

March 13, 2009

The Honorable Jon Corzine
Governor
Office of the Governor
PO Box 001
Trenton, NJ 08625

**RE: The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and its
Impact on New Jersey's Children and Families**

Dear Governor Corzine:

We would like to first thank you for your continued commitment to ensuring that our state's most vulnerable 3- and 4- year olds have access to high quality preschool programs. The increase in the proposed state budget of \$52 million for existing preschool programs and \$25 million in new funding for the newly-created Preschool Incentive Aid is an innovative way to maximize on our federal dollars. We recognize how difficult the budget decisions must have been in light of the current economic situation. We applaud your dedication in making education, and in-particular, preschool, a top priority in your administration.

On February 24th, the Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) facilitated a meeting to provide the latest information on the ARRA, funding earmarked for New Jersey. Forty-five early childhood stakeholders were in attendance. The goals of the meeting were to better understand the impact ARRA will have on New Jersey's children and families and to discuss advocacy next steps to ensure that those federal dollars earmarked for children and families will be spent in a way that best meets their needs.

The group came to an overall consensus that ARRA could provide our state with an opportunity to use those funds to continue to advance high quality early education, including preschool expansion. By providing more children with access to high quality early learning experiences, our state will reap the benefits of additional jobs in the early childhood field, support parents who need safe and developmentally appropriate places for their children as they return to work, and lay a solid educational foundation for our youngest citizens.

Besides coming to an overall consensus, the group identified several broad themes that should be addressed through the use of the federal dollars. The following outlines those themes:

- **Advance a comprehensive early childhood agenda.** Comprehensive systems building is key in ensuring that in the short term, any spending is well-planned, coordinated and transparent. In the long-term, such

systems building will better meet the needs of children and families in a more efficient way. In New Jersey, we already have examples that could support future comprehensive planning. For the last six years, many New Jersey early childhood stakeholders, including state representatives, have worked on the state's BUILD initiative, which addresses systems building for children from birth to age 5. Moreover, our state's *Ready Set Grow* Initiative also looks at systems building so that programs that affect children and families are better aligned and coordinated. This funding provides our state with the ability to thoughtfully address not just specific programs, but to develop a comprehensive agenda for young children.

- **Ensure an effective coordinated planning process.** Because much of the federal funding will flow through approximately 20 funding streams into various state and local agencies, there is a need to ensure that the dollars are being spent in a way that supports the implementation of a comprehensive agenda. This will not take place without a specified inclusive body that includes both public and community participation and input that can be responsible for coordinating these efforts. Moreover, such an entity must begin immediately. While many of the timelines remain uncertain at this moment, it is expected that much of the funding will begin immediately or at least very soon. Although the new state Early Learning Council, required under the Head Start Reauthorization, is currently housed in the Department of Education, there has been no public discussion as to when this Council will begin to meet or who its members will include. The time to identify an entity that will have the authority to coordinate the implementation and/or distribution of these funds is now.
- **Expand preschool:** Using some of the federal dollars from the second block grant of the Stabilization Fund to expand high quality preschool for low-income children outside of the Abbott districts is an investment in our state's future. There is no more "shovel ready" initiative than the state's preschool expansion program. District plans are in and being reviewed by the Department of Education. Schools and communities are preparing to provide preschoolers access to high quality programs. The significant educational gains made by Abbott children who participated in the state's high-quality preschool are proof positive that the expansion of this program is not only a good investment of the federal dollars but a down payment on our children's educational future.
- **Continue the emphasis on and expansion of quality:** While New Jersey has made huge strides in ensuring that all of the preschool teachers in Abbott classrooms have bachelor's degrees and specialized training in early childhood education, other professionals who impact the educational experiences of young children, such as classroom aides and family workers, have not had similar opportunities for professional development. If our charge, as President Obama has repeatedly stated, is to educate our children to be prepared for the 21st century, then we need to ensure that more than teachers are adequately trained. Ensuring that all adults who play a role in educating our children are provided with

necessary educational supports is an important piece to any systems building.

Outside of our Abbott preschool classrooms, thousands of young children spend their days in licensed child care and family care settings. The quality of these programs can vary significantly. In order to address quality issues in these programs, the state could use some of the earmarked quality expansion dollars from the increase of Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funding to implement a Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS). A QRIS is a method to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early care and education programs. New Jersey is already piloting a QRIS in six centers in Camden and Trenton. This scale was developed by early childhood stakeholders and state administrators. Moreover, the Division of Family Development organized a committee that developed a companion QRIS for family child care. Raising the level of quality in similar programs is critical and expanding the use of New Jersey's QRIS is a way that these dollars can be used to support quality.

- **Address key linkages.** To ensure funding is used in the most effective way and that it best meets the needs of children and families, program linkages need to be improved. The following specific examples are key and should be considered in planning for the funds:
 - Wraparound:** The success of the Abbott preschool program is due to the combination of providing eligible 3- and 4- year-olds with high quality preschool programs while meeting the needs of working poor families. Besides the six-hour educational component of the day, children are offered before- and after-care and summer programs so that their parents can work and know that they are in safe learning environments. Although this combination has been a proven success, at this date, the continuation of wraparound in Abbott programs is uncertain and no dollars for expansion of wraparound in preschool expansion districts have been identified. This is shortsighted as it does not meet the needs of parents who are trying to return to full-time employment. The uncertainty of wraparound funding also puts existing programs in financial jeopardy. New Jersey stands to gain over \$34 million additional dollars from the CCDBG. When thinking how best to use ARRA dollars, certainly a portion of those funds can support the expansion of this successful program that best meets the needs of workers with young children.
 - Collaboration and partnerships:** The Abbott preschool program's mixed delivery system is a national model in that districts, private providers and Head Start programs work collaboratively to provide the same level of high quality preschool. Currently, 65 percent of Abbott preschoolers are housed outside public preschool classrooms. Not only are children benefiting from the program, but the program implementation using the collaborative model has been cost-effective. It has built on existing early childhood infrastructures and has increased opportunities for adults in low-income communities to benefit from education, training and

employment. If preschool expansion is to move forward, this partnership remains critical. Similar to the initial years of Abbott, many school district administrators in the expansion districts are wary of such collaborations. The need for the state to continue to educate district administrators and support this successful system is important.

- **Streamline existing funding streams:** Currently the various difficulties that parents encounter when trying to access services, such as wraparound or child care subsidies make it difficult for families and their children to benefit from these programs. Efforts to simplify funding streams will not only be cost-effective for the state, but will make it easier for families to access the services.

- **Work toward making this funding permanent:** Many of the issues affecting children that will now be addressed thanks to the infusion of federal dollars have been problems long before our nation's economic downturn. Head Start has historically only been able to serve a small percentage of eligible children. Child care subsidy reimbursement rates lag significantly behind the market rate, forcing many parents to place their children in lower-quality care. It is not too early to begin thinking about how we can address these issues either through federal or state dollars, long after the two-year period of ARRA funding has ended.

As citizens of both this nation and this state, we are all stewards of this money. There is a great deal at stake and yet, incredible potential. In New Jersey, there is much interest in ensuring that these funds are used thoughtfully and responsibly. This process must be transparent. We have learned from the Abbott experience that programs are most effective and successful when people are working together towards the same end.

We are committed to work with you, the various state departments and our legislators to ensure that the ARRA dollars are used in a comprehensive, thoughtful and transparent way in the best interest of families and their children. We look forward to collaborating with you in moving towards that goal.

Sincerely,

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