

# ABBOTT PRESCHOOL AT 25: DECLINING ENROLLMENT PUTS A LANDMARK PROGRAM AT RISK



THE FIRST IN A SERIES MARKING THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF  
NEW JERSEY'S ABBOTT PRESCHOOL PROGRAM

## About the Authors

**Nicole Ciullo** is Associate Director of Policy & Development at Education Law Center. She tracks and analyzes legislative, policy, and research developments impacting K-12 public schools nationwide and leads ELC's individual giving efforts. She received a B.A. in Spanish and Sociology from The College of New Jersey, and a master's degree in Public Administration from Rutgers University-Newark.

**Danielle Farrie, Ph.D.**, is Research Director at Education Law Center. Since 2008, she has conducted research and data analysis to support public policy advocacy for ELC and partner organizations. Dr. Farrie is the lead author of ELC's ***Making the Grade*** report and has authored book chapters and peer-reviewed articles on topics such as school finance and school segregation. She has testified about school funding issues before numerous state and national commissions and has provided expert testimony in state school funding lawsuits. She holds a Ph.D. in sociology from Temple University.

## About Education Law Center

**Education Law Center** (ELC) pursues justice and equity for public school students by enforcing their right to a high-quality education in safe, equitable, non-discriminatory, integrated, and well-funded learning environments. We seek to support and improve public schools as the center of communities and the foundation of a multicultural and multiracial democratic society. We strive to secure and protect the rights of students who are underserved, experience inadequate learning opportunities, or face discrimination based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigrant or migrant status, or disability. To achieve these goals, we engage in litigation, research and data analysis, policy advocacy, communications, and strategic partnerships and collaborations.

## Executive Summary

This year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of implementation of New Jersey’s court-ordered, full-day, high-quality preschool program in the state’s 31 high-poverty, urban, “Abbott” districts. As the state continues to expand the program beyond these districts, it is imperative to examine whether Abbott Preschool is effectively meeting the needs of the students it was first designed to serve.

This report is the first in Education Law Center’s series about the state of preschool in New Jersey. It assesses the progress that has been made in the implementation of Abbott Preschool; analyzes enrollment trends across the Abbott districts by year, provider type, and student age; and examines whether individual districts are meeting the New Jersey Department of Education’s (NJDOE) target of enrolling at least 90% of their eligible preschool universe.<sup>1</sup> Of particular interest is district success in enrolling both three- and four-year-olds, given the growing body of evidence demonstrating the academic benefits of two years of preschool on student achievement.

The report uncovers alarming trends in preschool enrollment in the Abbott districts, finding that levels steadily decreased between 2015-16 and 2019-20, and that enrollment declines were further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. School closures, remote learning, and families’ decisions to delay enrollment in the school system likely contributed to the 20% decrease in Abbott Preschool enrollment between 2019-20 and 2020-21. While both three- and four-year-olds disengaged from the preschool system during the pandemic years, three-year-old enrollment was hit especially hard, making clear the urgent need to increase efforts to enroll this already hard to reach population.

Abbott Preschool enrollment has increased since schools reopened following the pandemic, but total enrollment is still below pre-pandemic numbers. During the 2023-24 school year, about 35,000 students residing in Abbott districts attended full-day, high-quality preschool in a mixed-delivery system of district-run programs, Head Start centers, and community providers. This represents just 78% of eligible preschoolers in these districts, meaning nearly 10,000 students missed out on the benefits of high-quality preschool. The majority of districts – a greater number than in previous years – failed to meet their 90% enrollment target.

The report also identifies a shift in where preschoolers are being educated, finding that the percentage of students in community provider and Head Start programs has steadily decreased over the last decade. This downward trend accelerated following the pandemic.

The findings in this report demonstrate the pressing need for the NJDOE and Abbott districts to collaborate on an effort to increase preschool enrollment through outreach to families. Specific efforts should be made to target three-year-olds whose enrollment has historically lagged behind four-year-olds. In addition, the state must provide facilities funding through the Schools Development Authority (SDA) to address ongoing preschool capacity issues in many of the Abbott districts.

As a nationally recognized model with proven benefits, New Jersey’s Abbott Preschool program offers lessons to other states on how to successfully implement high-quality early education. But recent trends also offer a cautionary tale on the importance of sustained commitment from the state to ensure longevity in both quality and access.

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<sup>1</sup> The source data used in this report is from the NJDOE’s Division of Early Childhood Education, which compiles information provided by districts. The enrollment figures reflect the number of students served, as per each district’s Application for State School Aid (ASSA) in the fall of each school year. The NJDOE reports actual enrollment only for general education students; preschoolers receiving special education services are not included. Because of these data limitations, and for consistency, we limit all discussions in the report to general education students.

## Key Findings

- The Abbott districts enrolled just 78% of their eligible preschool universe (34,930 students) in 2023-24. Nearly 10,000 eligible preschoolers missed out on the opportunity to participate in Abbott Preschool.
- Both three- and four-year-olds are underserved in Abbott Preschool. In 2023-24, just 70% of eligible three-year-olds and 84% of eligible four-year-olds were enrolled in the program. While outreach is needed to increase enrollment of both age groups, additional attention should be paid to three-year-olds given the added benefits of two years of preschool on long-term student outcomes.
- Abbott Preschool enrollment decreased by over 20% between 2019-20 and 2020-21, the years schools were closed or remote learning was in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2023-24, 13% fewer four-year-olds and 17% fewer three-year-olds were enrolled than before the pandemic.
- Pandemic enrollment losses varied greatly by individual district, ranging from 1% to 43%, and nearly all districts lost a greater percentage of three-year-olds than four-year-olds. Several districts have made significant progress in increasing preschool enrollment, but the majority have a long way to go to reach pre-pandemic levels.
- In recent years, there has been a decline in the percentage of preschoolers educated in community provider and Head Start programs. This downward trend has accelerated since the pandemic.
- Only five of the 31 Abbott districts met the requirement to enroll at least 90% of their eligible preschool universe in 2023-24, which is less than a third of the districts that met the target in 2009-10.
- Only four districts served a greater percentage of their eligible preschool universe in 2023-24 than in 2009-10, and many districts are much further from the 90% enrollment target than they were in 2009-10. The majority of Abbott districts are failing to meet the statutory requirement in this regard.

### ***Abbott v. Burke's School Funding Remedies***

As a result of the *Abbott v. Burke* school funding litigation, 31 low-wealth, urban school districts (“Abbott Districts”) were entitled to a set of remedies to ensure the children in their schools would receive a “thorough and efficient” education as required by the New Jersey Constitution. The Abbott rulings required implementation of a comprehensive set of improvements, including adequate foundational funding, supplemental programs for at-risk students, curriculum and instruction reform, facilities improvements, and universal preschool for all three- and four-year-olds.

In 2008, the New Jersey Legislature enacted a new school funding formula, the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA). The New Jersey Supreme Court subsequently deemed the SFRA constitutional and lifted the Abbott funding remedies. However, the remedies requiring preschool and facilities renovation and construction remain in place to this day.

## Introduction

In 1998, the New Jersey Supreme Court issued its *Abbott V* ruling in the landmark *Abbott v. Burke* school finance litigation mandating full-day preschool for all three- and four-year-olds in the state's 31 high-poverty, urban, "Abbott" districts. Under the Abbott rulings and New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) regulations, all students residing in Abbott districts are eligible to enroll in preschool, and districts are directed to maintain enrollment levels of at least 90% of the universe of all preschool-aged children in the community.

The New Jersey Supreme Court based its ruling in *Abbott V* on the growing body of research demonstrating that intensive, high-quality preschool can close much of the early achievement gap for lower income students, and that students who attend quality preschool programs perform better in school, leading to more productive participation in the social and economic life of their communities as adults.<sup>2</sup> The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) has continued to document the long-term outcomes of students who participated in the Abbott Preschool program in their Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES). The most recent report, APPLES-10, studying outcomes from preschool through grade 10, found that former preschool students' achievement gains in math, language arts, and literacy remained substantial throughout that period; students who participated in the program had lower grade retention and special education rates through grade 10; and two years of participation in Abbott Preschool beginning at age three had roughly twice the effects on achievement as one year at age four.<sup>3</sup>

### Preschool Expansion Under the SFRA

In 2008, the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) extended eligibility for Abbott-quality preschool to all three- and four-year-olds in District Factor Groups (DFG) A and B, all three- and four-year-olds in DFG CD districts with 40% or greater low-income students, and all low-income students in the remaining school districts. However, over the next decade, no new funding was allocated to implement Preschool Expansion. Governor Murphy proposed the first round of funding for Preschool Expansion in the FY2019 State Budget, and the NJDOE subsequently provided state funding to 31 new districts. The Murphy Administration has continued to expand Abbott-quality preschool, and the Governor has expressed his commitment to providing universal preschool to all three- and four-year-olds in the state, with the support of the NJDOE.<sup>4</sup> While statewide expansion is to be applauded, the targeted expansion under the SFRA still stands, and the state is still required to meet the mandates of previous court rulings regarding preschool in the 31 Abbott districts.

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2 *Abbott v. Burke*, 153 N.J. 480, 579-580 (1998)

3 National Institute for Early Education Research. May 6, 2021. [New Jersey Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study Through Grade 10 \(APPLES-10\)](#).

4 State of New Jersey. *Governor Murphy Announces Commitment to Universal Pre-K for New Jersey*. Sept. 16, 2021. <https://nj.gov/governor/news/news/562021/approved/20210916a.shtml>.



## Abbott Preschool Program Requirements

Abbott Preschool is based on a comprehensive and unprecedented set of programmatic elements established by the New Jersey Supreme Court and codified in NJDOE regulations.<sup>5</sup>

### Quality

Abbott districts are required to provide preschool to all three- and four-year-old children residing in their communities, regardless of family income. These programs must meet specific quality standards, including:

- Certified teacher and assistant for each class;
- Maximum class size of 15 students;
- Program length of six hours per day, 182 days a year;
- Adequate facilities;
- Transportation, health and related services, as needed;
- Developmentally appropriate preschool curriculum that meets the NJDOE's Early Childhood Education Program Expectations Standards of Quality (2002) and is linked with New Jersey's Core Curriculum Content Standards, now known as the New Jersey Student Learning Standards;
- Adequate state funding for all community providers, Head Start programs, and in-district classrooms.

### Providers

The Abbott Preschool program operates through a mixed-delivery system. Preschoolers are served in three types of educational settings, all of which are required to provide Abbott-quality standards: In-district programs operated by the district; Head Start programs which are federally funded early childhood education centers that were brought into the program in 2002; and childcare programs operated by community providers that contract with the district.

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<sup>5</sup> The State Supreme Court has issued three rulings setting forth the programmatic requirements for Abbott Preschool: *Abbott v. Burke*, 153 N.J. 480 (1998) (*Abbott V*), *Abbott v. Burke*, 163 N.J. 95 (2000) (*Abbott VI*), and *Abbott v. Burke*, 170 N.J. 537 (2002) (*Abbott VIII*). These Court mandates are codified in NJDOE regulations at N.J.A.C. 6A: 13A-1.1-11.3.



## Funding

Abbott Preschool is funded through the state’s school funding formula, the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA). The SFRA provides funding on a per-pupil basis with different funding levels for the three types of providers. In 2024-25, in-district programs are funded at \$15,594 per pupil, community providers at \$17,527 per pupil, and Head Start centers (which receive additional support from the federal government) at \$9,685 per pupil. The SFRA includes “hold harmless” provisions to ensure the Abbott districts do not receive less than their total Preschool Education Aid entitlement in 2008-09, or less funding per pupil than they received in 2008-09. Only three districts are currently eligible for this hold harmless funding.

$$\text{Preschool Aid} = (\text{In-District Enrollment} \times \$15,594) + (\text{Private Provider Enrollment} \times \$17,527) + (\text{Head Start Enrollment} \times \$9,685)$$

In 2024-25, a total of \$646 million was appropriated by the state to the Abbott districts for preschool.

## Eligible Preschool Universe

All three- and four-year-olds residing in an Abbott district are eligible for preschool. NJDOE regulations require that districts reach and maintain a preschool enrollment of at least 90% of their preschool universe. The eligible three- and four-year-old preschool universe is calculated by multiplying the count of public school first graders by two.

$$\text{Eligible Preschool Universe} = \text{District 1st Graders} \times 2$$

Because this formula relies on a district’s first grade student enrollment, it is possible that it underestimates a district’s actual preschool population. The first-grade count only includes students currently enrolled in traditional public or charter schools, excluding any students who attend private schools, or who are homeschooled, even though these students are also eligible for, and often attend, public preschool. For this reason, it is possible that the percentage of preschoolers served by a district exceeds 100% of the eligible universe calculation.

## Preschool Across the Abbott Districts

During the 2023-24 school year, 34,930 students were enrolled in Abbott Preschool. That figure represents only 78% of the eligible preschool universe across the Abbott districts. A total of 15,664 three-year-olds were enrolled, compared to 18,740 four-year-olds. Fifty-three percent of students were educated in community provider or Head Start settings, 46% in district-run programs, and fewer than 2% in charter-run programs.

Enrollment	Setting	Age
34,930 students enrolled	53% Community Provider	15,664 3-Year-Olds
78% of eligible students served	46% In-District	18,740 4-Year-Olds

The data above summarizes the state of Abbott Preschool overall but does not address how the program has changed over time and the great diversity of experiences among the 31 districts. The following charts show long-term trends and variations in the characteristics of Abbott Preschool programs across districts. We focus on the last twenty years to capture enrollment trends from the time the program was fully scaled up.

### Total Enrollment

In 2003-04, 35,732 students attended preschool in the Abbott districts. Over the next decade, with the exception of 2006-07, Abbott Preschool enrollment steadily increased year over year, with more than 43,000 students enrolled in the program in 2013-2014. Enrollment remained fairly consistent over the next several years, but participation began to decline during the 2016-17 school year. By the time schools closed in 2019-20 because of the Covid-19 pandemic, Abbott Preschool had already experienced a 5% decrease in enrollment (Figure 1).

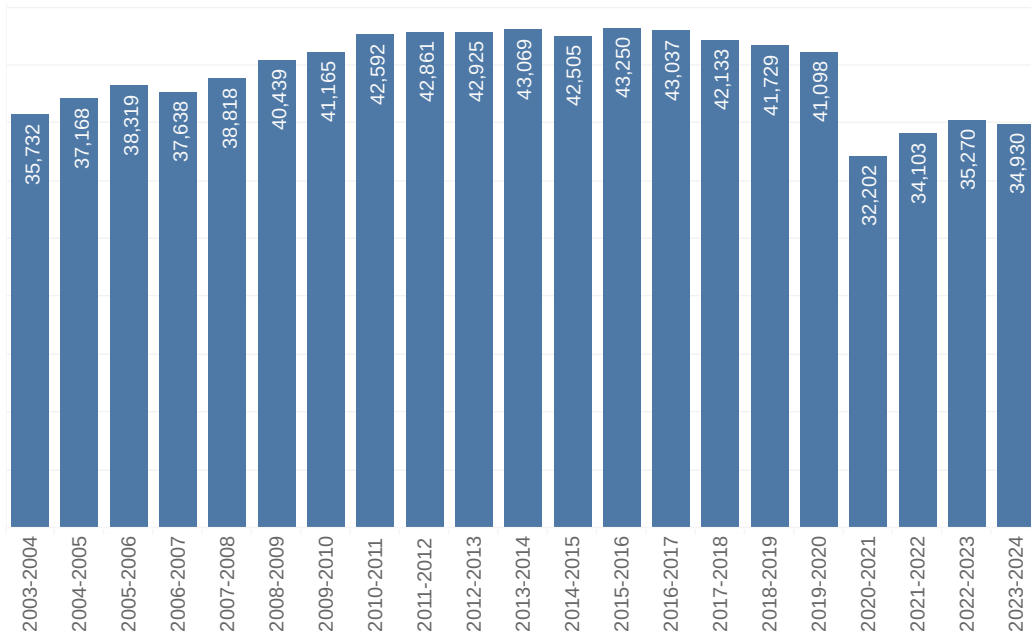
Abbott Preschool enrollment hit an all-time low in 2020-21, the years schools were operating remotely. That year, just over 32,000 students participated in the program, reflecting a 20% decrease from the prior school year. The devastating impact of Covid-19 on Abbott Preschool will be discussed in detail later in this report.

Over the last several years, Abbott Preschool enrollment has increased, serving 34,930 students in 2023-24. But participation is still below pre-pandemic levels, and, in fact, the program is now enrolling fewer students than in 2003-04.





Figure 1: Abbott Preschool Enrollment, 2003-04 to 2023-24

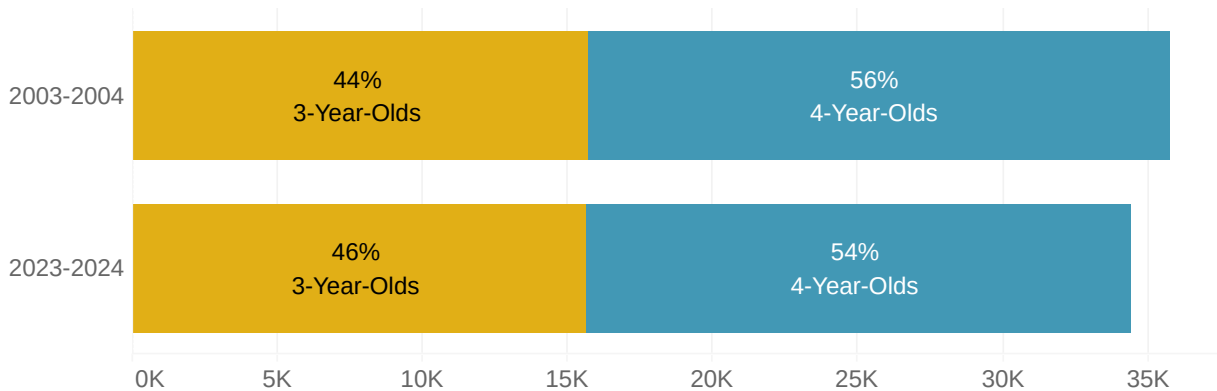


Source: NJDOE Division of Early Childhood Education, Application for State School Aid Reports

### Enrollment by Age

Abbott Preschool enrollments were slightly more balanced by age in 2023-24 than they were twenty years ago, but three-year-olds are still underrepresented in the program (Figure 2). Every district, except Hoboken and Pleasantville, enrolled significantly fewer three-year-olds than four-year-olds (Figure 3).<sup>6</sup> Given research demonstrating that students experience greater academic benefits after two years of preschool, more must be done to increase enrollment of three-year-olds in Abbott Preschool.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 2: Preschool Enrollment by Age, 2003-04 to 2023-24



Source: NJDOE Division of Early Childhood Education, Application for State School Aid Reports

<sup>6</sup> Hoboken is an outlier, likely because young families enroll in the public preschool program for one or two years and then either move out of district or enroll in nonpublic options by first grade.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, National Institute for Early Education Research. May 6, 2021. [New Jersey Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study Through Grade 10 \(APPLES-10\)](#).

Figure 3: Preschool Enrollment by Age and District, 2023-24

District	3-Year-Olds	% Eligible Enrolled	4-Year-Olds	% Eligible Enrolled
Asbury Park City	79	60%	110	83%
Bridgeton City	246	63%	318	82%
Burlington City	65	63%	85	82%
Camden City	714	62%	922	80%
City Of Orange Twp	288	76%	342	90%
East Orange	500	73%	591	86%
Elizabeth City	1,124	65%	1,415	81%
Garfield City	226	68%	279	84%
Gloucester City	87	58%	111	74%
Harrison Town	126	96%	141	108%
Hoboken City	513	152%	445	132%
Irvington Township	528	82%	662	103%
Jersey City	1,808	77%	1,899	81%
Keansburg Boro	52	50%	68	65%
Long Branch City	233	71%	256	78%
Millville City	252	88%	271	94%
Neptune Twp	143	74%	178	92%
New Brunswick City	329	58%	420	74%
Newark City	2,621	66%	3,100	78%
Passaic City	479	61%	651	83%
Paterson City	1,256	61%	1,506	73%
Pemberton Twp	208	75%	259	93%
Perth Amboy City	434	63%	616	90%
Phillipsburg Town	121	61%	154	77%
Plainfield City	644	71%	924	102%
Pleasantville City	198	74%	157	59%
Salem City	54	84%	71	111%
Trenton City	837	73%	1,069	93%
Union City	656	81%	739	91%
Vineland City	461	70%	525	79%
West New York Town	381	78%	456	93%

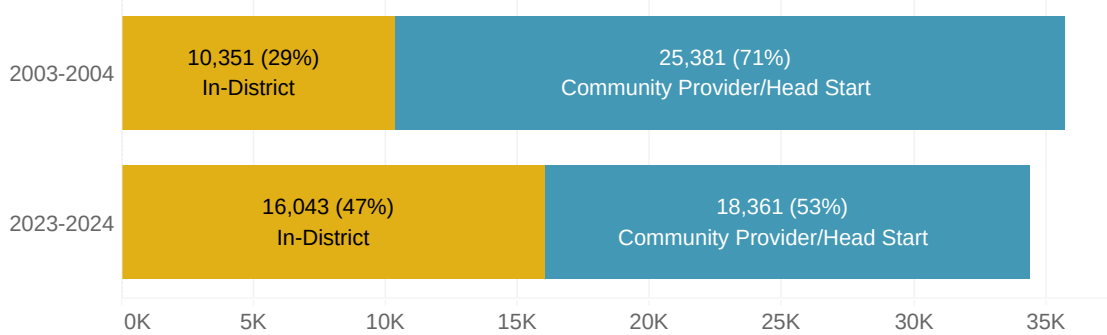
Note: This analysis does not include students enrolled in programs run by charter schools because the data provided by the NJDOE on charter enrollment is not broken out by age.

Source: NJDOE Division of Early Childhood Education, Application for State School Aid Reports

## Enrollment by Provider

Abbott Preschool is unique in that it relies on a mixed delivery system of district-run preschool programs, programs run by community providers and Head Start centers, and charter-run programs. In 2023-24, 53% of preschoolers were in community provider settings compared to 71% in 2003-2004 (Figure 4).

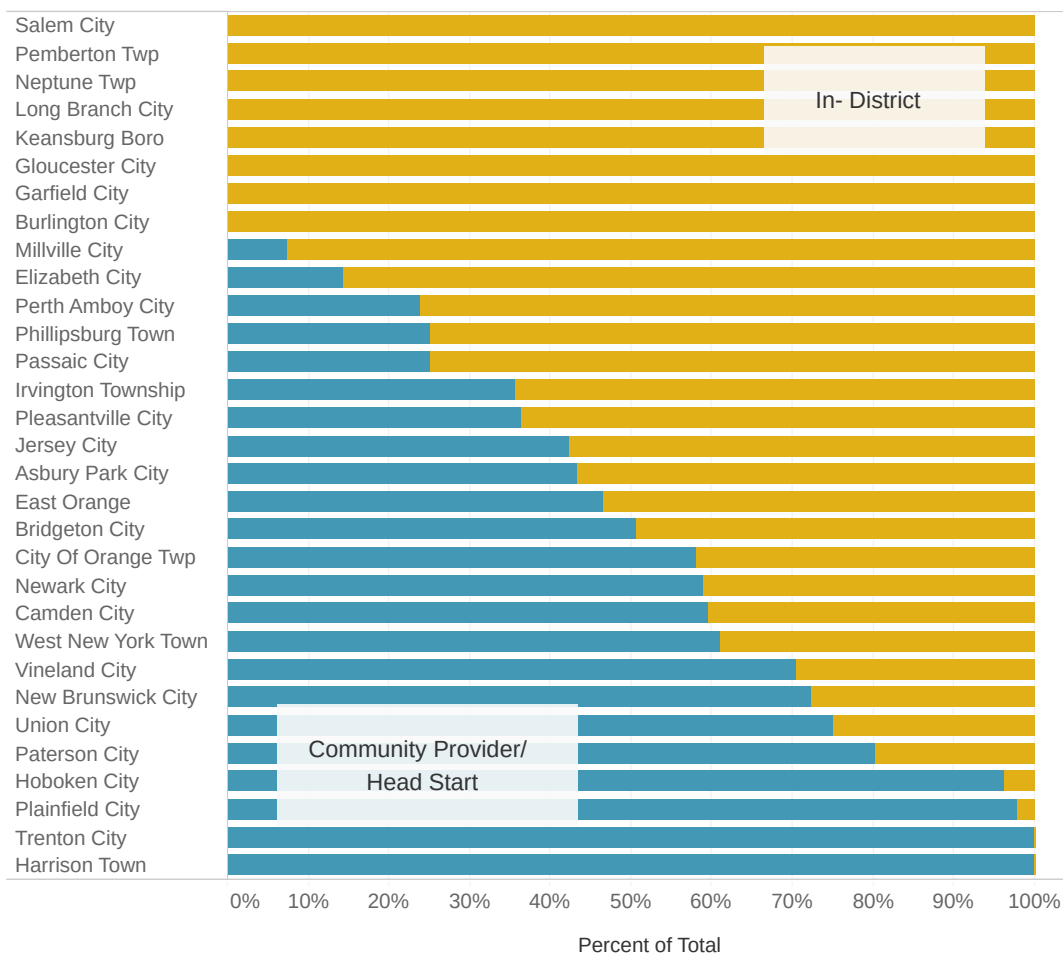
Figure 4: Preschool Enrollment by Provider, 2003-04 to 2023-24



Source: NJDOE Division of Early Childhood Education, Application for State School Aid Reports

Though there has been an overall decline in the proportion of students educated in community provider settings, there is still great variation among districts. About one-quarter of districts now rely solely on district-run programs, while a handful of districts rely overwhelmingly or solely on community providers (Harrison, Hoboken, Plainfield, Trenton). The remaining districts have a more balanced mix of both settings (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Preschool Provider Type by District, 2023-24



Source: NJ Division of Early Childhood Education, Application for State School Aid Reports

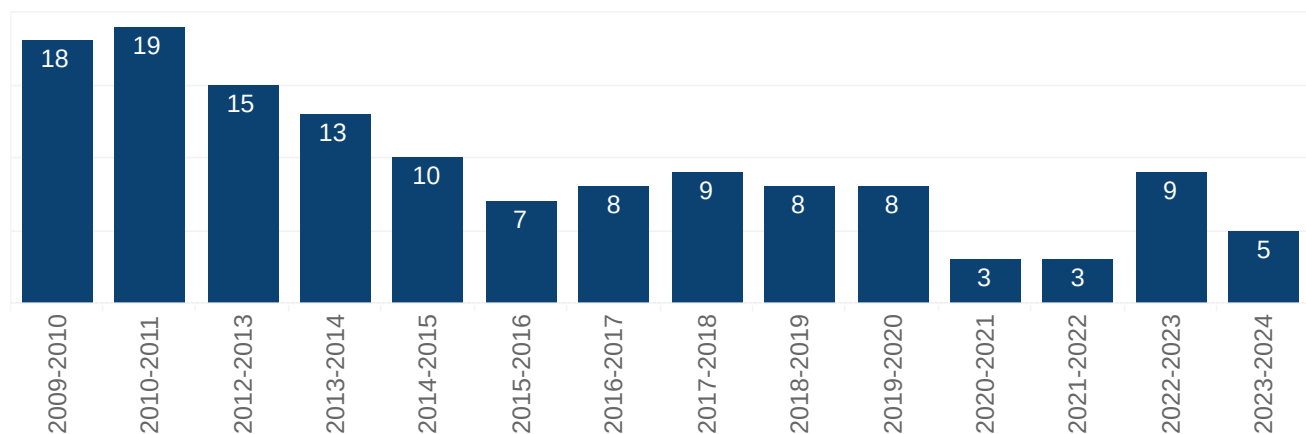


## Are Abbott Districts Meeting the Mandate of Enrolling 90% of Their Eligible Preschool Universe?

In 2023-24, significantly fewer districts met the NJDOE’s target of enrolling at least 90% of their eligible preschool universe than in 2009-10 (Figure 6). In fact, only five of the 31 Abbott districts (Hoboken, Harrison, Irvington, Millville, Salem) met the enrollment target in 2023-24, compared to 18 in 2009-10.

The number of districts meeting the enrollment target dropped significantly even before schools closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Between 2010-11 and 2015-16, this number decreased from 19 to seven, and in the years leading up to the pandemic, an average of eight districts met the requirement each year. During the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, the number of districts reaching the target hit an all-time low, with only three districts enrolling over 90% of their eligible universe. Figure 7 shows how each district performed in 2023-24 relative to the 90% enrollment target.

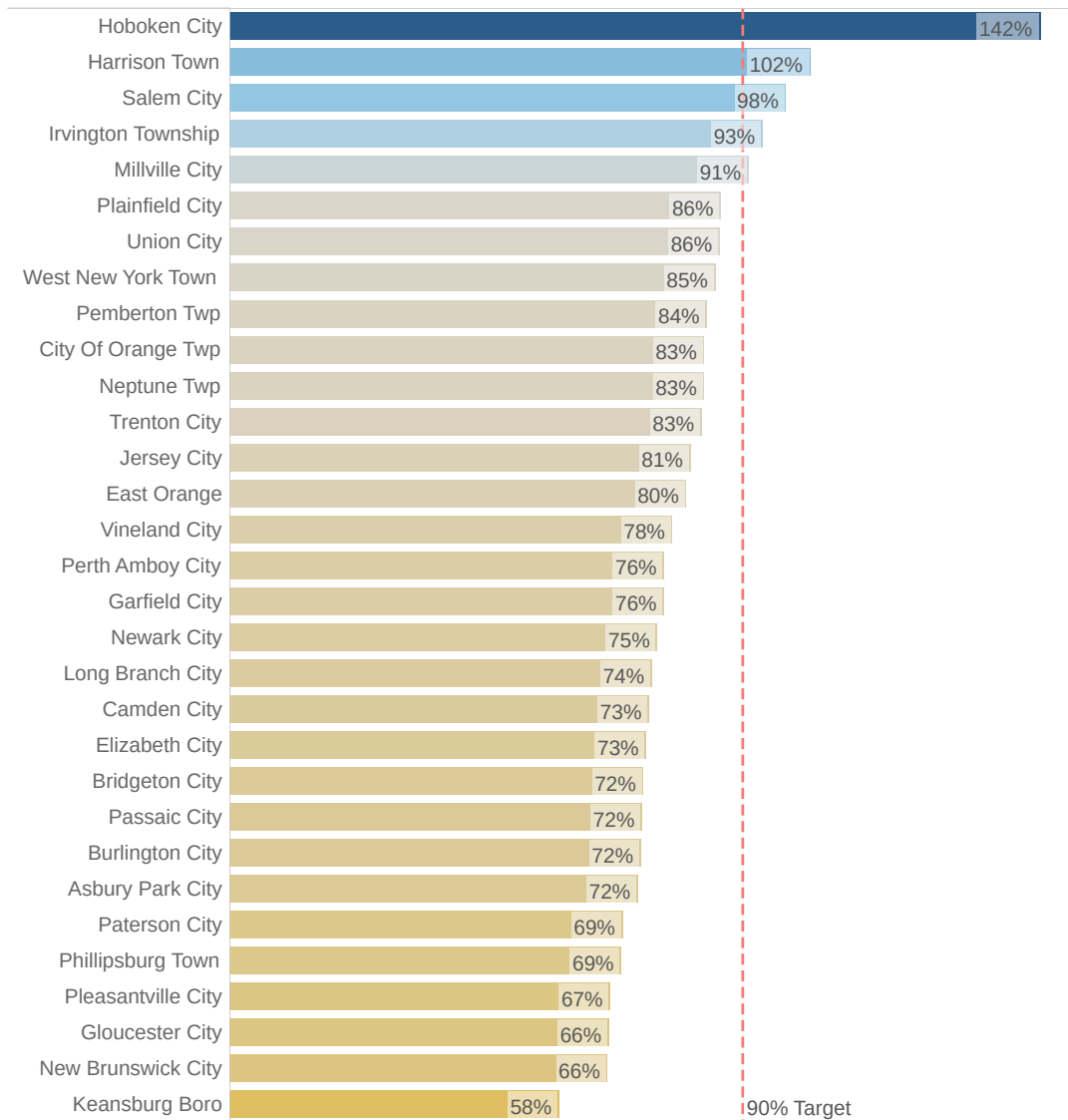
Figure 6: Number of Abbott Districts Meeting 90% Enrollment Threshold by Year



Source: NJ Division of Early Childhood Education, Application for State School Aid Reports

## Figure 7: Share of Eligible Students Enrolled, 2023-24

The bars below represent the number of preschool students enrolled by the district divided by the district's estimated preschool universe. **Blue** bars indicate that the district is enrolling at least 90% of the eligible universe. **Yellow** bars indicate enrollment is below the 90% target.



Source: NJ Division of Early Childhood Education, Application for State School Aid Reports

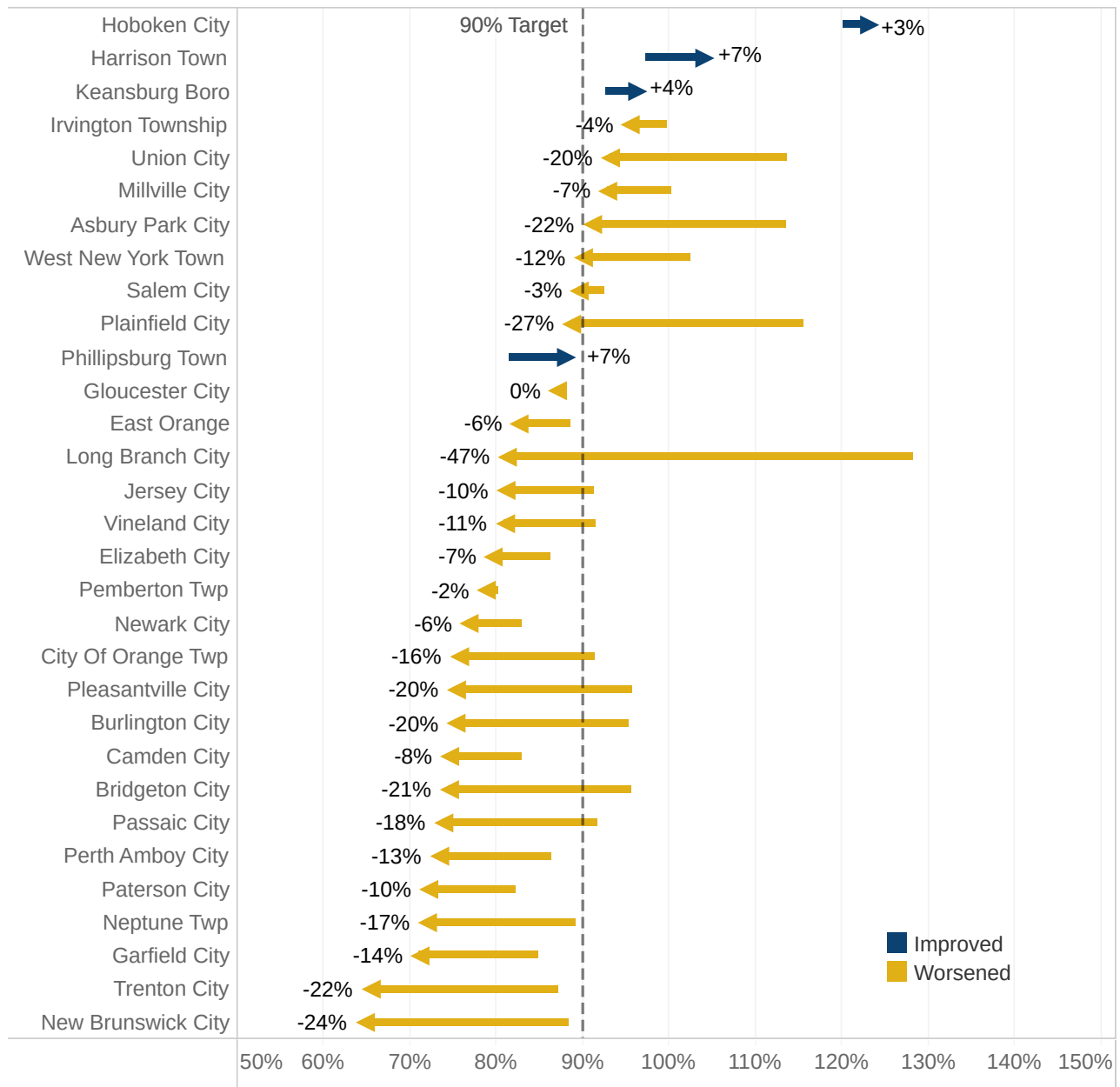
Five districts (Hoboken, Harrison, Salem, Irvington, Millville) met the 90% enrollment target in 2023-24, while others, such as Plainfield, Union City, and West New York, were just shy of the target. Some districts, such as Keansburg (58%), New Brunswick (66%), Gloucester (66%), and Pleasantville (67%), fell significantly below the target.

How districts fare at meeting the target varies significantly from year to year. Provided the data is correct, several districts that met the 90% enrollment target in 2022-23 no longer met the target in 2023-24. In the most extreme example, Keansburg, which enrolled 96% of its eligible preschool universe in 2022-23 (156 students), enrolled just 58% (120 students) in 2023-24. Asbury Park experienced a similar decrease in enrollment of its eligible universe, from 91% in 2022-23 to 72% in 2023-24; Union City fell from 93% to 86%, and West New York fell from 90% to 85%.

Figure 8 shows the percentage point change in a district's enrollment of its eligible preschool universe from 2009-10 to 2023-24. A blue arrow signifies that a district has improved upon its previous performance, serving a greater percentage of eligible students in 2023-24 compared to 2009-10, and a yellow line shows a decline in performance over the same period. It is important to note that districts, such as Irvington and Millville, may be represented by a yellow arrow and still have met the 90% enrollment target in 2023-24.

**Figure 8: Change in Share of Eligible Students Enrolled, 2009-10 to 2023-24**

A **blue** arrow signifies that the district served a greater percentage of eligible students in 2023-24 than in 2009-10; a **yellow** arrow signifies that the district served a smaller percentage in 2023-24 than in 2009-10. The dotted line represents the 90% enrollment target.



Source: NJ Division of Early Childhood Education, Application for State School Aid Reports

Four districts (Hoboken, Harrison, Salem, Pemberton) enrolled a greater percentage of their eligible preschool universe in 2023-24 than in 2009-10, while the remaining 27 districts served a smaller percentage. In the most dramatic example, Long Branch experienced a 54 percentage point decline from 2009-10, enrolling 74% of its eligible preschool universe in 2023-24, compared to 128% in 2009-10. Other districts, such as New Brunswick and Gloucester City, failed to meet the 90% enrollment target in 2009-10 and are much further from the target in 2023-24. Both districts served just 66% of their eligible preschool universe in 2023-24.

## Covid-19's Impact on Abbott Preschool Enrollment

In 2020-21, the year many schools remained closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of students enrolled in Abbott Preschool dropped significantly, hitting an all-time low of just over 32,200 students. This reflects an alarming 20% decline from the previous school year. Challenges brought about by school closures, expanded remote learning, and families' decisions to delay enrollment in the school system likely contributed to this decline.

Three-year-olds were significantly less likely to enroll in Abbott Preschool at the height of the pandemic. Between 2019-20 and 2020-21, three-year-old enrollment decreased 34%, a loss of about 6,500 students (see [Figure 9](#)). In comparison, four-year-old enrollment decreased 11%, a loss of about 2,400 students, and first grade enrollment declined less than 3%, or 640 students.<sup>8</sup>

Three years later, enrollments remain depressed for all three groups: In 2023-24, first grade enrollments rebounded to 91% of pre-Covid levels, four-year-olds rebounded to 87%, and three-year-olds were only at 83%. This suggests that the Covid-related enrollment losses, and the continued depressed enrollments, are a more severe problem for the preschool program, and especially for the youngest students. The continued decline of four-year-olds two years post-pandemic suggests that districts were unable to engage many of the families that chose not to enroll their three-year-olds the previous year. More must be done to encourage families to take advantage of the two years of preschool they are entitled to.

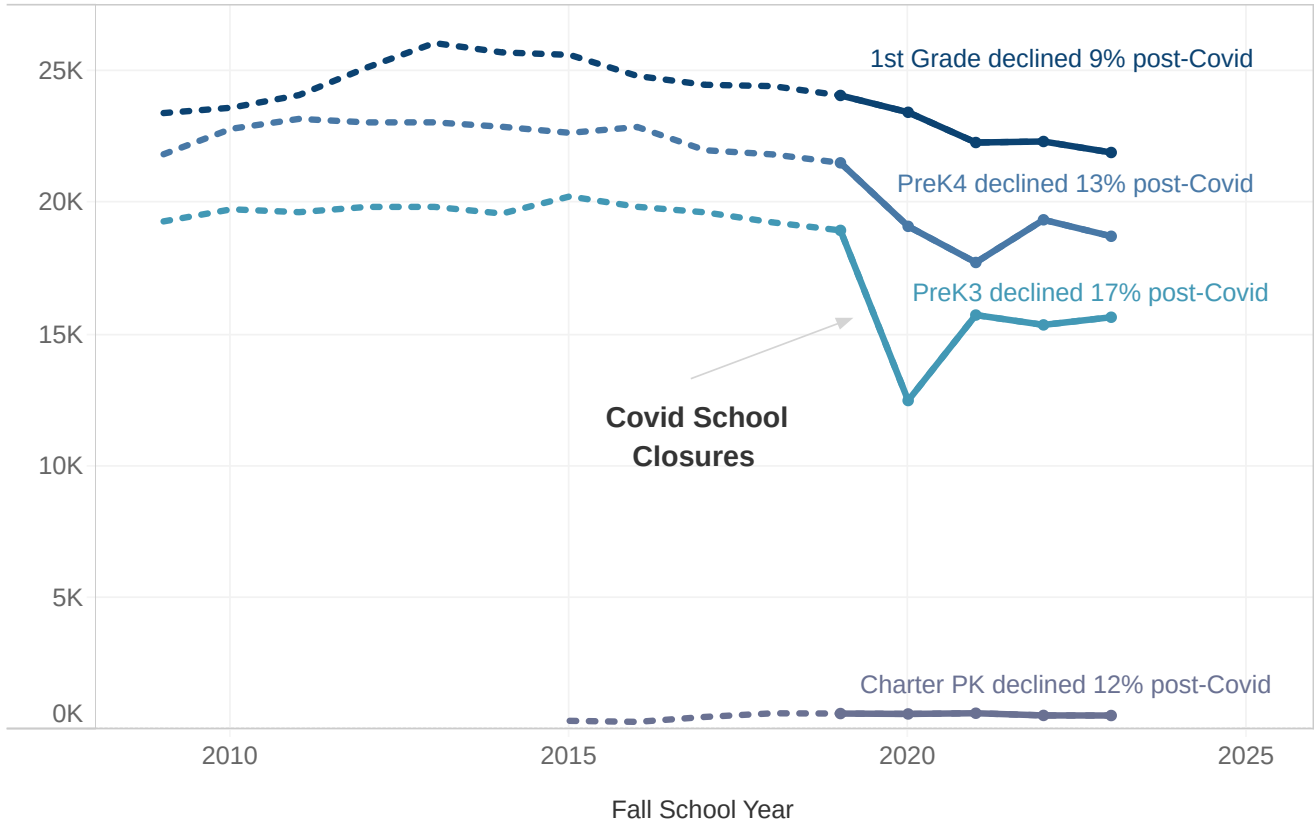
### The Impact of Covid-19 on Preschool Enrollment Across the Country

Decreased preschool enrollment during the Covid-19 pandemic is not unique to New Jersey. A recent Census Bureau report found that the percentage of three- to six-year-olds enrolled in preschool across the country decreased by 9.3 percentage points between 2019 and 2021, and that 2021 marked the lowest recorded estimate of three to-six-year-old preschool enrollment since the American Community Survey began collecting data in 2005. The report also found that New Jersey's preschool enrollment decline was greater than the national average and noted that additional research was needed to determine whether the national decline in preschool enrollment was caused by the pandemic or demographic or social shifts.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that these data only capture enrollment, not attendance. Students may have registered for preschool in the fall of 2020 but not attended regularly, given the difficulties of managing remote learning and abbreviated schedules for young children.

<sup>9</sup> Jacob Fabina, Erik L. Hernandez, & Kevin McElrath. *School Enrollment in the United States: 2021*, Report Number ACS-55, (June 8, 2023), <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2023/acs/acs-55.html>.

Figure 9: Pre- and Post-Covid Enrollment Trends



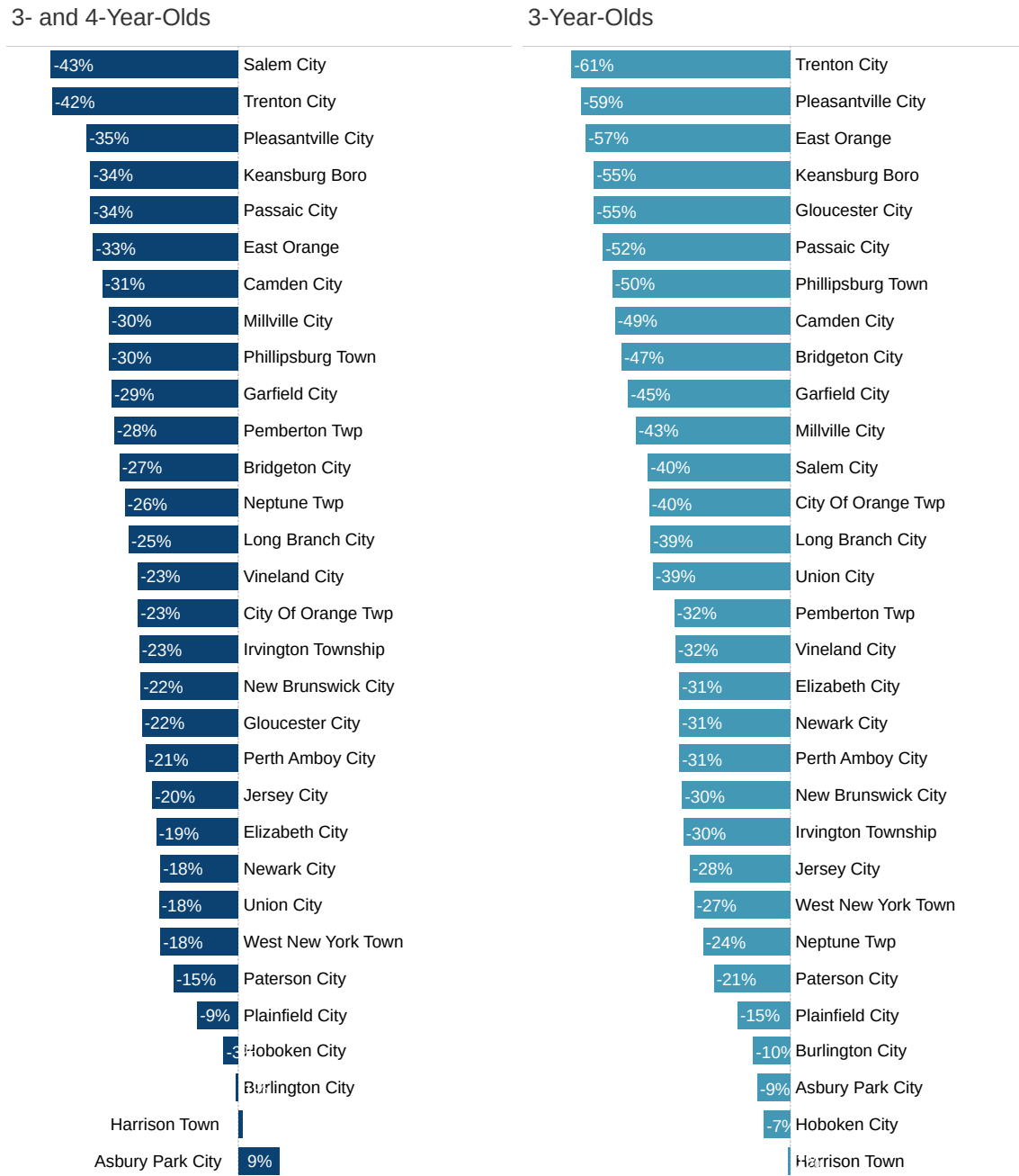
Source: NJ Division of Early Childhood Education, Application for State School Aid Reports

The Covid-19 pandemic did not affect all Abbott districts in the same way. Changes in preschool enrollment between 2019-20 and 2020-21 ranged from a 9% increase in Asbury Park to a 43% reduction in Salem City (Figure 10). Nearly all districts that experienced decreases in enrollment lost a greater percentage of three-year-olds than four-year-olds, with some districts reducing three-year-old enrollment by over 50%, and in the most extreme case of Trenton, over 60%.





Figure 10: Change in Enrollment, 2019-20 to 2020-21



Source: NJDOE Division of Early Childhood Education, Application for State School Aid Reports

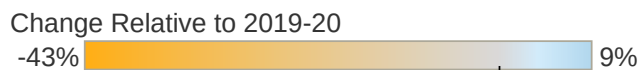
While enrollments have rebounded since 2021-22, all but a handful of districts (Harrison, Hoboken, Irvington, Plainfield) are enrolling fewer students now than pre-pandemic (Figure 11). For example, Asbury Park, Keansburg, New Brunswick, and Passaic all enrolled 30% fewer students in the fall of 2023 than in the fall of 2019.

It is clear that Covid-19 caused immense disruption to Abbott Preschool programs across the state, but the cause of the continued depressed enrollment is not fully understood. It is imperative that the NJDOE ramp up efforts to both understand and reverse these trends. That must include continued support to districts as they seek to restore enrollment to pre-pandemic levels, at a minimum.

**Figure 11: Annual Enrollment and Change Relative to 2019-20**

This chart shows the number of students enrolled in preschool from 2019-20 to 2023-24. The color represents the percentage change in enrollment each year relative to 2019-20. **Orange** indicates enrollment is below 2019-20 and **blue** indicates enrollment is above 2019-20. Darker colors indicate greater change.

	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Asbury Park City	307	336	334	224	189
Bridgeton City	703	514	577	593	564
Burlington City	161	160	156	152	150
Camden City	2,151	1,485	1,620	1,760	1,693
City Of Orange Twp	774	597	656	625	630
East Orange	1,285	862	954	1,073	1,101
Elizabeth City	2,997	2,436	2,576	2,695	2,539
Garfield City	622	443	482	489	505
Gloucester City	242	189	191	214	198
Harrison Town	260	263	255	256	267
Hoboken City	936	905	801	830	958
Irvington Township	1,188	920	1,033	1,185	1,197
Jersey City	4,707	3,784	3,675	3,867	3,797
Keansburg Boro	175	116	120	156	120
Long Branch City	681	511	500	518	489
Millville City	575	405	514	529	523
Neptune Twp	374	278	307	318	321
New Brunswick City	1,126	876	855	790	749
Newark City	6,858	5,642	5,822	5,944	5,953
Passaic City	1,627	1,081	1,203	1,236	1,130
Paterson City	3,267	2,784	2,827	2,930	2,852
Pemberton Twp	476	342	431	441	467
Perth Amboy City	1,384	1,092	1,081	1,118	1,050
Phillipsburg Town	298	210	261	280	275
Plainfield City	1,473	1,338	1,394	1,512	1,568
Pleasantville City	398	260	344	375	355
Salem City	138	79	112	145	125
Trenton City	2,069	1,193	1,786	1,645	1,907
Union City	1,697	1,390	1,379	1,464	1,395
Vineland City	1,176	909	1,072	1,069	1,026
West New York Town	973	802	785	837	837



Source: NJDOE Division of Early Childhood Education, Application for State School Aid Reports



## Recommendations

This report demonstrates the need for a concerted effort to increase preschool enrollment in the Abbott districts. All three- and four-year-olds in these districts are constitutionally entitled to a high-quality early education, and both the school districts and the State must make every effort to ensure that all students are afforded that opportunity.

ELC recommends the following:

1. The NJDOE's Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) must play a greater role in overseeing the Abbott Preschool program. The NJDOE and school districts must work collaboratively to increase the number of enrolled preschoolers, with special attention to enrolling three-year-olds. This could include outreach to families about the program, promoting the academic and social benefits of preschool, and conducting research to understand families' obstacles to enrollment. A greater investment in staffing and funding for the DECE will be critical in accomplishing these goals.
2. The State must provide funding to the Schools Development Authority (SDA) for school construction projects that include additional preschool facilities. The SDA's most recent [strategic plan](#) from 2022 identified preschool capacity deficiencies in 10 of the Abbott districts based on 2019-21 enrollments.<sup>10,11</sup> While some districts will have additional classroom space when the next round of school construction is completed, many will still lack sufficient facilities to accommodate their preschool populations. District efforts to increase preschool enrollment will further exacerbate these capacity issues and accelerate the need for additional learning spaces.
3. The ability of school districts to operate and expand high-quality programs that meet the Abbott standards is contingent on adequate funding. The NJDOE must conduct a cost study to evaluate whether the per-pupil preschool amounts in the SFRA formula are sufficient to meet current program requirements across settings and locations, especially as the Abbott Preschool program expands to non-Abbott districts across the state.

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10 These districts are: Orange, East Orange, Elizabeth, Garfield, Jersey City, New Brunswick, Passaic, Paterson, Union City, and West New York.

11 State of New Jersey Schools Development Authority. 2022 *Strategic Plan Update and Capital Plan Presentation*. April 6, 2022, Revised February 2024. [https://www.njsda.gov/Content/Projects/2022\\_Strategic\\_Plan\\_Update\\_and\\_Capital\\_Plan.pdf](https://www.njsda.gov/Content/Projects/2022_Strategic_Plan_Update_and_Capital_Plan.pdf). (p. 6).