



To: Members, Senate Education Committee
From: Cecilia Zalkind, Executive Director
Advocates for Children of New Jersey
Date: September 21, 2015
Re: **The Benefits of Preschool and Other Quality Early Learning Programs**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today at this important hearing. Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) is a statewide child advocacy organization based in Newark. Ensuring that every child has access to high-quality early learning has been a long-standing priority for ACNJ. We know that a strong early education gives children the best start towards success in school and life and that what happens to children in those early years impacts the rest of their lives.

This is no exaggeration. There is so much evidence – scientific, medical and developmental – about the importance of the early years, starting at infancy. This is the time when the brain grows faster than any other time. It sets the foundation upon which all later learning, behavior and health depends. When children have acquired that foundation, they will experience early success and those successes will lead to future successes. When they are not prepared, we are setting them up for a lifelong struggle.

Parents, of course, are their child's first and best teacher. But almost 70 percent of New Jersey parents with children under age 5 work outside the home. They rely on child care, not only to work, but to provide the high-quality early learning experiences they know their children need. But quality child care is expensive. It can cost a significant percentage of a family's income. This is a challenge to all families, but even greater for low to middle income families.

It is an even greater challenge for parents of very young children, infancy to age 3. The cost of quality infant/toddler care is beyond the reach of too many families. And quality can be hard to find. A recent study by NIEER evaluating infant/toddler programs in New Jersey raises some serious questions about the quality of care for young children – at the time when quality matters most.

There are some improvements on the horizon, however. Thanks to a federal grant, New Jersey is piloting a system to improve child care quality, called *Grow NJ Kids*. Another federal grant is enabling Early Head Start programs to partner with child care centers and family child care homes to improve quality. This has the potential to make a difference for infants and toddlers. The lessons learned from these efforts will help guide future policy and funding.

But we do not need to wait for these results to take action. There is one thing we can do right now. We can make sure that more children can benefit from our nationally recognized high-quality, successful preschool program.



New Jersey has the best preschool program in the country. It has a high-quality standard, with small class size, well-prepared teachers and partnerships among school districts, Head Start and child care, all critical elements of quality. It includes three- and four-year-old children, ensuring two years of a high-quality experience, which in itself makes a difference in preparing children for school. It is offered to children in the poorest communities of the state, ensuring that children who need it the most can access it. And it has a proven track record of success. A longitudinal research study by NIEER proves that high-quality preschool has an impact immediately and long-term, in learning gains that are sustained.

So what's the problem? It does not reach enough children.

Since 1999, thousands of low-income 3- and 4- year olds in New Jersey have started school on the path to success by attending state-funded high quality preschools. Every year, these young students continue to reap the benefits of this strong early learning foundation. For thousands more however, these programs remain inaccessible. Almost one-half of low-income children in New Jersey live outside of the school districts funded to provide preschool. For them, zip code continues to determine whether they can benefit from the strong start that preschool provides.

This is a problem we can solve. The solution already exists. The 2008 School Funding Reform Act called for expanding high-quality preschool to more low-income children across the state. Families in approximately 90 communities – the next tier of low-income districts – were promised access to quality preschool for their 3- and 4-year-old children. The remaining districts were targeted to provide that access to preschoolers from low-income families in their communities.

Over the last few years, fiscal constraints have moved preschool further down the list of state priorities. In the meantime, thousands of children have missed out on their opportunity for starting school with a greater chance of long-term educational success, because quality preschool was not available to them.

It is time to make preschool New Jersey's top priority and take the first step toward expanding it to more children. As you will hear from many witnesses today, preschool is an important investment, not only in the future of our children but of our state. That is why ACNJ is proud to support *Pre-K Our Way* and continue to voice our support to the growing number of other voices who support preschool and its expansion.

I saw the importance of preschool first hand last week when I visited a program in one of the communities that receives state-funding. It is a high-quality preschool program with a strong track record of results. I spent some time in the three-year-old class. This was the first week of preschool and the differences amongst the children were striking. Some of them were prepared. Too many were already behind. Their language skills were poor. They had never held a book. They had trouble simply communicating. But this group of 3-year olds is lucky because preschool will make a difference for them. Without preschool, they would start kindergarten already behind, when the stakes are higher and the remedy much harder.



Giving Every Child A Chance

I also had a conversation with a parent whose child is currently in the program. She had to return to work when her child was an infant and she told me about her struggle in finding infant child care. She knew what quality was but could not afford it. She described going to work every day knowing that her baby was in a program that was not meeting her learning needs. But cost drove her decision.

She also described how happy she was when her child turned 3-years-old and could attend a state-funded preschool program. She was grateful to live in a community where high-quality preschool was available for her child. We need to make sure that more children in New Jersey have an opportunity to start school with a strong foundation for future success.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this important issue today.