

Lessons in Strategic Communications

RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY COLLABORATION

A New Jersey Case Study

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A Product of the Early Care and Education Collaborative

INTRODUCTION

Too often vital research in the early care and education field does not get used effectively for advocacy purposes. While researchers and advocates often share the same goals, they tend to operate on separate tracks. Ultimately this approach can foster negative competition in the public and policy arenas and detract from mutual interests. “Diverse factions can lead to polarized political bargaining and few, if any, significant policy gains.”¹

This brief explores how research and advocacy can be bridged for greater effect using *strategic communications*. By definition, strategic communications means a deliberate plan or tactics for using communications as a channel for achieving a certain result.²

Collaborative work in the state of New Jersey is used as a backdrop for learning about effective practice. Specifically the brief draws on how New Jersey advocates and researchers collaborated around the common goal of achieving a quality and comprehensive preschool system in the state’s most disadvantaged school districts.

This brief has three parts.

Part One: State-Funded Preschool in New Jersey

Describes state-funded preschool in New Jersey, focusing on the significant role that the New Jersey Supreme Court case *Abbott v. Burke* has played in shaping preschool policy.

Part Two: A New Jersey Case Study in Collaboration

Offers a case study of how New Jersey researchers and advocates used strategic communications to collaborate and inform the *Abbott* case.

Part Three: Lessons on Effective Research and Advocacy Collaboration

Offers three lessons on what can be learned from the New Jersey experience about effective research and advocacy collaboration.

The brief ends with a background on the brief’s development and the methods and data sources used.

It is important to acknowledge upfront the importance of context. Undoubtedly the political and judicial circumstances described here are unique to New Jersey. The availability of relevant research and local expertise was also unique. And finally the presence of two parties who worked with both research and advocacy groups and encouraged the collaboration – the Schumann Fund for New Jersey and the Communications Consortium Media Center – made a distinct difference. However, the purpose is to use New Jersey as the *background* for a discussion of transferable lessons. These lessons are designed for application in spite of context.

PART ONE: STATE-FUNDED PRESCHOOL IN NEW JERSEY

New Jersey is the one of the wealthiest states in the nation, according to median household income estimates.³ In fact, the state is both incredibly rich and incredibly poor, with its wealth concentrated primarily in its suburban areas.

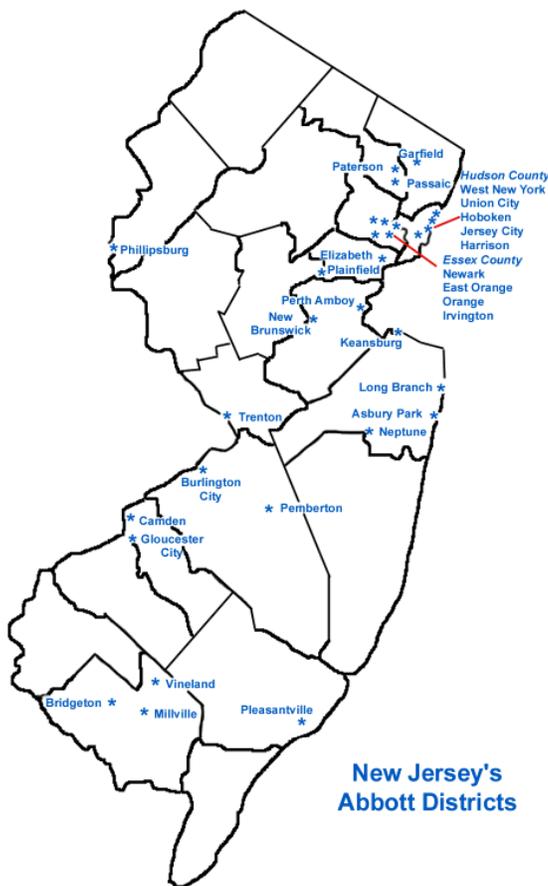
Outside of these suburban pockets of wealth, 15% of New Jersey children live in poverty, and 6% live in extreme poverty.⁴ Most of these children live in the state's urban areas, such as Newark, Paterson, Jersey City, Trenton, and Camden.

New Jersey provides for state-funded preschool in its most disadvantaged geographic areas. In 1996 the state began supporting preschool using Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA), part of its Comprehensive Educational Improvement and Financing Act (CEIFA).⁵ ECPA offers supports for preschool, as well as full-day kindergarten and other early childhood services, in 125 low-income school districts.⁶

In 1998 the New Jersey State Supreme Court took additional action on behalf of young children in the state's 30 most disadvantaged school districts (see the map at right).⁷ These districts serve about one-fourth of the school-aged children in New Jersey. With the goal of enabling children in low-income school districts to enter kindergarten with the same skills and abilities as children in the state's wealthier districts, the Court ruled that *all* three- and four-year-olds in those districts have access to a *high-quality* and *comprehensive* preschool education. This ruling came out of the long-running Court case *Abbott v. Burke*.

Abbott v. Burke

Abbott v. Burke began in 1970 as a New Jersey Supreme Court case (*Robinson v. Cahill*) over the constitutionality of the state's formula for public school funding. In 1981, the case – then called *Abbott v. Burke* – began to focus distinctly on the funding and supplemental program needs of the state's poorest or special needs school districts (referred to hereafter as the *Abbott* districts). Supplemental programs had the goal of providing services “over and above regular education” in the *Abbott* districts to eliminate learning disadvantages and improve academic achievement levels.⁸ The text box on the next page offers snapshots from the history of these court cases and the state's response to the Supreme Court's rulings.



As an historic whole, this series of cases has been significant for low-income children in New Jersey. The Supreme Court's rulings mandated unprecedented changes in the form of more parity in education funding and specific supplemental programs in the *Abbott* districts to assist disadvantaged students. These supplemental programs included whole school reform, full-day kindergarten, half-day preschool for three- and four-year-olds, and other supportive health and social services.

Abbott's Focus on High-Quality Preschool

Preschool was one of the supplemental programs the Court identified in 1998 (*Abbott V*) as necessary to ensure that children in the *Abbott* districts entered school ready to learn. The Court went a step beyond establishing a mandate for preschool; it mandated that preschool programs in the *Abbott* districts be *high quality* and defined the standards for quality programs.

The Court's standards gave New Jersey a significant push forward in terms of laying out what quality meant for

programs serving low-income children and in establishing the state's responsibility and authority for enforcing those standards. While nationally many states are showing a deepening commitment to preschool quality by laying out standards, accreditation requirements, and staff qualifications, only about one-third of states have the responsibility or authority to regulate those standards.⁹

In defining quality, the Court focused on six areas (see the text box on the next page). While this definition laid out what the state was responsible for in terms of quality programs, at the same time it created a number of challenges in making sure the

Snapshot History of *Abbott v. Burke*

1970 – *Robinson v. Cahill* lawsuit filed over the constitutionality of public school funding that relies heavily on property taxes. Legislature passed the Public School Education Act of 1975 to address funding issues.

1981 (*Abbott I*) – *Abbott v. Burke* suit filed to challenge the constitutionality of the 1975 Act as it applied in low-income school districts, saying it had actually increased disparities.

1990 (*Abbott II*) – New Jersey Supreme Court found the 1975 Act unconstitutional as it applied to state's 28 poorest districts (i.e. *Abbott* districts). The Court required new legislation and special programs and services in the *Abbott* districts. The legislature passed and amended the Quality Education Act of 1990.

1994 (*Abbott III*) – The 1990 Act was found unconstitutional in *Abbott* districts because it did not provide parity of educational spending and the state did not adequately address supplemental programs for disadvantaged students. In 1996 the legislature passed the Comprehensive Educational Improvement and Financing Act (CEIFA), which defined *Abbott* district supplemental programs – Demonstrably Effective Program Aid (DEPA) and Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA).

1996 (*Abbott IV*) – The Court found CEIFA unconstitutional in its application to the *Abbott* districts because it failed to provide sufficient funds. Also it found DEPA and ECPA were not based on a study of students' actual needs or costs of meeting those needs, and that facilities problems were not addressed.

1998 (*Abbott V*) – After a Remand proceeding to determine necessary supplemental programs, the Court ordered a series of entitlements for disadvantaged children, including whole school reform, full-day kindergarten, high-quality preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds to begin by September 1999, and a comprehensive state-managed and funded facilities program.

2000 (*Abbott VI*) – After a plaintiff challenge to the state's implementation of the 1998 ruling, the Court ruled the state had failed to meet educational standards set in 1998. The Court clarified preschool quality standards.

2001 (*Abbott VII*) – Plaintiffs appealed to the Court to revisit implementation issues and appoint a state "master" to monitor state progress. In an order in advance of its opinion, the Court denied the appointment of a master, but set a tight timeline for preschool plan submission, assessment, and approval.

Quality Preschool as Defined in *Abbott v. Burke*
(as identified in *Abbott V* and clarified in *Abbott VI*)

Substantive Standards

Specific substantive standards geared toward school readiness skill development.

Certification

A certified teacher and aide in every preschool classroom (both district- and community-based). Already-hired teachers without a college degree have four years to obtain certification and are to be evaluated annually. New teachers must be college graduates and have a limited time period to become certified. Additional funding must be made available to assist existing staff obtain a degree and certification if the current scholarship program proves insufficient.

Class Size

One certified teacher and an aide for every fifteen students.

Provider Contracts

School district has responsibility and authority for preschool programs. Contracts with community-based providers must include clear expectations, necessary supports, and accountability measures.

Facilities and Supplemental Program Funding

Adequate funding for space, facilities, supplies, teaching faculty, staff, and transportation needed to implement quality programs.

Community Outreach

Concerted school district outreach and enrollment efforts, with funding provided by the Department of Education if necessary.

necessary funding and infrastructure was in place to implement them. Specifically, these challenges existed:

Funding – Getting the state to provide the amount of money required per child to implement quality preschool programs. Also, providing the funding needed to compensate and retain qualified teachers and achieve appropriate facilities standards.

Facilities – Ensuring preschool facilities are available, and establishing facilities standards and quality.

Teacher Training – Putting in place a higher education infrastructure to meet quality standards. Tackling issues like availability, access, capacity, collaboration, recruitment, mentoring, and crediting.

Outreach and Collaboration – Informing parents about

preschool availability to achieve enrollment targets, and building public will for quality preschool. Ensuring that school districts collaborate with community-based providers and Head Start.

In recent years the *Abbott* case has offered an ongoing forum for monitoring the state's implementation of the *Abbott* programs and for addressing these and other concerns before the Court. Plaintiffs brought specific concerns about the inadequacy of the state's implementation back to the Supreme Court in 2000 and 2001 (*Abbott VI* and *VII*).

The Role of Research in *Abbott*

One of the most notable features of the *Abbott* case was the Supreme Court's explicit use of research to inform its rulings. Granted, the judicial system is set up for such a result with its deliberate procedures for presenting and weighing facts, testimony, and evidence. However, the use of preschool research in the *Abbott* case is particularly noteworthy because New Jersey's State Constitution – on which Supreme Court cases are typically argued and decided – does not address the topic of early care and education at all.

Early care and education research played a key role in the *Abbott* proceedings in at least two major ways:

1) *Determining supplemental programs.*

Superior Court remand proceedings held prior to *Abbott V* had a goal of determining what judicial relief was needed to address supplemental program and facilities improvements in the *Abbott* districts. These proceedings offered the opportunity to insert early care and education research directly and prominently into the decision making process.¹⁰

Both the plaintiffs and defendants (the state) submitted recommendations for preschool programs based on their review of early childhood research and expert advice. Both sides agreed on the importance of providing quality preschool; they differed in their recommendations for programs (e.g. half-day versus full-day preschool). The plaintiffs' case, led by the Education Law Center, featured, among many social science experts, the expertise and testimony of early childhood researcher Dr. Steven Barnett at the Center for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. Experts for both sides offered testimony during both the remand proceedings and before the Supreme Court.

The written version of these proceedings offers a compelling account of the significant role that research presented by both the plaintiffs and the state played in the Court's decisions. References to "empirical evidence," expert testimony, and lists of research results to support specific decisions are found throughout the Court's written opinions.

2) *Monitoring Abbott implementation.*

After the Court mandated *Abbott*-district preschool in 1998, research continued to play a significant role as a tool for monitoring *Abbott* implementation. Supported with funds from a consortium of *Abbott* school districts, private New Jersey and other foundations, and the U.S. Department of Education,¹¹ Dr. Steven Barnett and the Center for Early Education Research at Rutgers University continued to inform the Court, legislature, and administration of the state's progress on *Abbott* implementation.

Key Participants in *Abbott v. Burke*

Court

New Jersey Supreme Court, the state's highest court

Plaintiffs

Children in the *Abbott* districts represented by the *Education Law Center*, a Newark-based non-profit dedicated to pursuing equal educational opportunity on behalf of poor, minority children and children with disabilities.

Defendants

State Commissioners of Education (Fred Burke in 1981)

Researchers

Led by Dr. W. Steven Barnett, the *Center for Early Education Research* (CEER) at Rutgers University is dedicated to improving early childhood education and care for all children through research. CEER offers testimony in the ongoing *Abbott* cases and conducts research on *Abbott* implementation with a consortium of school districts.

Advocates

Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) – A nonprofit statewide child advocacy organization that acts as a non-partisan voice to improve the lives and living conditions of New Jersey's children. ACNJ acts as an amicus curiae (friend of the court).

Early Care and Education Coalition – A statewide coalition of over 40 individuals and organizations, led by ACNJ, representing every aspect of early care and education – advocates, researchers, preschool providers, educators, higher education administrators, school officials, and unions. It was founded in 1998 with the goal of developing comprehensive state policy on early care and education. The Coalition monitors implementation and offers recommendations in the ongoing *Abbott* cases.

The Center for Early Education Research (CEER) has issued two *Abbott* reports:

- (1) A 1999 report¹² on needs assessments CEER conducted in the *Abbott* districts to determine the needs of children and the capabilities of providers in those districts
- (2) A 2001 report¹³ with updated needs assessment data and an assessment of the state's implementation progress.

The 1999 report's findings that the quantity and quality of preschool programs in the *Abbott* districts was too low to meet the needs of children, played a significant role in *Abbott VI* and helped spur the Court to clarify preschool quality standards and to set specific deadlines. Release of the 2001 report and its impact, which found that the state had made little progress in providing quality preschool programs, is discussed in more detail in part two of this brief.

The Role of Advocacy in *Abbott*

Advocates played and continue to play a significant role in the *Abbott* cases. Notable participants have included the Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ), a statewide child advocacy organization, and the Early Care and Education Coalition, a coalition of over 40 individuals and organizations representing a full spectrum of early care and education interests.

ACNJ is a statewide nonprofit child advocacy organization with an overall vision of universally available preschool in the state's 602 public schools. For now, ACNJ now is focusing on getting preschool established in districts most in need. The organization's main role in the *Abbott* courtroom has been as an amicus curiae (friend of the court), providing testimony and recommendations. Outside the courtroom, ACNJ identifies and publicizes barriers to successful implementation, performs outreach and education to school districts, and has been a convener for those concerned about and dealing directly with *Abbott* implementation. In this capacity, ACNJ acts as the convening organization for the Early Care and Education Coalition.

The Early Care and Education Coalition came together around the 1998 *Abbott V* ruling and has been active since. The group's goal is the development of a comprehensive state policy on early childhood education. To that end, the group both identifies the critical elements of a long-term policy on early care and education for all New Jersey children, and sets principles and recommendations to guide *Abbott* implementation.

Parties affected by *Abbott* are diverse and so the coalition is diverse. It includes community-based providers, school administrators, educators, unions, and researchers, with Dr. Barnett and CEER and the Education Law Center as members. The coalition has been challenged by the need to present a unified voice within the state on *Abbott* and so has been challenged to come to agreement on its policy positions, recommendations, and advocacy tactics. The coalition participates in *Abbott* by advising the plaintiffs' case and providing testimony. Their work was instrumental in the Court's articulation of *Abbott* preschool quality standards in 2000. Outside the courtroom it engages in policy advocacy with the Department of Education and the legislature, holds press conferences, works with the media, and holds community forums.

PART TWO: A NEW JERSEY CASE STUDY IN COLLABORATION

While the discussion above shows the distinct and important roles that researchers and advocates played and continue to play in *Abbott*, what is also unique here is how they worked together. Their common goal of achieving a comprehensive and quality early care and education system in New Jersey forged a natural relationship that they built on.

Broadly speaking, New Jersey researchers (Center for Early Education Research (CEER)) and advocates (Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) and the Early Care and Education Coalition) used *strategic communications* as their medium for collaboration.

Overall Collaborative Communications Strategy on *Abbott*

Strategic communications is a deliberate plan or tactics for using communications as a channel for achieving certain results.¹⁴ Strategic communications is a central concern for advocates and researchers on *Abbott* because communications need to reach and have an impact on many audiences in order to meet the ultimate goal of achieving quality preschool.

The Supreme Court is only one target audience for communications about *Abbott*, albeit an important one. However, the Court's rulings need to be supported adequately to ensure that *Abbott* preschools are of sufficient quality to close school readiness gaps. This makes the New Jersey Administration and Legislature key audiences for communications efforts because they are charged with providing sufficient funding, leadership, and policies on *Abbott*.

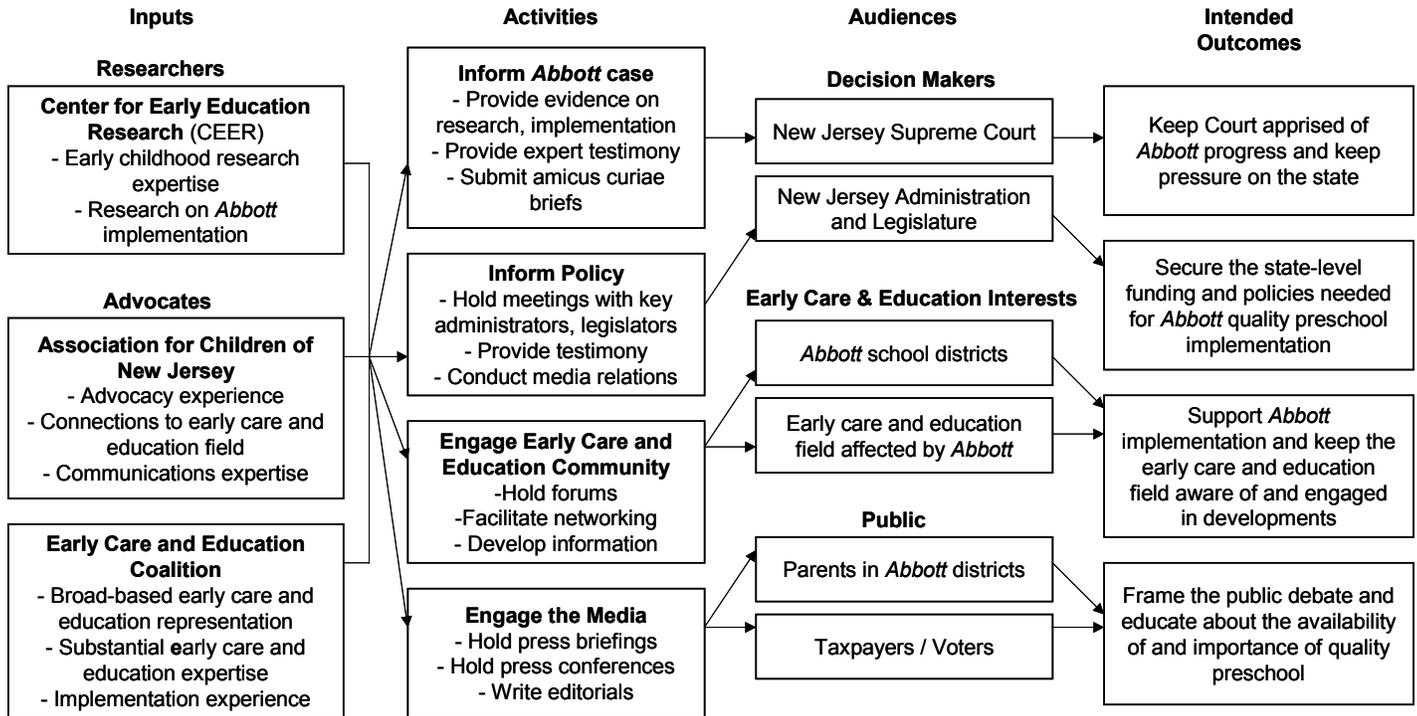
In addition, *Abbott* requires engagement of those affected by and involved in implementation, namely school districts, providers, and others in the early care and education field. Ultimately they are responsible for implementation and need to have an important voice in it, particularly about the supports they need to provide high-quality preschool.

Finally, the public is an audience. Parents with three- and four-year-olds eligible for preschool need to know about the *Abbott* programs. In addition, public will need to be built for quality preschool so that taxpayers and voters will demand action from their policymakers.

The figure on the next page presents the collaborative communications strategy New Jersey advocates and researchers used and continue to use to reach these audiences about *Abbott*. While it is represented as linear, the strategy is not. It is "dynamic" and specific components are brought into play when the situation calls for it (e.g. when *Abbott* is in front of the Court, or the Legislature is debating the state budget).

Overall Communications Strategy for *Abbott v. Burke*

COMMON GOAL: A quality and comprehensive preschool system in New Jersey's most disadvantaged districts.



The Strategy in Action: A Collaborative Press Conference

In the spring and summer of 2001 New Jersey researchers and advocates put a piece of their overall communications strategy into action. The Center for Early Education Research (CEER) had recently completed their second report on *Abbott* implementation and was getting ready to release it publicly. At the same time, as *Abbott VII* approached, advocates were getting ready to release another set of recommendations to the Court and the state on *Abbott* implementation.

The Decision to Collaborate. Encouraged by their foundation officer at the Schumann Fund for New Jersey and advised by a communications expert at the Communications Consortium Media Center in Washington D.C., ACNJ, CEER, and the Early Care and Education Coalition determined that a joint release of the report and recommendations would be a more effective approach than their separate release. This decision was based in part on the fact that the two pieces of information directly complemented one another. Advocates used CEER's findings as one basis for their recommendations.

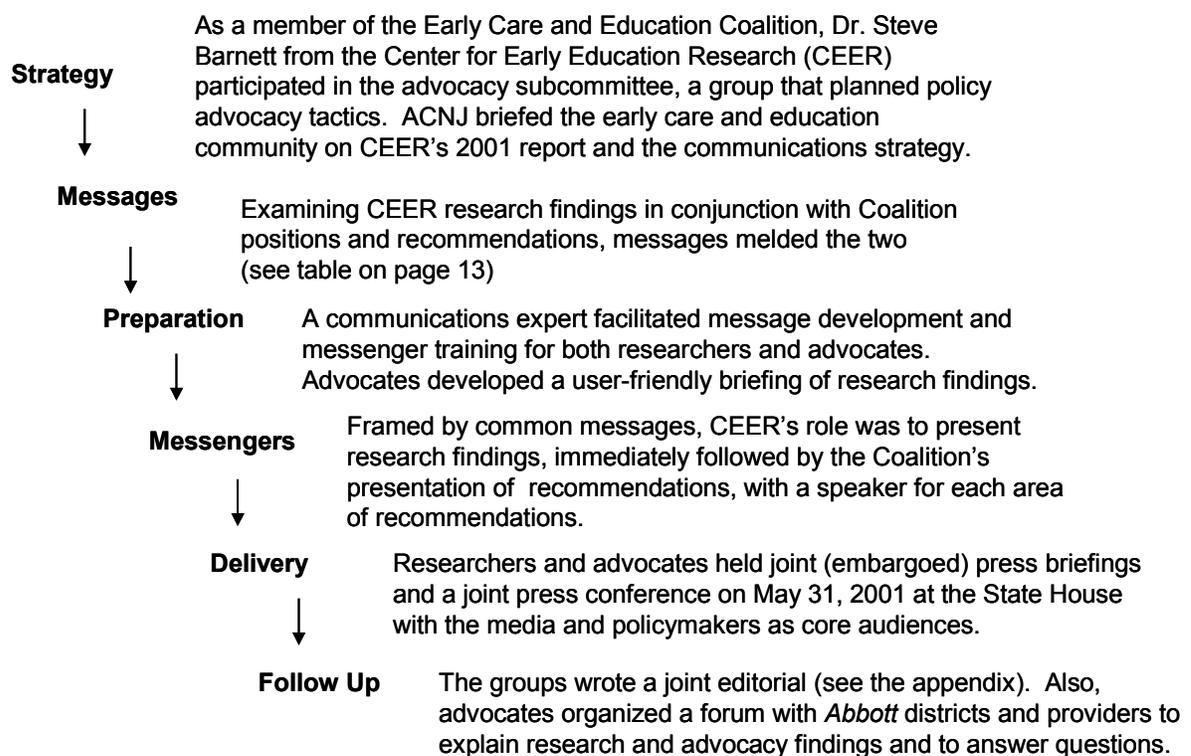
This decision was also based on prior experience around the release of CEER's 1999 report on *Abbott* implementation. This first report found that the quantity and quality of preschool programs in the *Abbott* districts was too low to meet the needs of children. While the report's intent was not to place blame on preschool providers, when it was released, many providers, especially in the *Abbott* districts, were taken aback by what they perceived to be the messages behind the findings – that they were to blame for the study's findings on quality.

This interpretation of findings from the first report drew a backlash of discontent from many in New Jersey’s early care and education community and ultimately may have affected the report’s impact on the media, public, and policymakers. Media accounts on the report featured mixed commentary on the findings from the early care and education community. The lack of a strong and unified provider backing made it difficult to get the report’s recommendations through to the administration and legislature. The joint research-advocacy release of the second CEER report in 2001 was meant to avoid that outcome a second time.

The Press Conference. Advocates and researchers used a press conference at the New Jersey State House as their main mechanism for collaboration. Their aim was to engage the media as a way of informing the public and the state about what was and was not happening in *Abbott* districts and what should be done as a result.

Advocates and researchers worked together at all steps leading up to and following the press conference, which took place on May 31, 2001. The figure below illustrates the steps involved in the collaboration.

Research-Advocacy Collaboration on the 2001 Press Conference



In preparation for the event advocates consulted with New Jersey’s larger early care and education community about the findings in the second report, the collaborative communications strategy, and the press conference messages. This process informed the messages developed and language used. For example, the group together identified metaphors to use (e.g. pole vaulting) that showed while things *had* improved in the *Abbott* districts, there was still a ways to go and therefore more resources were needed.

To implement the strategy, a few days before the event the researchers and advocates briefed the press together (using embargoed information). They then shared the stage at the State House press conference, with Dr. Barnett from CEER first presenting research findings and then advocates relaying recommendations about funding, facilities, training, and community outreach.

Follow-up steps to the event included writing a joint editorial to again get out the core messages in the media, and a community forum for the larger early care and education community to ensure the report's messages were being interpreted accurately.

Press Conference Outcomes. Press conference outcomes can be examined for the multiple players and target audiences involved.

Advocates - ACNJ, and the Early Care and Education Coalition

Benefits from the collaborative press conference included less divisiveness among advocates and a more unified provider reaction to the second report. The involvement of the provider community in the preparation, implementation, and follow-up to the press conference was successful in limiting misinterpretations of findings. The collaboration with CEER also increased credibility for the advocates' recommendations because they were connected directly to CEER research. Finally, the collaboration with CEER helped to cement a collaborative relationship that will sustain over the long term.

Researchers – Center for Early Education Research (CEER)

Researchers gained capacity in how to do strategic communications, better relationships with the New Jersey provider community, and greater media coverage for the report than would have been generated with a solo press release. Dr. Barnett from CEER commented, "This was by far the most sophisticated release we have ever done."¹⁵

Media – The deliberate strategy leading up to the press event and then the event itself generated coverage in most of New Jersey's major daily newspapers.¹⁶ The follow-up op-ed ran in at least five of these dailies. According to one communications expert at ACNJ, the media for the most part used their intended framing and incorporated the research findings accurately into the coverage. Setting up question-and-answer sessions with journalists before the press conference helped to ensure this result. In fact, on the day of the press conference when the administration challenged the report's findings, reporters briefed earlier were able to say, "No, it's not wrong, have you read the report?"

Policymakers - Recommendations relayed at the press conference require the New Jersey Administration and Legislature to take action in the *Abbott* districts. The extent to which the press conference generated this action has been mixed (discussed more in the table on page 13). On another level, the press conference was intended to keep the state accountable on the *Abbott* decision and make sure that public attention on the issue did not wane. To that extent, the media coverage generated by the press conference and the success of the op-ed's placement (which was targeted specifically to policymakers) were positive indicators of success.

PART THREE: LESSONS ON EFFECTIVE RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY COLLABORATION

Below are three transferable lessons, based on the New Jersey case study, about bridging research and advocacy and using strategic communications as the medium for doing so. The New Jersey experience provides illustration of what these lessons look like when applied.

1) Negotiate Researcher and Advocate Roles

While researchers and advocates often work on the same issues, target the same audiences, and can derive mutual benefit from one another, barriers can exist to their effective collaboration. For example, some researchers fear that a visible relationship with advocates will negatively impact their perceived impartiality, particularly with decision makers and academic and research colleagues. At the same time, advocates worry about their own image with researchers who do not have the trust of the communities and stakeholders they serve or represent.

In New Jersey researchers and advocates collaborated on all aspects of strategic communications, from strategy development to message delivery and follow up. Their affiliation was public and they delivered joint messages together (in the same place and at the same time). This relationship was not problematic because the researchers and advocates, assisted by their foundation officer at the Schumann Fund for New Jersey, negotiated their respective roles up front and eliminated any apprehension about the relationship. The table below outlines the roles, tasks, and value of the collaborative relationship established between New Jersey researchers and advocates.

Negotiated Roles in New Jersey Researcher and Advocate Collaboration

	Researchers	Advocates
Overall Roles	Inform advocates and <i>all</i> interested parties about what is best for children in the <i>Abbott</i> districts based on accumulated evidence and a sound research base.	Shape and implement an advocacy agenda based on what the research and evidence base says.
Tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conduct research - Advise advocates - Develop research-based recommendations - Inform policymakers and advocates of research findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contribute experience to the research knowledge base - Contribute advocacy savvy - Develop recommendations based on research - Engage in policy advocacy
Value of Collaborative Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identification of the right research questions - Better research access - Better utilization of research findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to build a strong and convincing advocacy case based on sound research and established expertise.

Overall Roles. When their collaboration started, both researchers and advocates made their expectations known up front. Researchers at CEER stated that they wanted their role to be one of informing both advocates *and* the State and any interested party about what was best for children in the *Abbott* districts based on evidence and a research base. At the same time, advocates stated they wanted to shape the advocacy agenda based on what the research and evidence said about what was and was not in the best interests of children. This upfront negotiation of complementary roles made both parties comfortable and allowed them to maintain their respective areas of professional expertise. Researchers did not become advocates and advocates did not become researchers. Researchers remained objective and provided information. Advocates attached an action agenda to research information.

Tasks. The tasks that researchers and advocates took on in the collaboration followed the patterns established by their negotiated roles. CEER conducted research in the *Abbott* districts. CEER also became a member of the Early Care and Education Coalition and as part of the Coalition offered information and recommendations to advocates that were based on the research findings. Advocates led the Coalition and used the research and their own experience to form an advocacy agenda. These roles were also maintained during the May 2001 press conference. CEER reported exclusively on research results and the Early Care and Education Coalition reported on coalition experience and advocacy recommendations.

Value of the Relationship. Both researchers and advocates gained value from the collaboration. According to Dr. Barnett at CEER, any researchers who engage in policy work are confronted with two key questions: (1) Will the information be useful? and (2) Will the information be used? His collaboration with ACNJ and the Coalition ensured that the research questions he went after were questions somebody wanted the answers to. In addition, because they were the “right” questions, he knew the answers would undoubtedly get used. Another benefit of this relationship is that it facilitated trust and access in the *Abbott* districts CEER was studying.

Likewise, advocates found the relationship with Dr. Barnett and CEER to be valuable. His participation in the Coalition diversified the membership, added credibility to the group, and gave the group direct access to reliable and frequent data on what was happening in the *Abbott* districts. In addition, the relationship offered advocates the opportunity to provide input on the nature of the research in *Abbott* districts – to get at the most relevant questions of interest to both advocates and policymakers.

2) Develop Joint Messages

Many incentives exist for creating messages that meld research with advocacy. Research can make advocacy messages credible and convincing. “When converted into balanced, reliable information, research defining a policy problem can influence [decision makers] and can help mobilize and sustain grassroots activism.”¹⁷

For their joint press conference, New Jersey researchers and advocates teamed up to build joint messages about the supports needed for quality preschool in New Jersey. They bridged CEER’s research in the *Abbott* districts with the Coalition’s broad-based knowledge of the issues and how they should be addressed.

The table below places side-by-side the research findings from CEER's 2001 research report on *Abbott* implementation, with the advocacy recommendations proposed. This linking formed the core messages used in both the May 2001 press conference and the follow up June 2001 editorial (included as an appendix).

Joint Research and Advocacy Messages on Necessary Preschool Supports

	May 2001 CEER Research Findings	May 2001 ECE Coalition Recommendations	Indicators of Message Effectiveness
Overall Progress and Supports	Most young children are still left behind. State preschool policy has been to try to create the appearance of compliance with the Court, while minimizing state spending and continuing to treat early education as little more than baby-sitting.	<p>"We're upset, we're dismayed, we're disappointed." Another year has been wasted for children who desperately need these programs.</p> <p><i>A special commissioner to supervise preschool programs in the Abbott districts</i></p>	<p>The state defended its record and released its own report on August 1, 2001, conducted by Westat.</p> <p>In an advance opinion on <i>Abbott VII</i>, the Supreme Court said it would <u>not</u> mandate a special commissioner appointment.</p>
Funding	Costs must take into account a reduced class size, wrap-around child care, a fifty-week school year, nutrition, health, and social services. Costs for one year of full-day preschool are between \$9,000 and \$14,000 per pupil. Costs for quality preschool programs are between \$12,000 and \$14,000.	<p>It is time to move away from a funding figure based on what the state is willing to pay, to one that reflects the true cost of high quality, well-planned education.</p> <p><i>An immediate increase in preschool funding and more realistic budgeting</i></p>	<p>The state submitted a plan to the Supreme Court on September 25, 2001 saying it would examine each preschool's needs and determine funding based on needs.</p> <p><i>Abbott</i> districts requested \$600 million in new plans submitted in late 2001. Overall state budget shortfalls will impact actual funding.</p>
Facilities	Many classrooms have indoor space problems and outdoor play areas have safety hazards that could result in serious injury.	<p>The state's response to meeting the facilities needs of the early childhood community has been inadequate on all levels.</p> <p><i>A standard for preschool facilities that ensures quality rather than simply accommodates boosted enrollment</i></p>	<p>The state has not responded on the standards issue. In 2000 the legislature appropriated \$12 billion for facilities, about half of which is designated for the <i>Abbott</i> districts. There has been little guidance, however, on how to address facilities issues for quality preschool.</p>
Teacher Training	Only 15% of classes studied provided good support for child development. Teachers scored high on items measuring morning greetings and departure times and score lower on nap, toileting and safety practices, and low across all items measuring materials for activities like art, music, science, and math.	<p>High quality early childhood programs require well-trained teachers. The existing higher educational system is inadequate to meet training needs.</p> <p><i>An incentive fund to help preschool teachers meet new education requirements and improve classroom quality</i></p>	<p>On the eve of the report's release, Acting Governor DiFrancesco announced the state would provide a \$5 million package of incentives, including a \$3500 first-year bonus, in hopes of recruiting 400 new preschool teachers.</p>
Outreach and Collaboration	Far less than half of 60,000 eligible children are in <i>Abbott</i> -funded classes. Data indicate no progress toward increased enrollment of 4-year-olds, and only a few percentage point increase for 3-year-olds.	<p>A significant number of children are left unserved.</p> <p><i>A realistic plan to enroll all children in high-quality programs within a specified number of years that will end legal battles</i></p>	<p>The state submitted a plan to the Supreme Court on September 25, 2001 saying it would examine each preschool's needs and determine funding based on needs.</p>

The last column of the table provides select indicators of the effectiveness of these messages based on target audience reactions. Fundamentally the messages held the New Jersey Administration and Legislature responsible for action in the *Abbott* districts. The extent to which they have been successful at that level has been mixed. Those involved cite the political viability of getting recommended changes instituted under the administration at the time as the main factor in their mixed success.¹⁸

At the same time, these messages kept the state “on its toes” and kept a placeholder for possible future state action. As one Early Care and Education Coalition member said, “I think we’ve laid good groundwork for the future. With a new governor and a new legislature coming in, and the process of implementation in the *Abbott* districts, the groundwork has been laid.” Another Coalition member agreed: “All of this advocacy was done for the future when the political situation is more viable.”¹⁹ That prediction, in fact, began to play out in early 2002. After taking office in January, Governor McGreevey told the Supreme Court that he would abide by the Court’s *Abbott* rulings and created a new office to coordinate the state’s efforts in the *Abbott* districts. He appointed a former Democratic state legislator and ECE Coalition member to head that office.

The press conference and messages from it also ensured that when the state released its report on *Abbott* implementation two months after the event, it had to operate within the message framing that was already established with this event. The state’s message of “look at how much better we’re doing” was tempered by the earlier CEER-Coalition message of “look at how much better you still need to do.”

3) Choose Persuasive Messenger Roles

Identifying the right sources for delivering messages is critical. Good messages need to be delivered by sources the audiences trust and find persuasive.

The table below generalizes assets and drawbacks of researchers and advocates as messengers. These characteristics may change depending on the audiences involved.

Researcher and Advocates as Messengers: Assets and Drawbacks

	Assets as Messengers	Drawbacks as Messengers
Researchers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seen as credible and qualified to make judgments - Convey objectivity backed by methodology - Seen as unbiased, nonpartisan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have difficulty translating research into concise messages understood by lay audiences - Lack experience in strategic communications to multiple audiences - May be unknown by many target audiences
Advocates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Garner public trust and admiration - Are inspirational - Have a proven public track record - Have communications experience - Can connect to and have contacts with multiple audiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - May be seen as biased and partisan - Can be seen as either too soft or too extreme - Can make issues and messages more complex than they need to be

When researchers and advocates share common goals and messages, building on one another's assets as messengers and minimizing weaknesses makes sense. The New Jersey experience illustrates how to do this.

Determine who has clout with the audience. In New Jersey, researchers added perceived objectivity and consequently clout to the delivery of joint messages, particularly with decision makers and the media. Therefore having Dr. Barnett as a speaker during the press conference was critical. As one Early Care and Education Coalition member said, "Steve [Barnett] is well-known and well-respected...so the cachet of having him associated with us [the Coalition] raises the credibility of the group."²⁰

It is important to note, however, that researchers may not have this same effect with all audiences. Advocates have more experience, credibility, and trust with certain audiences. For example, in New Jersey this issue arose around the release of CEER's 1999 report on *Abbott* implementation, which was not done at the same level of collaboration with advocates as the 2001 report. As a result, some early care and education providers interpreted the first reports' findings negatively and grew distrustful of the researchers.

The joint release of the second report helped to alleviate the risk of that outcome a second time. The presence of advocates as speakers at the joint press conference was critical because it helped mitigate potential negative reactions from the early care and education community. In addition, to further ensure the report was not being misinterpreted, ACNJ convened a follow-up forum to the press conference with over 200 attendees to give those with questions or concerns about the report the opportunity to discuss them directly with Dr. Barnett. ACNJ moderated the discussion and played a big role in bringing the early care and education community to the table. The consensus after the forum was that this approach worked and essentially "cleared the air."

Build on differing areas of expertise. In addition to making the collaborative relationship efficient, making sure both parties capitalize on their different areas of expertise can lead to cross training and skill building. For example, advocates are generally experienced in the art of strategic communications, often more so than researchers. In New Jersey, ACNJ advocates lent their media outreach, press conference, message development, and message delivery expertise to the collaborative relationship. As a result, CEER walked away from the experience having gained more sophistication and capacity in strategic communications – capacity that could be used later either within or outside of the collaborative relationship.

SUMMARY

The New Jersey case study illustrates how researchers and advocates can work together effectively, and how collaboration can be comfortable, productive, and have mutual benefit. Below are summary points for the three lessons the New Jersey experience offers about effective research and advocacy collaboration in strategic communications.

Lesson	Summary Points
1) Negotiate Researcher and Advocate Roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Define roles up front to eliminate any apprehension about the collaborative relationship.- Forge collaborations that allow researchers to be researchers and advocates to be advocates. Collaborations that force a crossing of traditional role boundaries invite difficulties and apprehension.- Base assigned tasks on negotiated roles and build on the separate strengths of researchers and advocates.- Ensure the collaborative relationship will yield mutual benefit. Reframe relationships that do not.
2) Build Joint Messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Create messages together to ensure that information is accurate and acceptable to both parties.- Link research with advocacy messages when possible to make them credible and convincing.- Vet both the nature of the collaborative relationship and messages developed with stakeholders in order to avoid misinterpretations.
3) Choose Persuasive Messengers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Consider the audience and weigh the advantages and disadvantages of using researchers and advocates as messengers. Choose strategically.- Remember that researchers and advocates are not the right messengers for all audiences. Researchers may be more persuasive with decision makers, but other audiences may trust them less.- Bring advocacy expertise in strategic communications to the table, especially in collaborations with researchers.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Reid, E. (2001). Building a policy voice for children through the nonprofit sector. In C. DeVita & R. Mosher-Williams (Eds.), *Who speaks for America's children?* (pp. 105-133). Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, p.107.
- ² Bonk, K., Griggs, H., & Tines, E. (1999). *Strategic communications for nonprofits*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- ³ DeNavas-Walt, C., Cleveland, R., & Roemer, M. (2001). *Money income in the United States: 2000*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce.
- ⁴ Extreme poverty is defined as income below 50% of the Federal Poverty Level. Annie E. Casey Foundation (2001). *The 2001 Kids Count data book*. Baltimore, MD: Author.
- ⁵ Mitchell, A. (2001). *Prekindergarten programs in the states: Trends and issues*. Climax, NY: Author.
- ⁶ Administration for Children and Families (2000). Improving services for children in working families. Retrieved December 3, 2001 from <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/ofa/ngachn/child~24.htm>.
- ⁷ Map is copied from the Education Law Center Web site. Retrieved December 9, 2001 from http://www.edlawcenter.org/public_html/map/abbott_map.html.
- ⁸ *Abbott v. Burke*, 153 N.J. 480, 710 A.2d 450 (1998). Ed. Law Rep. 258.
- ⁹ Mitchell, A. (2001). *Prekindergarten programs in the states: Trends and issues*. Climax, NY: Author.
- ¹⁰ Remand proceedings took place in the Superior Court, Chancery Division.
- ¹¹ New Jersey funders included the Schumann Fund for New Jersey, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Fund for New Jersey, and Prudential Foundation. Other foundations included the Carnegie Corporation of New York and David and Lucile Packard Foundation.
- ¹² Barnett, W.S., Tarr, J., & Frede, E. (1999). *Children's educational needs and community capacity in the Abbott districts*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Early Education Research.
- ¹³ Barnett, W.S., Tarr, J., Lamy, C., & Frede, E. (2001). *Fragile lives, shattered dreams: A report on implementation of preschool education in New Jersey's Abbott districts*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Early Education Research.
- ¹⁴ Bonk, K., Griggs, H., & Tines, E. (1999). *Strategic communications for nonprofits*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- ¹⁵ Dr. Steve Barnett interview, January 2002.
- ¹⁶ Daily newspapers included *The New York Times*, *Star-Ledger* (statewide), *The Times* (Trenton), *Asbury Park Press*, *The Inquirer* (Philadelphia), *The Record* (Bergen-Hackensack), *The Press* (Atlantic City), *The Tribune* (Central New Jersey).
- ¹⁷ Reid, E. (2001). Building a policy voice for children through the nonprofit sector. In C. DeVita & R. Mosher-Williams (Eds.), *Who speaks for America's children?* (pp. 105-133). Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, p.124.
- ¹⁸ *Abbott V, VI, and VII* were decided under the Christine Todd Whitman and Donald DiFrancesco administrations.
- ¹⁹ Early Care and Education Coalition member interviews, December 2001.
- ²⁰ Early Care and Education Coalition interview, December 2001.

BACKGROUND AND METHODS

This brief was developed as a product of the Early Care and Education Collaborative, a multi-year project of six state-based child advocacy organizations and five national organizations working on early care and education issues. The project's purpose is to use strategic communications and public education as a means for increasing the supply and the quality of early care and education investments in six states. The Communications Consortium Media Center in Washington D.C. coordinates the Collaborative. Harvard Family Research Project is its evaluator.

The Collaborative aims to share "lessons learned" on this unique partnership with the broader early care and education community. This brief was commissioned with that aim in mind.

Methods and data sources used to develop this brief include:

Document Review

Key documents were content analyzed to capture the New Jersey data and experience, lessons learned, and outcomes. Documents include the Center for Early Education Research's reports, court documents from *Abbott v. Burke IV, V, VI, and VII*, media coverage related to the *Abbott v. Burke* case from September 2000 through December 2001 (including specific coverage of the May 2001 CEER-Early Care and Education Coalition press conference), Association for Children of New Jersey documents related to *Abbott*, and Early Care and Education Coalition position papers and press releases.

Literature Review

A literature review for the purpose of identifying and bringing in experience and knowledge from others who have tackled and written about early care and education issues, researcher-advocate collaboration, and strategic communications, informed the brief's findings.

Key Informant Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key players in the New Jersey research-advocacy collaboration. They included members of the ACNJ staff, representatives of the Early Care and Education Coalition, and the Center for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. An interview was also conducted with the communications expert from the Communications Consortium Media Center who advised New Jersey researchers and advocates.

APPENDIX

Getting Preschool Right in New Jersey *The Times*, Monday, June 11, 2001

By W. Steven Barnett and Cecilia Zalkind

Almost exactly three years ago, the New Jersey Supreme Court directed the state to ensure all children in 30 of the state's most disadvantaged school districts receive a well-planned, high-quality preschool education. The court recognized that unless these children could enter school ready to learn, they had little hope of benefiting from reforms in Grades K-12.

Unfortunately, an evaluation of the state's implementation of that court order by Rutgers University's Center for Early Education Research (CEER) shows the state has disregarded the rights of its most fragile, most vulnerable residents, and shattered their dreams for a better future by refusing to provide the high quality education to which they are entitled.

This week, Education Commissioner Vito A. Gagliardi continued the state's strategy of delay and deny. In April, an administrative law judge recommended the state Department of Education improve preschool assessment and funding and directed the department to issue a preschool curriculum by June 15. But Gagliardi has decided the state can wait until August 2002, precluding any improvements for the upcoming school year and wasting more than a year in the lives of these already disadvantaged children.

The continued delay is especially dismaying in light of scientific evidence from many sources indicating that much of the large education gap between rich and poor, and cities and suburbs could be closed if disadvantaged children began school on par with their more advantaged peers.

Assessments of kindergarten children in the Abbott districts in the 1999-2000 school year found that they were well behind the national average. They are even further behind their suburban peers. Data from several years show that they begin school as much as 18 months behind in language and other abilities vital for school success.

Research demonstrates that intensive, high-quality preschool education can prevent much of the problem, greatly reducing the achievement gap at school entry.

Yet a follow-up CEER study finds that in three years, the state has made no real progress in providing high-quality preschool education in the Abbott districts. Far less than half the 60,000 eligible children are in classes funded under Abbott.

Equally outrageous is the fact that state funding and other support for those classes is so limited that it often results in educational quality too low to achieve the intended goals. Just 15 percent of classrooms of the classrooms CEER studied provide good support for child development. We worry that some programs may even be harmful. The message that the state sends to these children is that they are not important to the adults who are responsible for their care and education.

Those who staff these programs now should not be blamed for the problems. Indeed, many work long hours at short pay. They provide valuable services to children and families under difficult conditions. However, the state Supreme Court substantially raised the bar for quality, and existing programs are being asked to perform a virtually impossible task because the state refuses to give them the resources required.

While state officials have been forced to make some efforts and invest millions of tax dollars, their efforts continue to fall short of what is needed. Too often the state's steps seek to create a facade of compliance with little or no money to back them up. Now, Gagliardi seems poised to continue this sorry tradition.

We encourage the state to take another look at the consequences of its actions, to recognize the opportunity, and obligation, the state has to provide

these children with educational opportunity. We urge Acting Gov. Donald T. DiFrancesco and Gagliardi to embrace recommendations endorsed by a statewide coalition of educators, higher education administrators, school officials, preschool providers, and advocates for children. This Coalition for Early Care and Education, led by the Association for Children of New Jersey, urgently requests:

- A special commissioner to supervise preschool programs in the Abbott districts.
- An immediate increase in preschool funding and more realistic budgeting.
- An incentive fund to help preschool teachers meet new education requirements and improve classroom quality.
- A standard for preschool facilities that ensures quality rather than simply accommodates boosted enrollment.
- A realistic plan to enroll all children in high-quality programs within a specified number of years worked out with the plaintiffs that ends the legal battles.

These steps are not too complicated; they are not too expensive. High quality preschool education for disadvantaged children is sound policy for all the state's citizens. Taxpayers are losing money now because these disadvantaged children continue to enter school unable to take advantage of education reforms made in the K-12 program. Unless this state gets preschool right, we will fail these children and forfeit our common future. Acting Gov. DiFrancesco can set things right and firmly establish his legacy as a hero to both this state's children and taxpayers.

W. Steven Barnett is director of Rutgers University's Center for Early Education Research. Cecilia Zalkind is Executive Director of the Association for Children of New Jersey.