation that will provide them with the best opportunity for educational success. This is money well-spent. We need to be committed to future 4-year-olds in those communities, as well as thousands of others throughout the state, in order for them to have the best chance of succeeding in kindergarten and beyond.

¹ U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ecd/early-learning/preschool-development-grants>. Retrieved April 18, 2017.

² New Jersey Preschool Expansion Plan. Retrieved May 11, 2017 from <http://www.state.nj.us/education/ece/psexpansion/planpres.pdf>

³ The Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects (APPLES). Retrieved April 19, 2017 from <http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/apples20fact20sheet.pdf>

⁴ New Jersey Preschool Expansion Plan.

⁵ Ahmad, F., Hamm, K. (2-13) The School-Readiness Gap and Preschool Benefits for Children of Color. Center for American Progress. Retrieved May 12, 2017 from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/reports/2013/11/12/79252/the-school-readiness-gap-and-preschool-benefits-for-children-of-color/>

⁶ Robbins, T., Stagman, S., Smith, S. Young (2012) Young Children at Risk, National and State Prevalence of Risk Factors. National Center for Children in Poverty. Retrieved May 12, 2017 from http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_1073.html

⁷ Grow NJ Kids, State of New Jersey. Retrieved May 23, 2017 from <http://www.grownkids.com/About>

⁸ A Formula for Success: All Children. All Communities (2007) New Jersey Department of Education. Retrieved May 23, 2017 from <http://www.state.nj.us/education/sff/reports/AllChildrenAllCommunities.pdf>

⁹ Pre-K Our Way: *What is Pre-K Our Way?* Retrieved June 1, 2017 from <https://prekourway.org/about/>



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