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Gov. Whitman Tours Trenton Preschool, Emphasizes Commitment to Quality Programs in Early Childhood Education

During a tour of the West State Child Development Center in Trenton today, Gov. Christie Whitman reiterated her commitment to helping preschoolers in New Jersey's disadvantaged school districts prepare for kindergarten and success in school.

"I know how important it is to the future of the children this program will be serving that it be of the highest quality education," said Gov. Whitman. "I am committed to making this program a success. Working together, we will give all our children the opportunity they deserve."

The New Jersey Supreme Court mandated state-funded, half-day preschool programs for three- and four-year-olds in the state's most disadvantaged school districts in 1998 in what is known as the Abbott decision.

Total funding for Abbott preschool programs for this school year is \$276 million, including \$53 million in federal Head Start funds, for an average of about \$8,000 per child. The Governor intends to increase the funding to about \$9,000 per child for the next school year.

As part of the Governor's plans to enhance early childhood programs, she called for more staff per students in each classroom, the hiring of master teachers to consult with child care centers on educational programs, the hiring of family workers to keep the youngsters' parents involved, and increasing funding to the Abbott centers.

The West State Child Development Center is one of three child development centers operated by Mercer Street Friends. The state is funding one Abbott classroom at two of the centers. The center was opened in 1987 to serve lower-income working families in Mercer County.

The center in Trenton is one of more than 350 in the state's 30 Abbott school districts statewide that are offering a state-funded preschool program for some 44,000 three-and four-year-olds in designated communities.

"My goal is to ensure the best possible education for all New Jersey children -- from preschool through college," said Gov. Whitman. Instituting higher preschool standards, such as certified teachers in every classroom, is one way the Governor is helping to ensure that children are prepared for school.

To help achieve quality in preschool classrooms, the state is developing a new certification for early childhood education. The State Board of Education is in the process of approving a new Preschool-Grade Three license, and institutions of higher education are gearing up to offer appropriate curriculum and training to teacher candidates.

"There is no doubt that young children learn differently than do older children," said Gov. Whitman. "By establishing this new certification, we'll make sure every preschool teacher is well-versed on how to teach preschoolers."

Also to ensure quality programs, the Governor recently announced special safety and program inspections of all Abbott preschools within the first 60 days of the start of each program.

"This is just the beginning," said the Governor. "My goal is to have full-day, quality programs with certified teachers and a nationally-recognized model curriculum."

