

*Lessons in Strategic Communications*

# **RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY COLLABORATION**

## **A New Jersey Case Study**

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*A Product of the Early Care and Education Collaborative*

# INTRODUCTION

Too often vital research in the early care and education field does not get used effectively for advocacy purposes. While researchers and advocates often share the same goals, they tend to operate on separate tracks.

This brief<sup>1</sup> explores how research and advocacy can be bridged for greater effect using *strategic communications*. By definition, strategic communications means a deliberate plan or tactics for using communications as a channel for achieving a certain result.<sup>2</sup> Collaborative work in the state of New Jersey around the goal of achieving a comprehensive and quality early care and education system is used as a backdrop for learning about effective practice.

It is important to acknowledge upfront the importance of context. Undoubtedly, the political and judicial circumstances and availability of relevant research and local expertise described here are unique to New Jersey. Also the presence of two parties who encouraged the New Jersey collaboration – the Schumann Fund for New Jersey and the Communications Consortium Media Center in Washington D.C. – made a distinct difference. However, the purpose is to use New Jersey as the *background* for a discussion of transferable lessons that can be used in any state context.

## STATE-FUNDED PRESCHOOL IN NEW JERSEY

New Jersey provides for state-funded preschool in its most disadvantaged geographic areas. In 1998 the New Jersey State Supreme Court took special action on behalf of young children in the state’s 30 most disadvantaged school districts (see the map at right).<sup>3</sup> These districts serve about one-fourth of the school-aged children in New Jersey. With the goal of enabling children in low-income school districts to enter kindergarten with the same skills and abilities as children in the state’s wealthier districts, the Court ruled that *all* three- and four-year-olds in those districts have access to a *high-quality* and *comprehensive* preschool education. This ruling came out of the long-running Court case *Abbott v. Burke*.



<sup>1</sup> This brief was developed as a product of the Early Care and Education Collaborative, a multi-year project of six state-based child advocacy organizations and five national organizations working on early care and education issues. The project’s purpose is to use strategic communications and public education as a means for increasing the supply and the quality of early care and education investments in six states.

<sup>2</sup> Bonk, K., Griggs, H., & Tines, E. (1999). *Strategic communications for nonprofits*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>3</sup> Map is copied from the Education Law Center Web site. Retrieved December 9, 2001 from [http://www.edlawcenter.org/public\\_html/map/abbott\\_map.html](http://www.edlawcenter.org/public_html/map/abbott_map.html).

## **Abbott v. Burke**

*Abbott v. Burke* began in 1970 as a New Jersey Supreme Court case over the constitutionality of the state's formula for public school funding. In 1981, the case began to focus distinctly on the funding and supplemental program needs of the state's poorest or special needs school districts (referred to as the *Abbott* districts).<sup>4</sup>

Supplemental programs had the goal of providing services "over and above regular education" in the *Abbott* districts to eliminate learning disadvantages and improve academic achievement levels.<sup>5</sup> Preschool was one of the supplemental programs the Court identified as necessary to ensure that children entered school ready to learn.

### **Quality Preschool as Defined in *Abbott v. Burke*** (as identified in *Abbott V* and clarified in *Abbott VI*)

#### **Substantive Standards**

Specific substantive standards geared toward school readiness skill development.

#### **Certification**

A certified teacher and aide in every preschool classroom (both district- and community-based). Already-hired teachers without a college degree have four years to obtain certification and are to be evaluated annually. New teachers must be college graduates and have a limited time period to become certified. Additional funding must be made available to assist existing staff obtain a degree and certification if the current scholarship program proves insufficient.

#### **Class Size**

One certified teacher and an aide for every fifteen students.

#### **Provider Contracts**

School district has responsibility and authority for preschool programs. Contracts with community-based providers must include clear expectations, necessary supports, and accountability measures.

#### **Facilities and Supplemental Program Funding**

Adequate funding for space, facilities, supplies, teaching faculty, staff, and transportation needed to implement quality programs.

#### **Community Outreach**

Concerted school district outreach and enrollment efforts, with funding provided by the Department of Education if necessary.

In 1998, the Court went a step beyond establishing a mandate for preschool; it mandated that preschool programs in the *Abbott* districts be *high-quality* and defined program standards. In defining quality, the Court focused on six areas (see the text box at left). While this definition laid out what the state was responsible for in terms of quality programs, at the same time it created a number of challenges in making sure the necessary supports were in place to implement them. Challenges included securing adequate funding, facilities, teacher training, and outreach and collaboration.

### **The Role of Research in *Abbott***

One of the most notable features of the *Abbott* case was the Supreme Court's explicit use of

research to inform its rulings. Early care and education research played a key role in at least two major ways:

- 1) *Determining supplemental programs.* In making the case for high-quality preschool as part of the supplemental programs children in the *Abbott* districts needed, early care and education research factored prominently into the Court's decisions about what was necessary in terms of quality programs.

<sup>4</sup> From 1981 through 2001, *Abbott v. Burke* was argued before the Supreme Court seven times.

<sup>5</sup> *Abbott v. Burke*, 153 N.J. 480, 710 A.2d 450 (1998). Ed. Law Rep. 258.

2) *Monitoring Abbott implementation.* After the Court mandated *Abbott*-district preschool, research became a tool for monitoring *Abbott* implementation. Since the preschool mandate began in 1998, the Center for Early Education Research (CEER) at Rutgers University has tracked *Abbott* implementation and issued two reports:

- A 1999 report<sup>6</sup> on needs assessments in the *Abbott* districts to determine the needs of children and the capabilities of providers in those districts
- A 2001 report<sup>7</sup> with updated needs assessment data and an assessment of the state's implementation progress.

### The Role of Advocacy in *Abbott*

Advocates played and continue to play a significant role in the *Abbott* cases. Notable participants have included the Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) and the Early Care and Education Coalition.

ACNJ is a statewide nonprofit child advocacy organization. The organization's main role in the *Abbott* courtroom has been to provide testimony and recommendations. Outside the courtroom, ACNJ identifies and publicizes barriers to successful implementation, performs outreach and education to school districts, and convenes those concerned about and dealing with *Abbott* implementation. In this capacity, ACNJ leads the Early Care and Education Coalition.

#### Key Participants in *Abbott v. Burke*

##### Court

New Jersey Supreme Court, the state's highest court

##### Plaintiffs

Children in the *Abbott* districts represented by the *Education Law Center*, a Newark-based non-profit dedicated to pursuing equal educational opportunity on behalf of poor, minority children and children with disabilities.

##### Defendants

State Commissioners of Education (Fred Burke in 1981)

##### Researchers

Led by Dr. W. Steven Barnett, the *Center for Early Education Research* (CEER) at Rutgers University uses research to improve early childhood education and care for all children.

##### Advocates

*Association for Children of New Jersey* (ACNJ) – A statewide advocacy organization that acts as a non-partisan voice to improve the lives and living conditions of NJ children.

*Early Care and Education Coalition* – A statewide coalition of over 40 individuals and organizations, led by ACNJ, founded in 1998 with the goal of developing comprehensive state policy on early care and education.

The Early Care and Education Coalition's goal is the development of a comprehensive state policy on early childhood education. To that end, the group both identifies the critical elements of a long-term policy on early care and education for all New Jersey children, and sets principles and recommendations to guide *Abbott* implementation.

Parties affected by *Abbott* are diverse and so the coalition is diverse. It includes community-based providers, school administrators, educators, unions, and researchers. The coalition participates in *Abbott* by advising the plaintiffs' case and providing testimony. Outside the courtroom it engages in policy advocacy with the Department of Education and the legislature, holds press conferences, works with the media, and holds community forums.

<sup>6</sup> Barnett, W.S., Tarr, J., & Frede, E. (1999). *Children's educational needs and community capacity in the Abbott districts*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Early Education Research.

<sup>7</sup> Barnett, W.S., Tarr, J., Lamy, C., & Frede, E. (2001). *Fragile lives, shattered dreams: A report on implementation of preschool education in New Jersey's Abbott districts*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Early Education Research.

## CASE STUDY: NEW JERSEY COLLABORATION

While the discussion above shows the distinct and important roles that researchers and advocates played and continue to play in *Abbott*, what is also unique here is how they worked together. Their common goal of achieving a comprehensive and quality early care and education system in New Jersey forged a natural relationship that they built on.

Broadly speaking, New Jersey researchers (Center for Early Education Research (CEER)) and advocates (Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) and the Early Care and Education Coalition) used *strategic communications* as their medium for collaboration. Strategic communications is a deliberate plan or tactics for using communications as a channel for achieving certain results.<sup>8</sup> In this case the intended results were to inform the *Abbott* court case and implementation.

### A Collaborative Press Conference

In the spring and summer of 2001, New Jersey researchers and advocates decided to work together to inform *Abbott v. Burke* as the case was getting ready to go before the Court a seventh time, and as *Abbott* implementation geared up for the 2001-02 school year. The Center for Early Education Research (CEER) had recently completed their second report on *Abbott* implementation and was getting ready to release it publicly. At the same time, advocates were getting ready to release another set of recommendations to the Court and the state on *Abbott* implementation.

**The Decision to Collaborate.** Encouraged by their foundation officer at the Schumann Fund for New Jersey and advised by a communications expert at the Communications Consortium Media Center in Washington D.C., ACNJ, CEER, and the Early Care and Education Coalition determined that a joint release of the report and recommendations would be a more effective approach than their separate release. This decision was based in part on the fact that the two pieces of information directly complemented one another. Advocates used CEER's findings as one basis for their recommendations.

This decision was also based on prior experience around the release of CEER's 1999 report on *Abbott* implementation. This first report found that the quantity and quality of preschool programs in the *Abbott* districts was too low to meet the needs of children. While the report's intent was not to place blame on preschool providers, when it was released, many providers, especially in the *Abbott* districts, were taken aback by what they perceived to be the messages behind the findings – that they were to blame for the study's findings on quality.

This interpretation of findings from the first report drew a backlash of discontent from many in New Jersey's early care and education community and ultimately may have affected the report's impact on the media, public, and policymakers. Media accounts on the report featured mixed commentary on the findings from the early care and education community. The lack of a strong and unified provider backing made it difficult to get the report's recommendations through to the administration and legislature. The joint and strategic release of the second CEER report in 2001 was meant to avoid that outcome a second time.

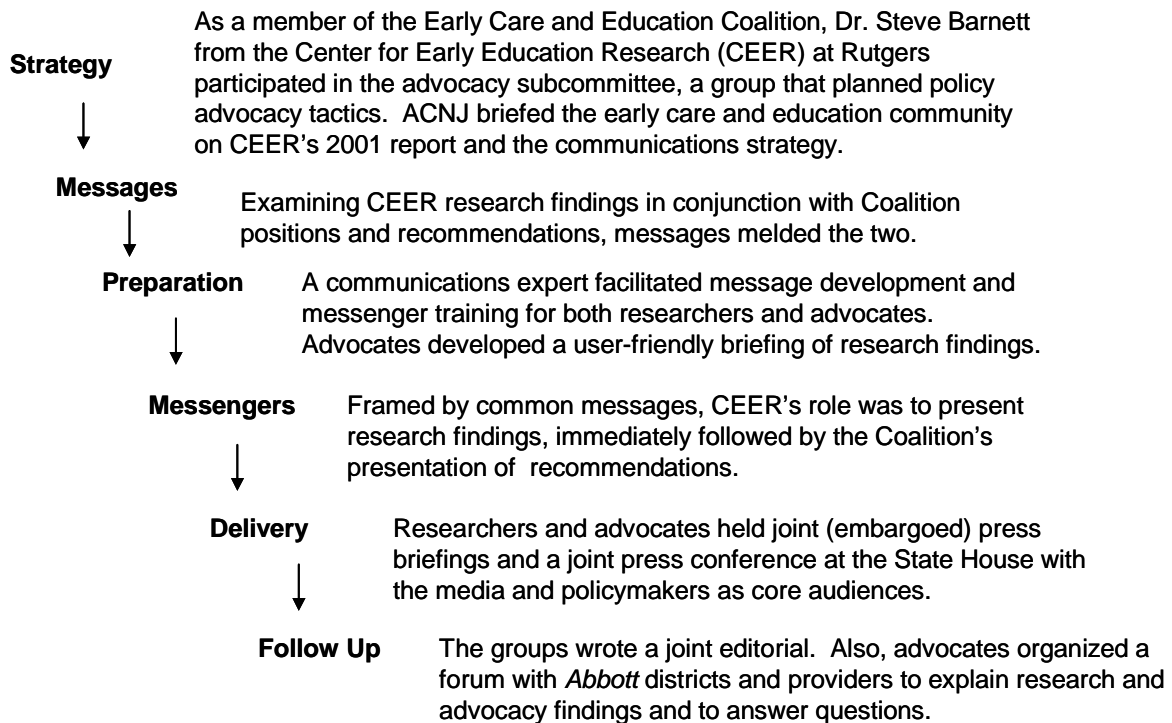
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<sup>8</sup> Bonk, K., Griggs, H., & Tines, E. (1999). *Strategic communications for nonprofits*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

**The Press Conference.** Advocates and researchers used a press conference at the New Jersey State House as their main mechanism for collaboration. Their aim was to engage the media as a way of informing the public and the state about what was and was not happening in *Abbott* districts and what should be done as a result.

Advocates and researchers worked together at all steps leading up to and following the press conference, which took place on May 31, 2001. The figure below illustrates the steps involved in the collaboration.

### Research-Advocacy Collaboration in the 2001 Press Conference



In preparation for the event, advocates consulted with New Jersey's larger early care and education community about the findings in the second report, the collaborative communications strategy, and the press conference messages. This process informed the messages developed and language used. For example, the group together identified metaphors to use (e.g. pole vaulting) that showed while things *had* improved in the *Abbott* districts, there was still a ways to go and therefore more resources were needed.

To implement the strategy, a few days before the event the researchers and advocates briefed the press together (using embargoed information). They then shared the stage at the State House press conference, with Dr. Barnett from CEER first presenting research findings and then advocates relaying complementary recommendations about funding, facilities, training, and community outreach.

Follow-up steps to the event included writing a joint editorial to again get out the core messages in the media, and a community forum for the larger early care and education community to ensure the report's messages were being interpreted accurately.

**Press Conference Outcomes.** Press conference outcomes can be examined for the multiple players and target audiences involved.

*Advocates - ACNJ, and the Early Care and Education Coalition*

Benefits from the collaborative press conference included less divisiveness among advocates and a more unified provider reaction to the second report. The involvement of the provider community in the preparation, implementation, and follow-up to the press conference was successful in limiting misinterpretations of findings. The collaboration with CEER also increased credibility for the advocates' recommendations because they were connected directly to CEER research. Finally, the collaboration with CEER helped to cement a collaborative relationship that will sustain over the long term.

*Researchers – Center for Early Education Research (CEER)*

Researchers gained capacity in how to do strategic communications, better relationships with the New Jersey provider community, and greater media coverage for the report than would have been generated with a solo press release. Dr. Barnett from CEER commented, "This was by far the most sophisticated release we have ever done."<sup>9</sup>

*Media* – The deliberate strategy leading up to the press event and then the event itself generated coverage in most of New Jersey's major daily newspapers.<sup>10</sup> The follow-up op-ed ran in at least five of these dailies. According to one communications expert at ACNJ, the media for the most part used their intended framing and incorporated the research findings accurately into the coverage. Setting up question-and-answer sessions with journalists before the press conference helped to ensure this result. In fact, on the day of the press conference when the administration challenged the report's findings, reporters briefed earlier were able to say, "No, it's not wrong, have you read the report?"

*Policymakers* - Recommendations relayed at the press conference require the New Jersey Administration and Legislature to take action in the *Abbott* districts. The extent to which the press conference generated this action has been mixed. On another level, the press conference was intended to keep the state accountable on the *Abbott* decision and make sure that public attention on the issue did not wane. To that extent, the media coverage generated by the press conference and the success of the op-ed's placement (which was targeted specifically to policymakers) were positive indicators of success.

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Steve Barnett interview, January 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Daily newspapers included *The New York Times*, *Star-Ledger* (statewide), *The Times* (Trenton), *Asbury Park Press*, *The Inquirer* (Philadelphia), *The Record* (Bergen-Hackensack), *The Press* (Atlantic City), *The Tribune* (Central New Jersey).

# LESSONS ON EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

Below are three transferable lessons, based on the New Jersey case study, about bridging research and advocacy and using strategic communications as the medium for doing so.

## 1) Negotiate Researcher and Advocate Roles

While researchers and advocates often work on the same issues, target the same audiences, and can derive mutual benefit from one another, barriers can exist to their effective collaboration. For example, some researchers fear that a visible relationship with advocates will negatively impact their perceived impartiality, particularly with decision makers and academic and research colleagues. At the same time, advocates worry about their own image with researchers who do not have the trust of the communities and stakeholders they serve or represent.

In New Jersey this relationship was not problematic because the researchers and advocates, assisted by their foundation officer at the Schumann Fund for New Jersey, negotiated their respective roles up front and eliminated any apprehension about the relationship. The table below outlines the roles, tasks, and value of the collaborative relationship established between New Jersey researchers and advocates.

**Negotiated Roles in New Jersey Researcher and Advocate Collaboration**

	<b>Researchers</b>	<b>Advocates</b>
Overall Roles	Inform advocates and <i>all</i> interested parties about what is best for children in the <i>Abbott</i> districts based on accumulated evidence and a sound research base.	Shape and implement an advocacy agenda based on what the research and evidence base says.
Tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conduct research</li> <li>- Advise advocates</li> <li>- Develop research-based recommendations</li> <li>- Inform policymakers and advocates of research findings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Contribute experience to the research knowledge base</li> <li>- Contribute advocacy savvy</li> <li>- Develop recommendations based on research</li> <li>- Engage in policy advocacy</li> </ul>
Value of Collaborative Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identification of the right research questions</li> <li>- Better research access</li> <li>- Better utilization of research findings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ability to build a strong and convincing advocacy case based on sound research and established expertise.</li> </ul>

Using these role definitions, New Jersey researchers and advocates collaborated on all aspects of strategic communications, from strategy development to message delivery and follow up. Their affiliation was public and they delivered joint messages together (in the same place and at the same time).



## 2) Develop Joint Messages

For their joint press conference and follow up communications work, New Jersey researchers and advocates teamed up to build joint messages about the supports needed for quality preschool in New Jersey. As the table below illustrates, they bridged CEER’s research in the *Abbott* districts with the Coalition’s broad-based knowledge of the issues and how they should be addressed.

**Joint Research and Advocacy Messages on Necessary Preschool Supports**

	<b>2001 CEER Research Findings</b>	<b>2001 ECE Coalition Recommendations</b>
Overall Progress and Supports	Most young children are still left behind. State preschool policy has been to try to create the appearance of compliance with the Court, while minimizing state spending and continuing to treat early education as little more than baby-sitting.	“We’re upset, we’re dismayed, we’re disappointed.” Another year has been wasted for children who desperately need these programs.  <i>A special commissioner to supervise preschool programs in the Abbott districts</i>
Funding	Costs must take into account a reduced class size, wrap-around child care, a fifty-week school year, nutrition, health, and social services. Costs for one year of full-day preschool are between \$9,000 and \$14,000 per pupil. Costs for quality preschool programs are between \$12,000 and \$14,000.	It is time to move away from a funding figure based on what the state is willing to pay, to one that reflects the true cost of high quality, well-planned education.  <i>An immediate increase in preschool funding and more realistic budgeting</i>
Facilities	Many classrooms have indoor space problems and outdoor play areas have safety hazards that could result in serious injury.	The state’s response to meeting the facilities needs of the early childhood community has been inadequate on all levels.  <i>A standard for preschool facilities that ensures quality rather than simply accommodates boosted enrollment</i>
Teacher Training	Only 15% of classes studied provided good support for child development. Teachers scored high on items measuring morning greetings and departure times and score lower on nap, toileting and safety practices, and low across all items measuring materials for activities like art, music, science, and math.	High quality early childhood programs require well-trained teachers. The existing higher educational system is inadequate to meet training needs.  <i>An incentive fund to help preschool teachers meet new education requirements and improve classroom quality</i>
Outreach and Collaboration	Far less than half of 60,000 eligible children are in <i>Abbott</i> -funded classes. Data indicate no progress toward increased enrollment of 4-year-olds, and only a few percentage point increase for 3-year-olds.	A significant number of children are left unserved.  <i>A realistic plan to enroll all children in high-quality programs within a specified number of years that will end legal battles</i>

### 3) Choose Persuasive Messengers

Messages need to be delivered by sources the audiences trust and find persuasive. When researchers and advocates share common goals and messages, building on one another’s assets as messengers and minimizing weaknesses makes sense. The table below generalizes assets and drawbacks of researchers and advocates as messengers. These characteristics may change depending on the audiences involved.

**Researcher and Advocates as Messengers: Assets and Drawbacks**

	<b>Assets as Messengers</b>	<b>Drawbacks as Messengers</b>
Researchers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Seen as credible and qualified to make judgments</li> <li>- Convey objectivity backed by methodology</li> <li>- Seen as unbiased, nonpartisan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Have difficulty translating research into concise messages understood by lay audiences</li> <li>- Lack experience in strategic communications to multiple audiences</li> <li>- May be unknown by many target audiences</li> </ul>
Advocates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Garner public trust and admiration</li> <li>- Are inspirational</li> <li>- Have a proven public track record</li> <li>- Have experience with communications</li> <li>- Can connect to and have contacts with multiple audiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- May be seen as biased and partisan</li> <li>- Can be seen as either too soft or too extreme</li> <li>- Can make issues and messages more complex than they need to be</li> </ul>

*Determine who has clout with the audience.* In New Jersey, researchers added perceived objectivity to the delivery of joint messages, particularly with decision makers and the media. Researchers may not, however, have this same effect with all audiences. Advocates have more experience, credibility, and trust with certain audiences, like, as was seen in New Jersey, the early care and education community.

*Build on differing areas of expertise.* In addition to making the collaborative relationship efficient, making sure both parties capitalize on their different areas of expertise can lead to cross-training and skill building. For example, advocates are generally experienced in the art of strategic communications, and can contribute that expertise to the collaborative relationship.

## CONCLUSION

Most nonprofits and advocates already know how to collaborate. Yet collaborative relationships between advocates and researchers are rare. The New Jersey case study shows that strategic communications offers much potential as a vehicle for effective advocate-researcher partnering. Advocates and researchers need only to take what is already known about collaboration, and apply it to their communications work. “[M]aking a difference in society requires an ability to coordinate both the messages and messengers.<sup>11</sup>”

<sup>11</sup> Bonk, K., Griggs, H., & Tines, E. (1999). *Strategic communications for nonprofits*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p.126.