

“We would not have this if it wasn’t for Abbott”

By Kathleen Carroll And Patricia Alex
The Record
March 26, 2009

Whether it’s the brightly lit library, the humming computer lab or the colorful preschool classrooms at Passaic’s School #3, Principal Talma Addes has the same explanation.

“We would not have this if it wasn’t for Abbott,” Addes said. “We went from nothing to a dream.”

New Jersey has spent billions over the past decade on schools in 31 low-income districts like Passaic, which carry the special “Abbott” designation that guarantees state-funded preschool, small class sizes, community liaisons and social workers.

Over the same period, some non-Abbott districts, such as Bergenfield — where 21 percent of students receive subsidized lunches — have struggled to make do without massive infusions of state aid.

Superintendent Michael Kuchar said he would like to follow the state’s new requirement to provide preschool for low-income students, like the Abbott districts do.

But Kuchar hasn’t even been able to swing full-day kindergarten yet. He said getting the space for the program would mean going to the voters for money. “It is worthwhile, but we’re all sensitive to taxpayers’ plight,” Kuchar said. “People are hurting and we feel it, we see it.”

A legal ruling this week means Abbott districts could soon see their special status expire. The landmark *Abbott v. Burke* case is back before the state Supreme Court, which ordered an unprecedented tide of state funding for 31 school districts in poor communities after ruling New Jersey’s school funding method was shortchanging their students. A judge asked to review Governor Corzine’s new funding formula ruled this week that it should be accepted as fair, which could free the state from giving Abbott districts special treatment.

The new funding formula will continue to send more state aid to school districts with large numbers of poor students. But it treats Abbott districts like any other, and will award aid to communities based in part on how many poor students are enrolled.

“There is a lot to be said about an equal playing field,” Kuchar said.

The extra funding does appear to have helped in the Abbott districts.

Elementary school test scores have improved overall and officials have credited preschool with much of the improvement.

Abbott districts receive state funds to pay for preschool and full-day kindergarten to all of their students — an extra two-and-a-half years of free public education for students who enroll at age three.

A Record analysis found the gap between Abbott and non-Abbott schools has narrowed during the program's first decade, especially on the fourth-grade reading exam. In 1998-99, 31 percent of Abbott students and 67 percent of non-Abbott students passed. In 2007-08, 67 percent of Abbott students and 87 percent of non-Abbott students passed.

Superintendent Robert Holster of Passaic, where 80 percent of students are from low-income families, said the special status for his district is important, because it recognizes the exceptional challenges faced by schools where the majority of children are poor.

"It's by birth that children are being deprived, by where they are born," he said. "What we're doing is a lot of supplementals. Not just the three R's, but also safety nets and support systems to give kids access to services that [middle-class] families provide. We've taken whole ownership of the child."

Abbott districts receive about half of all state aid and educate about one-quarter of public school students, and the spending has become a hot-button political issue. Reports of wasteful spending helped fuel suspicion about the returns from New Jersey's Abbott investment. A state agency overseeing an \$8 billion school construction program collapsed amid allegations of fraud. Local taxes in middle-class towns spiked to cover school costs after the state froze aid to non-Abbott districts.

"It's turned into an ugliness where legislators allowed it to become personal, allowed it to become a dividing line between the state," said Holster. "I'm not suggesting that other districts — even wealthy ones — don't have the same problems. But they have an opportunity to have an intact family that can pay for things that we pay for children in our system... There are some hidden resources that we need to give kids to get a fighting chance to be competitive in their schooling."

For instance, educators say preschool provides the best chance to close a gap in classroom readiness between rich and poor students. Governor Corzine, even in the teeth of an economic crisis, included \$75 million in next year's proposed budget to help expand preschool statewide.

At School #3 on Thursday, a dozen preschoolers sat in a circle and held a group discussion about the morning's activities.

When it was Dhruv's turn, the five-year-old boy picked up a toy car that reminded students who held the floor. Then he described his literacy activity for the morning: decorating a gingerbread man cookie with the letter "G."

"What does 'G' stand for?" asked his teacher, Susan Simbol.

Tiny voices shared their answers quick-fire.

“Gingerbread! Goose! Ghost! Giraffe! Giant!”

“And for me!” said a student named Gianna.

Such activities, designed to promote language development, socialization and self-control, help students learn how to be students — how to remain on task during a long school day, get along with their classmates and ask questions. Children from very poor families generally arrive in kindergarten with a smaller vocabulary and fewer coping skills than their wealthier classmates.