



STATEMENT ON BENEFITS OF EXPANDING PRESCHOOL

SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

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Chairwoman Ruiz and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the importance of high quality early education and the urgent need to expand preschool programs statewide.

New Jersey is a leader in early education. In 1998, the NJ Supreme Court, in the landmark *Abbott v. Burke V* decision, issued the first judicial directive in the nation requiring the provision of full-day kindergarten and “well planned, high quality” preschool for all three- and four-year-olds in our most impoverished communities.

This – and the subsequent *Abbott VI* and *Abbott VIII* rulings – propelled implementation over the last 15 years of what is now widely recognized as the strongest early education program in the nation, commonly referred to as “Abbott preschool.”

The hallmarks of Abbott preschool are New Jersey’s rigorous standards for high quality programs, including an age-appropriate curriculum linked to the State’s K-12 curriculum standards, small class sizes, full-day kindergarten and preschool programs, and certified teachers. Our mixed delivery approach is a model for other states, linking together in-district preschool classrooms, private providers and Head Start programs to serve over 43,000 three- and four-year-olds in our high poverty, urban school districts.

Even the federal government recognized the new ground broken by Abbott preschool. In 2013, when President Obama announced the federal initiative to expand preschool around the country, the Abbott program served as the template for the requirements for the national grant competition proposal.

Abbott preschool’s success was also recognized by the State Legislature in 2008, when lawmakers included in the school funding formula – the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) – a requirement to phase in expansion of the program to all at-risk, three- and four-year-old children across the state in five years, or by 2014.

Most importantly, the success of the Abbott program is based on solid, longitudinal research. Data from the APPLES studies show that children in the urban districts enrolled for two years in Abbott preschool do better in school, and that those benefits hold through fifth grade. These children have higher test scores, less grade retention and, most importantly, reduced need for costly special education services. This

research demonstrates that preschool is an essential resource in the effort to close gaps in achievement among low-income, at-risk student populations.

We should take pride in Abbott preschool. But there is much more work to do.

First, we still have far too many children who are not in full-day kindergarten. ELC estimates that approximately 25% are in half-day programs. The SFRA formula does provide operational funding for a full-day program, but facilities remain a major obstacle, and the school construction fund has been depleted. When the Legislature considers increasing school construction bonds over the coming months, we must make construction projects aimed at increasing kindergarten from half- to full-day a top priority for the next round of school construction grants.

Second, despite the legal mandate in the SFRA, no funds have been appropriated to expand Abbott preschool beyond the 31 urban districts covered by the *Abbott* rulings. The five-year phase-in period under SFRA has come and gone, with not one new classroom funded. ELC estimates that 48,000 three- and four-year-olds should now have the benefits of high quality early education, but they do not. In our pending court case involving rural districts, the NJ Department of Education (DOE) represented in 2009 that it would fund preschool for the 2,000 eligible children to ensure a thorough and efficient education in those districts. These at-risk children are among the thousands across the state still waiting for SFRA's preschool mandate to be fulfilled.

And we're losing even more ground. Due to rising student poverty rates, the number of eligible preschoolers in universal districts, where every three- and four-year-old child is entitled to preschool under the SFRA, has increased by over 50% since 2009-10, to about 30,000 in 2014-15. Presently, 109 districts qualify for universal programs, as compared with 86 districts in 2009-10.

Finally, we also need to redouble our efforts in the 31 urban districts currently implementing preschool under the *Abbott* court order. Some of these districts are not meeting the target of enrolling 90% of all eligible children. An ELC analysis shows that enrollments in 21 districts, including Newark, are below 90% and have remained stagnant for some time. The barriers are several: flat funding of the SFRA since 2011, a lack of classroom capacity, strained budgets for community provider programs, a halt to new school construction projects due to a lack of funding, and reductions in mandated outreach and recruitment efforts. It is also critical that the APPLES longitudinal research following children who attended Abbott preschool be funded and continued by the DOE.

The hearing today is an opportunity to refocus New Jerseyans on this urgent issue. But I also urge that we get to work on three priorities:

- 1) Develop and implement a plan to provide full-day kindergarten to all children in five years, or by 2020-21, which includes raising the bond cap for school construction and prioritizing new classrooms necessary to reach that goal;
- 2) Restart the five-year phase-in of Abbott preschool expansion under the SFRA in 2016-17, by appropriating at least \$50 million in the FY17 State Budget to begin the effort next school year; and

3) Request a detailed analysis from the DOE on the barriers to achieving the 90% enrollment target in the SFRA for urban districts and a plan for addressing those barriers, along with continuation of the critically needed APPLES research project.

By taking these steps, New Jersey can become the first state where every child in a poor community, and every at-risk child across the state, has access to the high quality early education they must have to succeed in school and in life.

In 2000, our Supreme Court was at a crossroads similar to what we face today. High quality preschool had been ordered for urban children in 1998, but implementation and funding had not been forthcoming. In directing the State officials to get moving, Chief Justice Deborah Poritz's stirring words embody the call to action we need again today. The Chief Justice said "another generation of children will pay the price for each year of delay" because "quality early education does make a difference, that poor urban youngsters do better academically when they have participated in enriched preschool programs from an early age."

The Chief Justice also said that "our constitution requires a thorough and efficient education for all children because we believe that educated citizens are better able to participate fully in economic and communal life of the society in which we all live."

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to you today.