

Testimony of Kathleen Dunn Priestley
Before the
Committee on Education and Labor
U.S. House of Representatives

January 23, 2008

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee...

I am Kathleen Priestley, Supervisor of Early Childhood Education for the Orange, NJ Public Schools. I am proud to represent the New Jersey educators who have passionately worked for universal access to high-quality preschool education programs.

We know that children who attend preschool education programs that meet high standards will experience greater success in elementary school and well-beyond.

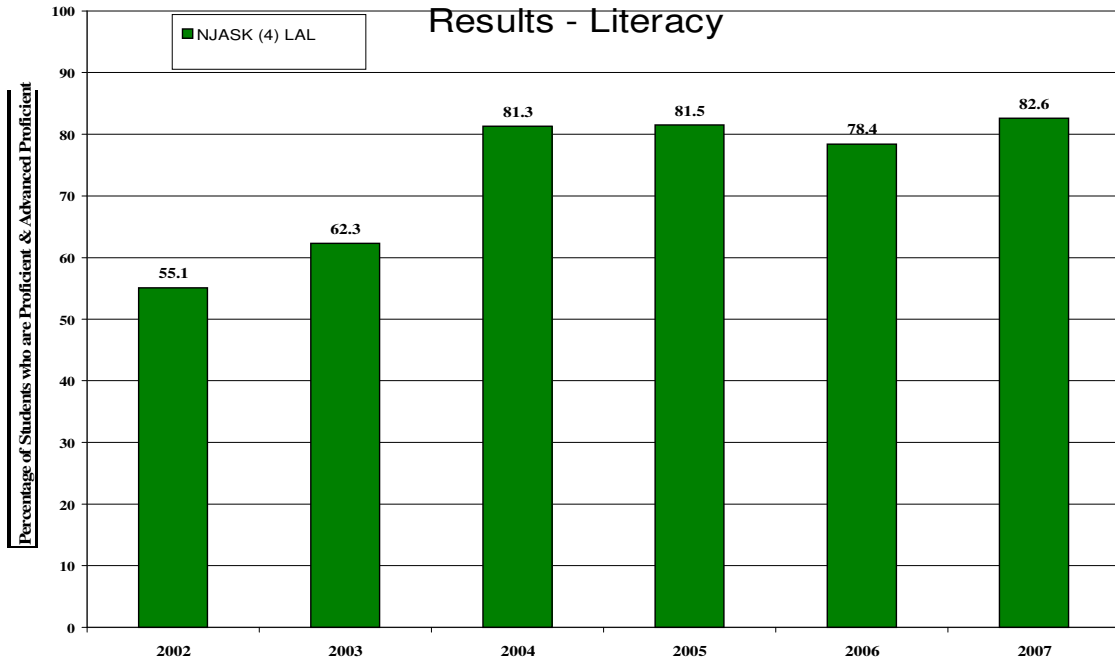
For more than 30 years I've worked as a teacher of young children in both general and special education, as a staff developer/ teacher trainer in a large urban public school district in NJ and at the state Office of Early Childhood Education. My primary responsibilities at the New Jersey Department of Education included the coordination and delivery of Professional Development for preschool teacher leaders; and implementation support to local district professionals. I experienced the growing pains but I truly have seen the remarkable benefits from high quality preschool!

The City of Orange's 33,000 people includes 75% African American children; 13% White and 12% Hispanic, the vast majority from low-income families. I oversee the education of 765 3- and 4-year- old children in multi-age inclusive classrooms in ten

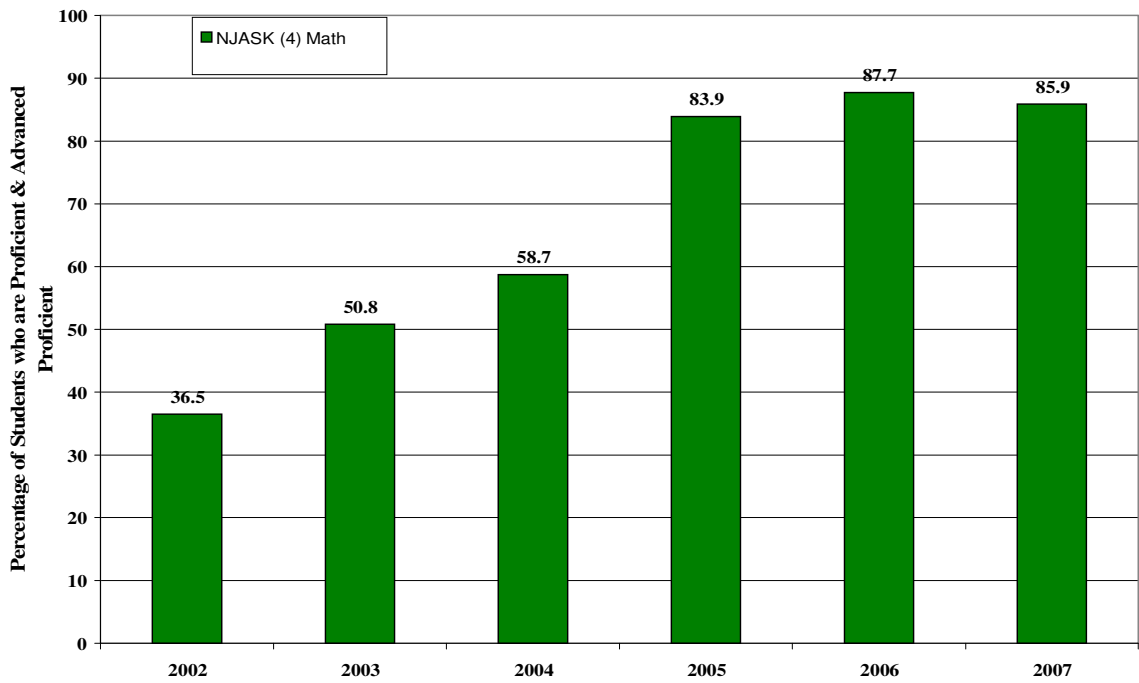
different sites. The Orange Board Of Education offers preschool education through a mixed-delivery system that includes classrooms at public school buildings, at Head Start facilities and private child care centers. We contract with Head Start and child care providers partly because of space constraints, but more importantly because we appreciated the experience of the existing local Head Start, and child care providers. Our district applies the same high standards to classrooms at all the sites. Preschool education in Orange is now looked upon as part of a continuum of Early Childhood Education Preschool to Grade 3 and part of the larger Whole School Reform plan for Preschool to Grade 12.

Since the initiatives have been put into place, Orange has experienced remarkable growth in achievement. Five years ago, in 2002, only 55% of our 4th Graders scored “proficient” on New Jersey’s Statewide Test of literacy. Now, in 2007, 83% scored proficient- a 50% increase overall. Similarly, in Math in 2002, 37% were proficient, while in 2007, this increased to 86%- a 70% increase. This improvement in test scores corresponds to improvements in access and quality of preschool education for our children. These scores are comparable to districts throughout the state, many serving more advantaged families and some right in our neighboring communities.

Orange, NJ 4th Grade State Test Results - Literacy



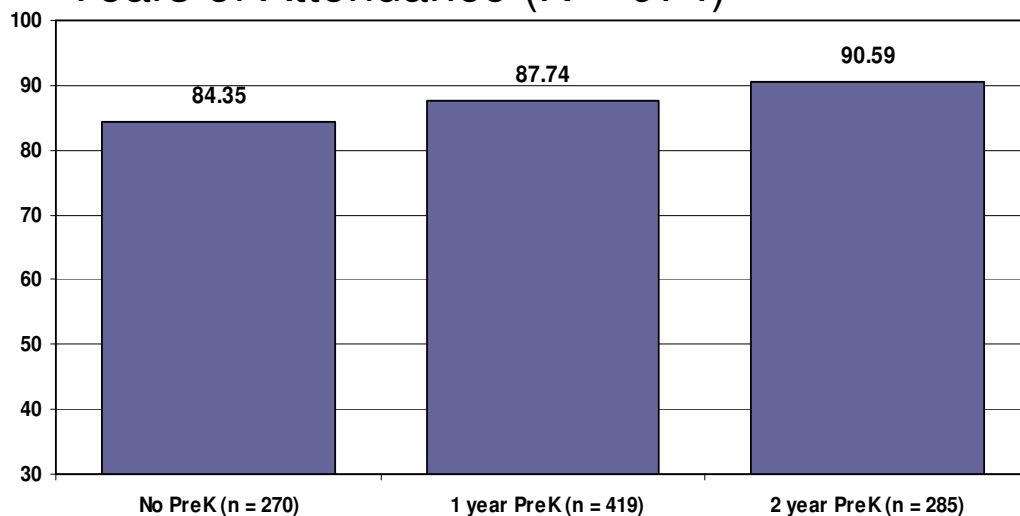
Orange, NJ 4th Grade State Test Results - Math



In addition to the evidence of this remarkable progress, we have results of a statewide evaluation of the effects of providing increased access to high quality preschool education on children’s achievement in kindergarten and first grade in districts similar to ours across New Jersey. The National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University has found that

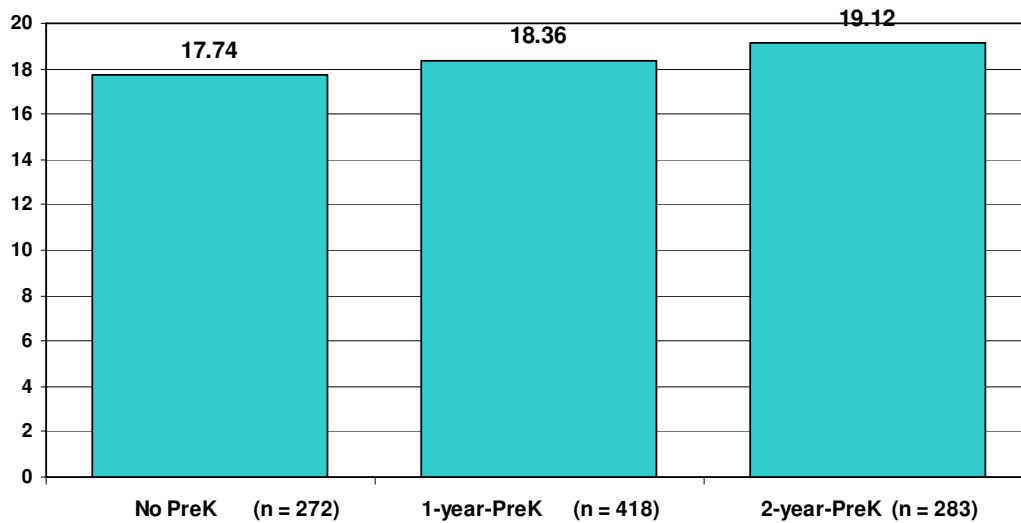
- The pre-K group made substantially larger gains in language, literacy, and math than did children who did not attend pre-K and
- Gains from two years of pre-K beginning at age 3 were nearly double for language and 70% larger for math.

NJ Statewide Results Receptive Vocabulary at End of K by Years of Attendance (N = 974)



Frede, et al, 2007 NIEER.ORG

NJ Math Scores at the End of Kindergarten



Frede, et al, 2007 NIEER.ORG

In addition, parents regularly tell me stories about what their children have learned and kindergarten teachers and principals marvel at the difference between children who have attended preschool and those who have not.

How are we achieving these remarkable results? Recently, on visits to preschool classrooms in my district, I was extremely proud to see children engaged with materials and interacting with their peers in well-organized learning environments. I saw teachers supporting and stimulating children throughout their group times and individual work. The children were learning about the physical properties of liquids and solids; talking about which sounds were the same in the nursery rhyme that they read; graphing how many children were in class and how many were absent; discussing how many blocks they would need to carry out their plan to build a castle and signing in to work at the

computer. This learning went beyond the traditional academics and included learning to think ahead, negotiate play with others, taking turns, and solving conflicts with help from the teacher.

We didn't achieve this without some critical components. The most important of which is that the child comes first in every decision.

- Our preschool teachers are college-educated and hold state licenses in early child education AND they receive the same pay as any public school teacher regardless of where they work.
- They understand child development and the components of high quality preschool education.
- We implement a comprehensive research-based curriculum that emphasizes teaching to the whole child-cognitive, social, physical and emotional.
- We have small class sizes of only 15 with a teacher and an assistant.
- We provide mentoring to new teachers to support their success as they learn to individualize strategies to maximize children's learning.
- We involve parents and help parents receive social services if needed,
- We engage in systematic planning and evaluation at every level- the child, the classroom, the center, the district, the state- to strengthen what worked best and improve what didn't.
- In addition to adequate financial support from the state, we benefit from regular implementation support from the Department of Education both of which are crucial to our success.

Given the clear and impressive success of this and other preschools throughout the nation, I would recommend that NCLB reauthorization recognize the benefits of a high quality education for young children and include a preschool education component. Further, I recommend that the Committee immediately take steps to help states increase preschool education access and quality. I applaud all three pieces of legislation currently being considered for their strong provisions to help states implement high quality programs and their rigorous attention to the elements that make these programs so beneficial for young children. Pre-K legislation would mark a major accomplishment for this committee as states across the country struggle to raise or maintain the quality of their programs in spite of impending deficits, and as several governors have put their administrations on the line on behalf of pre-K.

This investment can literally change children's lives. I have spent my entire career in the field of early childhood education and I can think of no better use of tax dollars.

Thank you.