

A Preschool with Promise

How One District Provides Early Education for All

BY JENNIFER DUBIN

As soon as Adam Morales's parents pick him up from the Ignacio Cruz Early Childhood Center, the 4-year-old often starts talking about the story they read in class that day, the songs they sang, the musical instruments they played, the animals they counted, the letters of the alphabet they wrote, the picture he drew, the tricycle he pedaled on the playground, the blocks he piled high, and the toy truck he pushed around the floor. In short, he tells them how much fun he had and what he learned at school.

For students ages 3 and 4 in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, the two ideas—learning and fun—are one and the same. The school district has created a full-day preschool program in which teachers carefully plan fun, engaging, and educational lessons. They also carefully plan the day so children enjoy a mix of teacher-directed time, self-directed time, and play time. Many Perth Amboy children benefit from a curriculum that introduces letters and numbers, builds their vocabularies, hones their listening and social skills, and gives them the background knowledge they need to be prepared for school. Adam's teacher, for instance, engages with her pupils in their make-believe games of being a doctor or playing house to stretch their imaginations and expand on what they know about the world.

Outside of school, that world is a blue-collar town on the banks of the Raritan River in central New Jersey. Many parents work in factories in neighboring areas, or have clerical or custodial jobs with the board of education or the sprawling hospital complex in the center of town. In all, 74 percent of the district's students receive

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At the Ignacio Cruz Early Childhood Center, Carol Graff immerses students in a variety of content throughout the school year. Every four to six weeks, she introduces a topic for her class to study in depth. Throughout the fall, the children learned about apples, pumpkins, and spiders. Later, they will study clothing, pets, the ocean, and ice cream.

In January and February, when these photos were taken, Graff's students were studying hair. They studied the different styles, textures, and colors of hair, and learned vocabulary words such as scalp, hair follicle, and hair shaft. As part of the unit, Graff's students grew grass—in paper cups decorated with faces—to simulate hair growing. Right, Steve displays his plant's "hair."



free or reduced-price meals, and 68 percent speak a language other than English at home. Perth Amboy has long been a city of immigrants. Italians, Poles, Hungarians, and Ukrainians settled here in the early to mid-1900s, followed by Puerto Ricans in the 1970s. Today, the city is largely Latino, with many recent arrivals coming from South America, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic.

Although it's one of the wealthiest states in terms of median household income, New Jersey has its share of impoverished school districts. In 1998, the New Jersey Supreme Court, as a result of a school funding lawsuit known as *Abbott*

v. Burke (see “New Jersey Finally Gets It Right” on page 24), sought to address such disparities. Through court orders and subsequent state regulations, 31 high-poverty school districts, including Perth Amboy, were required to provide full-day preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds. Each preschool class could be no more than 15 students and had to have a teacher with a bachelor’s degree and certification, as well as a trained paraprofessional. The districts had to choose a state-approved preschool curriculum, and master teachers had to provide professional development throughout the school year.

To determine the needs of Perth Amboy’s youngsters, right before implementing universal preschool 10 years ago, the district joined a collaborative of *Abbott* districts to fund a study of households. The analysis found that “children had no exposure to books before they came to us,” says Superintendent John Rodecker. As a result, the district has worked to develop a preschool program that prepares children for school both socially and academically—and that gets them excited about learning.

Today, more than 1,300 3- and 4-year-olds attend preschool in the district. At Ignacio Cruz, Adam is quickly learning his letters and numbers. His mother, Paulina Morales, is quite pleased with her son’s progress. When “he picks up a book, he doesn’t put it upside down,” she says. “He might not know what it says right now, but he’s learning.”

A Content-Rich Curriculum

Prior to *Abbott*, Perth Amboy Public Schools limited preschool to children who were most educationally in need. If 3- and 4-year-olds did poorly on a school-readiness test, they were admitted to the program. The district funded two half-day preschool classes in each of its five elementary schools. Across the whole district, roughly 250 children were served each year.

As a result of *Abbott*, Perth Amboy hired teachers and paraprofessionals for 10 full-day preschool classes in 1999. Today, there are 90 preschool classes. After offering preschool within elementary schools and running out of room, the district built two new buildings just for preschool—the Igna-

cio Cruz Early Childhood Center and the Edmund Hmieleski Jr. Early Childhood Center—and took over School Number 7, a former elementary school now also home to the district’s early childhood department. Struggling to keep up with parents’ interest in the program, Perth Amboy also pays four private child care centers to enroll roughly 200 children. The private centers work with the district’s early childhood supervisor, use

The hair study culminated with the students opening their barber-shop, which they named “Little People Haircut.” Right, paraprofessional Emily Colon helps Rahim paint the shop’s sign. Below, teacher Carol Graff checks on Steve and Laura’s progress.



the district’s curriculum, employ licensed teachers paid at public school salaries, and meet the district’s administrative and operational standards.

Although the program is “universal” in that any Perth Amboy child can attend, as of January the waiting list had more than 100 names. “The goal is to serve every eligible student, and we thought we were close to that,” says Superintendent Rodecker.

“The numbers seem to keep growing.”

Children spend most of their time in the classroom; they eat, learn, and nap there. But they still enjoy plenty of active play. Each day, they spend 60 minutes developing their gross motor skills: if the weather is nice, they play outside; indoors, they have room for hopscotch and basketball, among other games. At 8:30 a.m., the school provides free breakfast for all chil-

dren. At 9 a.m., the day officially begins. While classes for 3- and 4-year-olds follow slightly different schedules (3-year-olds eat lunch and nap earlier), school ends for all children at 3:30 p.m. and extended child care runs until 6:30 p.m.

Both the 3- and 4-year-olds' programs focus on preparing for school academically and socially, but teachers devote more time to helping 3-year-olds get acclimated to the school day. They introduce 3-year-olds to the concept of the daily schedule, and encourage self-help skills such as feeding themselves and cleaning up after themselves. Teachers also focus on developing 3-year-olds' oral language skills by helping them learn vocabulary that will allow them to follow directions, take turns, and express their needs to adults.

For both 3- and 4-year-olds, the classroom is organized into interest areas known as centers. Three-foot-high bookcases separate each area and hold supplies. In the library, writing, and media centers, children "read" books, practice writing, and play literacy games on the computer. In the art center, they draw and paint, and do projects. In the blocks center, they push trucks and build with blocks. In the toys and games center, they sort objects and solve puzzles. In the dramatic play center, they act out career aspirations and family situations. In the music and movement center, they play instruments, sing, and

dance. In the sand and water centers, they play, experiment, and learn about concepts such as balance, flotation, and measurement. In the science center, they expand their knowledge of the natural world and hone their powers of observation.

In morning and afternoon sessions that add up to roughly two hours per day, students engage in meaningful play in the centers of their choice. Within this time, the classroom teacher and the paraprofessional work with students in small groups for about 15 minutes in each of the centers. For example, in the science center, children will be guided in comparing and contrasting objects and discussing what they observe. In all of the centers, the teacher and paraprofessional engage students in their play and ask them questions to stimulate their thinking. The idea for the centers, and how they should be organized, comes from the Creative Curriculum for Preschool. Creative Curriculum calls for the same classroom centers for both 3- and 4-year-olds. However, for 3-year-olds, the curriculum focuses more heavily on social skills and language development, while for 4-year-olds, reading, writing, math, social studies, and science concepts and skills are integrated into the activities more systematically.

A couple of years into the district's use of this curriculum, kindergarten teachers raised concerns that students were not as well prepared as they should be because they didn't know enough letters and numbers when they arrived in kindergarten. At their urging, preschool teachers began

infusing more literacy and math content into Creative Curriculum's "shared reading" and "morning meeting" activities. Now, during shared reading, the teacher reads a book to students, asks questions, and has the children engage in choral reading (in which they repeat sentences from the book out loud). During morning meeting, a variety of activities enhance children's language and math knowledge. For example, the teacher has them count the students to take attendance, and sing songs.

In addition, Perth Amboy's kindergarten and preschool teachers began meeting together regularly to review state standards that outline what students should learn in each grade. Through these meetings, teachers align the knowledge and skills that children should acquire in preschool to the expectations for their transition to kindergarten. Academically, the goals for students entering kindergarten include knowing basic colors and shapes and several letters of the alphabet, identifying their written name and writing it with some legibility, and counting to 20. Socially, children should learn to resolve conflicts, work and play together, be honest and respectful, and follow classroom rules. Such meetings, which continue to take place, help ensure that students enter kindergarten prepared and that their teachers are sharing ideas for helping them grow.

Preschool teachers closely monitor student learning. As part of Creative Curriculum, teachers assess 3- and 4-year-olds in math and language. To assess listening skills, for example, teachers ask students to follow directions. To assess their progress in math, teachers ask students to count from 0 to 5 or 1 to 10. In February and June, students receive a progress report created by the district detailing their language, social/emotional, and physical development (gross and fine motor skills), and their progress in mathematics. The district has also developed its own math and language assessment for 4-year-olds to take at the end of the school year. The assessments help the district pinpoint where students excel and where they need to improve. Mary Jo Sperlazza, the district's supervisor for early childhood education, says the assessments given in June test

Rahim enjoys being creative and practices his fine motor skills by painting the barbershop sign.



students' knowledge of beginning sounds in words, uppercase letters, rhyming words, colors, shapes, and numbers—everything that “we’re teaching them all year” in preschool.

Apples to Apples

At the Ignacio Cruz Early Childhood Center one morning in October, students in Carol Graff’s 4-year-old class sit on a green carpet in the library center in a corner of the room. They have assembled there for the 9 a.m. morning meeting. “1, 2, 3, eyes on me,” Graff says to get their attention. She takes attendance and then tells Jalen it’s his turn. Graff asks everyone to count the number of boys and girls with him. When Jalen says there are five boys and seven girls, Graff turns to a laminated paper with the equation “__ boys + __ girls = __ Total Children” taped to the wall. Graff writes 5 in front of boys and 7 in front of girls. “Now we’re going to add,” she says as she writes 12 in front of Total Children. “Let’s count everyone all together so we can make sure the total we have here is the same as you’ve counted.” The children count to 12. To reinforce what they just did, Graff points to the equation, and asks, “What number is up here?” The children say the same number: 12. Rounding out the morning meeting, students, with Graff’s help, read aloud a poem about apples and perform some of their weekly classroom chores. Students’ assignments for the week are listed on a poster: line leader (Adam), line ender (Steve), and attendance counter (Jalen), to name a few.

Standing near Graff is Emily Colon, a paraprofessional, who works with Graff to implement lesson plans and provide individual and small-group instruction. Besides helping to teach, Colon gives students their breakfast and lunch, and supervises them during nap time. She also looks after the class pet, Nena, a parrot she brought from home.

After the morning meeting, students engage in various activities, including working in small groups with Graff and Colon. At Graff’s science center table, they will conduct an apple taste test, while at Colon’s table in the middle of the room, they will count apples. Both activities are part of the class’s month-long study of apples. A couple of days ago, Graff read books to the students about how apples grow and introduced them to words such as

blossom and seed pocket.

Five students walk to the science center: a table and chairs next to a countertop and a low sink. Graff, who has written Red Delicious, Golden Delicious, and Granny Smith on a poster, explains that everyone will say which kind they like best after tasting. Then she’ll put that information on a graph. The children take their seats and look at three apples on the table. “What’s that thing sticking out?” Graff asks. “The stem,” they say. Graff asks Nalani if the apples are the same or different. “That one’s yellow, that one’s green, that’s red,” Nalani says, pointing to each. Graff asks if the stem makes an apple bigger or taller. Rahim says taller.

Graff washes the apples and uses a corer to cut them. “This is so awesome like that!” Rahim says, as the apple slices fan out. Graff asks the children to wash their hands. When they return to their seats and start eating, Graff continues the discussion. “What’s the inside of the apple that we eat called?” “Flesh,” Rahim says. Graff breaks an apple core and shows the children the seeds. They eagerly lean forward to look. After they taste each apple, Graff asks them their favorite and records their answers on a graph. In future lessons, Graff will teach the students how to read the graph and then will use it to introduce concepts such as more than and less than, and most and least.

After 15 minutes, the students at Graff’s table move to Colon’s, where they continue the apple theme. Colon lays three pictures of red, green, and yellow baskets on the table. Next, she hands out pictures of apples the same colors as the baskets. Adam looks at his pile and decides he wants more yellow apples. “Can I have Golden Delicious?” he asks. Colon looks at him and smiles. “I like the way you say the name instead of just saying apples,” she says. “They have a name just like you.” When Colon tells them to, the students rush to place their “apples” in the basket



Inside their barbershop, students took turns playing the roles of barber and customer. Barber Adam attends to his customer, Steve, whose smile shows he’s satisfied with his imaginary haircut.

with the same color. After a few seconds, Rahim finishes first. “I win!” he says, throwing up his hands. Colon praises Kendal for sorting her apples by color first before placing them in the correct basket.

Colon then shows the students a basket of artificial apples. “We’re going to do an estimation,” she says. “I’m going to ask you how many apples you think are in this basket.” Rahim and Adam guess six and Kendal, who seems more interested in playing with the apples, says “a lot.”

“Yes, I know there are a lot,” Colon says, and encourages her to make a concrete guess. Kendal looks at the basket and says four. After everyone has given their estimates, Colon lines the apples up on the table. She tells the students to look quickly at the apples without counting them, and then to close their eyes. If they want, she says, they can change their numbers. All the students increase their estimates. Then, with Colon’s help, they count the 12 apples. Colon asks whose estimate was the closest. “I picked eight!” Adam says. When Colon



points out that Nalani also picked eight, the two children cheer.

After all the students have worked with Graff and Colon, they choose other center activities. Adam and Rahim play with cars in the blocks center. Kendal, Nalani, and Shawna play house in the dramatic play area. Damaris sits on a tiny couch by the window listening to *Goodnight Moon* on tape. While Colon builds and counts blocks with Francisco, Graff helps Laura and Jenifer paint pictures. When Jenifer asks Graff for help, Graff encourages her to paint a self-portrait. After she paints her eyes and nose, she pauses and looks up at Graff. “What else do you have on your head?” Graff asks. Jenifer says hair and goes back to painting. Suddenly Adam and Rahim rush over to tell Graff that a couple of girls are hogging the play phone. Without directly intervening, Graff helps them solve their problem. A few seconds later, she turns and notices Laura opening the door to the bathroom (conveniently located inside the classroom) and tells her to wipe the paint off her face.

Graff calmly walks through the room. She seems to be everywhere the kids are, but in a way that makes them feel like she’s giving them her undivided attention. “You try to not make it like you’re the whirlwind, but focus on what each child is doing,” she says later. When Graff sees Nalani playing with the stethoscope, she asks if she knows how to use “a stethoscope.” Graff makes a point of identifying the instrument to familiarize Nalani with

its proper name. The little girl puts the plastic toy in her ears. “Then what do you do?” Graff asks. Nalani takes a deep breath and exhales, pushing out her tummy. To Graff’s delight, Nalani clearly remembers what happens during a visit to the doctor. She then presses the stethoscope to her chest and pretends to listen to her heart.

At noon, Graff tells the children to finish their activities and sit on the carpet for shared reading. Graff has chosen a nonfiction book *How Many?* by Judy Nayer. The book contains pictures of animals and people, flowers and the four seasons, and asks the children to count the number of items shown. The numbers 1 through 10 run along the bottom of each page to help the children count. To review what they’ve already learned, Graff asks the students to name the parts of the book—front cover, back cover, and spine—and then begins to read the first line of the book, “Can you count the things you see?” She asks the children to give examples of what they count every day. They say the days on the calendar and each other while taking attendance.

Graff turns to a picture of apples. “What kind of apples do you think they are?” she asks, linking a term learned earlier to the current lesson. “Red Delicious,” Laura says. When Graff asks Gianna how many apples are in the tree, she helps Gianna count: 1, 2, 3. “How many apples did we taste today?”

Above left, Laura pretends to give Jenifer a shave, while Shawna adjusts her smock. Above, Laura answers the barbershop phone.

Graff asks. The students say three.

A few pages later, Graff reads, “How many seasons are there in all?” She holds up a picture of penguins in snow, flowers in a field, a beach scene, and colorful leaves. When she asks how many penguins there are, the children call out six. Another voice adds that penguins live in Antarctica. That Laura knows such a big word—one the class hasn’t covered yet—impresses Graff and Colon, who exchange surprised smiles. They tell Laura she could go to elementary school right now, and the little girl giggles.

Skilled, Knowledgeable, Supported Educators

Graff and Colon regularly discuss which children understand the material covered in class and which ones need more help, and they tailor their instruction accordingly. For those students who speak Spanish at home and have trouble comprehending certain sentences in English, Colon

translates for them and then repeats the phrase in English.

To help the teachers meet their students' needs, Lynda Alfano, a master teacher who works full time in the building, partners with experienced teachers like Graff—who has taught for eight years—and those new to the profession. Teachers attend professional development sessions run by Alfano and meet with her individually to improve their instruction. Last year, for instance, Alfano and Graff built on the math concepts Graff and Colon presented during their small-group work by creating a Venn diagram to use in the classroom. Upon arrival each day, students wrote their names in a certain part of the diagram to show if they planned to eat the school snack, the snack they brought from home, or a little of both. At snack time, the child assigned to helping with snacks for the week consulted the diagram, with the teacher's help, to see how many children wanted which snack. Introducing the diagram was "a purposeful way to incorporate a math skill for children to practice," Alfano says.

Alfano regularly visits classrooms to model a lesson or coteach, and to observe and make suggestions. In addition to those visits, the principal and vice principal observe classrooms regularly to see how "children are interacting with each other" and "what their accomplishments are as far as their learning," says Principal Susan Roque. She and her staff also welcome parents to the school and encourage them to engage in their children's education. Every other month, parents and children are invited to a family literacy night in which



Students, wearing ponytails made out of yarn, listen to Graff read *Stephanie's Ponytail* by Robert Munsch.

teachers and paraprofessionals model how to read books to children. Families also participate in a craft activity related to one of the featured books. At the end of the night, each family receives a free book. On average, 100 families attend.

Classroom teachers also engage parents. Graff and Colon send home newsletters in English and Spanish twice a month telling them the activities and skills children have been working on in class, what books they're reading, and content and skills to reinforce at home. For example, in the newsletter dated October 29, Graff wrote that students were learning how to write their names and count forward and backward between 0 and 10. If Graff has a particular concern or if a student has done something great, Graff usually calls or writes a note home. Paulina and Adalberto Morales appreciate the constant feedback. When Graff sent home a picture of Adam building a tower, "it meant a lot to me," Paulina says. She saw that he had assembled the tower "correctly and neatly" and was reassured of his progress.

Adam often builds towers and pushes trucks in class with his friend Rahim, whose mother is pleased that her son's favorite activity is listening to a story. "He loves to come home and tell me what book they read," Iram Shah says, "and he wants to buy exactly the same book. So we have a little library in our house, too."

Perth Amboy's preschool teachers take pride in the district's students entering kindergarten prepared. "Their language skills are

exceptional when they come out of our preschools," says Donna Chiera, president of the Perth Amboy Federation/AFT. "They can count to 20. They know their colors." Chiera notes that the preschool program is especially crucial for children whose first language is Spanish. In addition, over the years, says Chiera, kindergarten teachers have attributed their students' improved social skills to the district's preschool; children have learned to take turns, listen to the teacher, and wait patiently. As a result, kindergarten teachers say they can spend more time teaching content instead of emphasizing appropriate classroom behavior.

While district officials try to accommodate more preschool students, Adam and his classmates will continue to enjoy learning. At the end of that October day in Graff's class, the students, wearing coats and book bags, stand near their cubbies as Graff asks them to review all that they did during the day. Rahim says they ate apples. Laura says they counted. Other voices say they read a story. Although it's 3:30 p.m., the students are chatty and energetic. They have just come inside from playing outdoors, and as they socialize with each other and move around, their little bodies seem to say they would like to stay and do more. Not looking the least bit tired, Shawna can't believe how quickly the day has passed. She looks up at Graff and asks, "It's time to go home?" □

For top researchers' recommendations on making the most of young children's natural proclivity to develop knowledge and skills in language, literacy, mathematics, and science, see *Preschool Curriculum: What's In It for Children and Teachers*, published by the Albert Shanker Institute (available at www.ashankerinst.org).

