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NEWS RELEASE

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

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

As part of this commitment, all 30 Abbott districts will see full day programs in the next 12- 24 months, a new certification is being developed for teachers of grades preschool through three and standards for centers are being developed by a newly formed task force. The Departments of Education and Human Services are also funding a long-term evaluation of Abbott preschool programs to ensure their effectiveness.

"I know how important it is to the future of the children this program is serving that it provide an education of the highest quality," said Gov. Whitman. "I am committed to doing everything necessary to ensure that quality programs are being offered for our children."

"My commitment to this program extends beyond what was asked for by the State Supreme Court. Full day preschool will be offered to all Abbott children and new standards are being developed to ensure that when children step into our Abbott programs they are receiving an enriching head start to their education."

To help achieve quality in preschool classrooms, the state is developing a new certification for early childhood education teachers. 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."

A recently formed Task Force on Early Childhood Education Programs has been formed to develop an enriching educational program for preschool programs. The task force will forward recommendations to the Department of Education and the recommendations will include guiding principles and performance standards and expectations.

Also to ensure quality programs, the Governor asked that special safety and program inspections of all Abbott preschools be performed within the first 60 days of the start of each program. Nearly all of the currently operating programs have been inspected and while none displayed immediate physical or safety violations, those exhibiting any infractions of standards will be reinspected.

"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."

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. Currently, 27,000 children are enrolled in the state program.

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.

"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.

