



NEW JERSEY HEAD START AND THE VISION FOR UNIVERSAL PRE-K

The New Jersey Head Start Association (NJHSA) and its member agencies have been an integral part of the State's system of early childhood education for over 55 years. Our more than 200 centers statewide provide children with foundational learning experiences, along with comprehensive supports to meet their needs and those of their families, in safe and healthy learning environments.

Proudly, New Jersey is at the forefront of ensuring that our children benefit from a strong school readiness foundation. Governor Phil Murphy has a vision of Universal Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) for all children in our State. In his words, *"Investing in early childhood education lays the foundation for a bright future for our early learners."* (nj.gov). Aligned with this vision, and with the goals of the Biden-Harris American Families Plan, NJHSA is committed to working in full partnership with all stakeholders --- the Governor, the State Department of Education (DOE), our local school districts, and other service providers --- to create the highest quality system of services for our children.

The Governor's Universal Pre-K strategic plan is led by the NJ DOE. While this plan stresses the importance of involving Head Start and early care providers in Pre-K expansion as essential resources in a mixed delivery system of services, NJHSA is working diligently to address a number of significant challenges to achieving this critical goal, issues we address in detail in this white paper.

HEAD START'S ROLE IN UNIVERSAL PRE-K EXPANSION

Head Start is a federally funded, community-based early education program that gives young children ages 0-5 from at-risk backgrounds the skills they need to be successful in school and in life. Significantly, it is the only coordinated preschool system in the country that serves three- and four-year-old children. With this nationally recognized model of high-quality education, we have collaborated closely for many years with former Abbott school districts serving New Jersey's three- and four-year old children in a mixed delivery system of preschool services.

Extensive, independent research into the impact of Head Start throughout its history clearly demonstrates that, *"children who attend Head Start have enhanced physical health, improved social skills, and increased math, language, and literacy skills that better prepare them for Kindergarten and school"* (Source: National Head Start Association, July 2021).

Today, Head Start programs in our state reach a total of 14,475 eligible children ages 0-3 (Early Head Start) and 3-5 (Head Start) including our most vulnerable children who are without homes, experiencing disabilities, and living in the foster care system. We deliver a comprehensive continuum of high-quality school readiness, education, health (including mental and oral health), and family support services. Many Head Start agencies also provide before and aftercare, enabling parents to work or pursue job training or educational advancement. And yet today, Head Start only reaches about one out of every three eligible children, leaving out significant numbers of Hispanic and Black children who live in neighborhoods where funding is insufficient to meet the need. Further, while Head Start is an integral part of the fabric of our communities and many of our staff members live in those communities, resources to pay them are so limited that many must work multiple jobs to provide for their own families.

The American Families Plan for Universal Pre-K prioritizes preschool of the highest quality with a full range of services to families in high-need communities as well as support for educators seeking to earn a bachelor's degree or other early childhood education credential. Head Start programs meet or exceed all of these requirements. In fact, a number of states leading the charge for high quality Universal Pre-K (Washington State, West Virginia, Michigan, Alabama, Iowa, Minnesota, Oregon) are placing Head Start programs at the heart of their efforts, with several allocating state funding directly to Head Start provider agencies.

NJHSA'S VALUES & STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Despite the intentions of the NJ Supreme Court in the Abbott v. Burke decisions, our system of state-funded preschool education continues to be hampered by significant structural inequities that prevent the optimal delivery of high-quality education to all of our early learners. As the New Jersey Department of Education works to develop a ten-year preschool roadmap, NJHSA therefore deems it essential that critical barriers --- namely those that negatively impact our capacity to ensure high quality education, workforce parity, vibrant learning environments, and the equitable allocation of resources --- be directly addressed in any future plans for Pre-K expansion.

1. New Jersey's system of early childhood education does not currently provide equitable access to the best quality services for all of our children.

NJHSA members are united in our passion for overcoming racial inequities and the destructive forces of poverty. We believe that equity can only be achieved when all preschool children, regardless of where they go to school, have access to the same high-quality learning experience wrapped in comprehensive services designed to improve the quality of life for the whole family.

Our strategic priorities therefore focus on:

- ✓ Advocating for increased federal and state funding and other resources, including direct funding for Head Start, and the full utilization of Head Start services to reach underserved low-income children and children of color
- ✓ Instituting a State mandate for Head Start's engagement as an essential partner in the design and implementation of New Jersey's ten-year roadmap and all future preschool planning
- ✓ Ensuring equal access among providers to state-funded early childhood education services for all eligible children available through local school districts, including Title I funds intended to support at-risk children served by Head Start
- ✓ Mandating automatic pre-school eligibility and referral to Head Start for all of New Jersey's vulnerable children, including those with disabilities, in foster care, in kinship care, or experiencing homelessness
- ✓ Extending the per-child funding model to share resources equitably with Head Start providers for case management, transportation, and other supportive services to which vulnerable children and families are categorically eligible
- ✓ Paying close attention to existing collaborative partnerships between local school districts and community preschool providers throughout our communities and striving to replicate approaches that are proving effective for boosting enrollment, supporting staff development, enhancing family services, and improving overall quality.

2. The current allocation of preschool resources throughout New Jersey does not effectively ensure pay equity, which is fundamental to building a highly qualified early learning workforce

The quality of preschool education in our State depends directly upon the qualifications, skills, dedication, and commitment of our teachers and early learning staff. Head Start and partnering providers delivering state-funded preschool must be state-certified and perform the same duties as district preschool teachers. Although the intent of the New Jersey Supreme Court in Abbott—and subsequent DOE regulations—require parity between preschool programs, such parity is rarely achieved. With far fewer dollars than our public-school partners for salaries and benefits, our ability to hire and retain qualified staff remains extremely challenging. This has, of course, become even more problematic since the

onslaught of COVID-19 as existing and potential employees now have competing job opportunities including employment with school districts directly engaged in preschool expansion, many of which are working to increase pay rates for teachers.

We therefore advocate for an early education system in which:

- ✓ Head Start and other community-based providers receive per-pupil reimbursement for preschool services comparable to district preschool programs. This is essential to achieving equity in salaries and benefits for all teachers and staff delivering similar services
- ✓ Sufficient time and resources are available for Head Start employees to pursue early childhood education and professional development including certifications, and bachelors' and advanced degree programs
- ✓ School districts receiving increases in State funding be required to share those resources proportionally with Head Start providers delivering state-funded Pre-K programs
- ✓ Resources are provided to Head Start teachers with a two-year degree pursuing a four-year degree or other enhanced credentials, as was the policy in the early days of Abbott.

3. Current policies and contract structures are not sufficient to ensure that all of our preschool children thrive in safe and healthy learning environments with the most cost-effective use of resources possible

We therefore see a future in which:

- Collaboration between local school districts and Head Start providers is mandated to make the best possible use of early childhood facilities throughout our communities
- State regulations are amended to provide space waivers to fully licensed Head Start facilities that already comply with federal size standards
- Contracts terms between school districts and Head Start providers are extended from one year to five years, with an option for an additional five-year renewal, enabling providers to achieve savings by negotiating long term leases with landlords and/or obtaining bank loans to purchase or renovate facilities.

4. Today, resources are not strategically invested throughout the entire system of early childhood education in a manner that promotes quality education while building the overall capacity for future Pre-K expansion

NJHSA believes that the flow of funding and other resources must be holistically, intentionally, and strategically directed throughout the *entire system* of early childhood education if we are to achieve the long-term goal of Universal Pre-K for all New Jersey children and families.

We therefore advocate for legislative, regulatory, and policy changes that will:

- ✓ Provide ample opportunity and equitable funding directly from the State to Head Start agencies, which play a significant role in Pre-K expansion, particularly in communities where school districts are not already partnering or accessing these resources
- ✓ Alleviate inconsistent and/or underfunding of Head Start agencies receiving State resources by ensuring comparable funding per child across the entire system of preschool services
- ✓ Reduce the impact of structural funding deficits by requiring school districts to pay all community-based preschool partners 100% of the contracted budget, and pass along any per-pupil increases received to these providers
- ✓ Authorize all Head Start agencies to rollover unspent state funds as school districts are authorized to do, provided there is a prudent plan for utilizing those funds in the future
- ✓ Require that all contracts for state funded Pre-K with Head Start agencies provide stable, five-year funding (similar to the federal funding model), enabling providers to adequately plan for the future, engage and retain a highly qualified workforce, expand enrollment, and invest in continuous quality improvement.

In Closing

In this white paper, NJHSA had sought to illuminate the primary issues and challenges that most severely affect the quality of preschool education in our state and the capacity for one day achieving a shared vision of Universal Pre-K. As always, we seek to partner collaboratively with all who share our commitment to achieving equity and excellence

throughout the entire system of preschool education --- in the best interest of all New Jersey children and families.

Important Note: In the early years of Abbott, New Jersey Head Start providers received State funding for educational programs and extended hours of morning and afternoon through contracts with DOE and the Department of Human Services respectively. This support was unfortunately short-lived as the result of changes to parent eligibility, dramatic budget reductions, and the institution of fee-for-service reimbursement agreements replacing contracts. Even before the COVID-19 Pandemic, these funding reductions have had a severely negative impact on the capacity of community preschool programs facing undue financial hardship to provide equitable and optimal quality services. Today, Head Start agencies must make the difficult choices required to cover even basic operational costs with very limited budgets, preventing us from paying teachers and staff comparable salaries and benefits to those offered by school districts, and limiting our ability to make investments and enhancements required to serve our children and families with excellence, as we consistently strive to do.