

California's Major Investment in Universal Transitional Kindergarten

What Districts Need to Fulfill Its Promise

H. Alix Gallagher



High-quality early learning experiences (i.e., developmentally appropriate, play-based instruction with clear learning goals) have positive long-term effects on student outcomes. As California rolls out Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK), district leaders focused on meeting state requirements for hiring qualified staff and finding appropriate facilities, and thus have been unable to focus on quality. The state can take the following actions to incentivize and support districts to broaden their focus for UTK: set a vision, establish goals, and measure progress in terms of enrollment, key implementation features, and student outcomes for preschool through third grade; align resources and support to advance high-quality implementation of UTK at scale; and publicly communicate key aspects of implementation and outcomes, enabling communities to monitor whether their districts are serving them well.

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Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, California's student achievement lagged the national average and had greater disparities among student groups relative to other states. In fact, student achievement in affluent districts was on par with typical districts across the country, but in less affluent communities, students were about a full year behind the national average.¹ Research shows that once students are in California's public schools, however, they progress at similar (or better) rates than in many parts of the country.² The vast achievement gap in California, therefore, is present at kindergarten, which is why one of the most promising approaches for enabling California students to meet state standards and close the gap with students elsewhere is ensuring broad participation in high-quality preschool.³

Preschool can have significant, lasting impacts on student learning and development, especially for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Yet research shows that preschool programs vary, with some having few, if any, long-term positive impacts on students. A recent well-publicized study of statewide preschool in Tennessee found negative effects on students' performance on state tests, disciplinary outcomes, attendance, and participation in special education in elementary school.⁴ While these findings are an outlier, there is strong consensus in the field that differences in outcomes across preschool programs are driven by the extent to which they offer high-quality learning environments that are well aligned with the elementary schools students subsequently attend.⁵ Cumulatively, the research base shows that if California expanded participation in preschool that provides developmentally appropriate learning opportunities focused on a trajectory of standards that is coherent with our expectations for students in elementary school, this could play a key role in addressing the persistent achievement problems in the state.

Understanding the importance of early learning, Governor Gavin Newsom made Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) access central to his education strategy.⁶ The centerpiece of the state's preschool investment is Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK).⁷ Starting in the 2022–23 academic year, districts are required to offer access to transitional kindergarten (TK) to increasingly younger students (based on moving the birth-date requirement earlier each year) until all 4-year-olds have access to TK by the 2025–26 school year. Between 2021–22 and 2022–23, California provided \$1.2 billion in one-time funding to support facility improvements, planning, and workforce development for TK. With the governor's January 2023 budget proposal, the administration has reinforced this ongoing commitment. The proposal includes \$690 million of additional Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) funds to support the expansion of TK across all districts in the state and an additional \$165 million to reflect the costs associated with maintaining the required 12:1 staffing ratio. If enrollment meets predictions, over time the additional year of schooling for TK is estimated to cost \$3 billion annually.⁸

This is a critical juncture for UTK, as the program is growing and educator and community expectations for what UTK entails are being formed. Early implementation is the best time to address emerging challenges and remove barriers to quality, avoiding the possibility of districts settling into a status quo that does not meet California’s needs. **This brief focuses on what California state leaders need to do to ensure that UTK achieves its goal of providing a high-quality option for all 4-year-olds.** We start by describing the state of UTK expansion in its first year (2022–23) and then identify key gaps in current policy and implementation that the state needs to address to meet the policy goal of universal access to high-quality TK for all students.

Our findings are the result of

- 25 interviews of district, County Office of Education (COE), and state leaders within California; researchers; and national experts to understand promising P–3 practices across the country, the current state of California policy, and district and COE experiences supporting UTK expansion and UPK more broadly;
- a review of existing research; and
- analysis of policy documents.

The Current State of Universal Transitional Kindergarten Expansion

California has made a major investment in early childhood education. The state is taking a relatively complex approach—called the “mixed-delivery” model—to offer choices to families for the learning environment they want for their children. This approach also gives local district leaders flexibility in what they offer in addition to TK, while the state makes additional investments in state preschool, childcare contracts, and childcare vouchers. This model could ultimately serve California’s diverse communities very well, but in the early stages of UTK rollout, districts are scrambling to meet the most basic requirements: offering at least one TK class, taught by an appropriately credentialed teacher, in a facility that meets state guidelines.⁹

This section presents a district-level perspective on UTK expansion, based on interviews with district leaders and COE staff focused on early childhood. What we heard was analogous to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs; that is, districts are focused on the most basic needs—facilities and staffing, where they are prioritizing meeting state mandates—and lack the guidance and support necessary to establish high-quality programs. This focus reflects district leaders’ understanding of the requirements and incentives that currently exist in California policy as well as the paucity of supports that could enable consistent, high-quality TK offerings.

California Universal Prekindergarten Policies at a Glance

- California is committed to achieving UPK access using a mixed-delivery model that includes Head Start (ages 3–5), the California State Preschool Program (CSSP; ages 3–5), and TK (ages 4–5) as well as private, community, and home options.
- All students who turn 4 by September 2 of the 2025–26 school year will be eligible for TK, and every local educational agency (LEA) must offer TK, although the program can be either 3 hours or full day. TK is paid for by Proposition 98 funds as an additional year of the (formerly) K–12 public school system, with districts receiving funding for every student they serve according to their LCFF rates.
- The Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELO-P) provides additional funding for before/afterschool and summer to give TK–6 students access to 9 hours of education and care every day. A wide range of providers can offer services under ELO-P, and there are fewer guidelines for the offerings, although programs serving TK or kindergarten students are required to maintain a pupil-to-staff ratio of not more than 10:1. Under current policy, students enrolled in TK could spend more of their time in an extended learning program than in TK.
- In collaboration with the Office of Public School Instruction, the California Department of Education (CDE) has issued specific requirements for appropriate PK/TK/kindergarten facilities, along with competitive grants to support their development.
- CDE has multiple grant programs designed to help develop a credentialed workforce.¹⁰
- CDE is in the process of revising the California Preschool Learning Foundations (anticipated in November 2023) and the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) to span preschool through third grade (P–3) and clearly articulate the alignment between the Preschool Learning Foundations and Common Core State Standards for relevant subjects.
- There are currently no data on students younger than third grade on the California School Dashboard; although LEAs must report enrollment to the state, they do not report whether TK and kindergarten students are enrolled in half-day versus full-day programs. LEAs are not required to post enrollment information on their websites or report it on their Local Control and Accountability Plans.
- The state collects data from all LEAs on their early childhood offerings but has not invested in a learning infrastructure to track implementation progress, understand the effects of TK, and support improvement over time.

Facilities

Providing appropriate educational facilities is a general concern across the state given current policies and historically unmet needs for construction and modernization.¹¹ State education code specifies facility requirements for TK and kindergarten classrooms, and funding the necessary construction and renovation is one of district leaders' top concerns.¹² The 2021-22 and 2022-23 budgets allocated \$590 million in a grant program to support construction and retrofit of preschool, TK and kindergarten classrooms. The state received \$1.48 billion in requests for those funds.¹³ Nonetheless, Governor Newsom's May Budget Revision proposes delaying funding of an additional \$550 million for this program until 2024-25. Our interviews provide corroboration for others' findings that facility upgrades for TK are a challenge where districts perceive insufficient state support.¹⁴ District leaders we interviewed reported a range of strategies for making facilities compliant, including using existing bond funding to revamp classrooms and centralizing TK services in an existing site configured for 4-year-olds. The former approach requires tradeoffs with other planned infrastructure projects, and the latter can mean that TK facilities are not colocated with the elementary grades that the 4-year-olds will transition into and may be more difficult for families to access.

Staffing

Staffing is a critical issue, with CDE estimating that 12,000–16,000 teachers credentialed to teach TK will need to be hired by 2025–26,¹⁵ even as many districts are experiencing a teacher shortage in grades K–12. Starting in 2022, TK classrooms were required to have a minimum of two adults (one must be an appropriately credentialed teacher, and the other can be a credentialed teacher, classified staff, or paraprofessional) and a maximum of 24 students, for a 12:1 student ratio. Maintaining this ratio requires the more consistent presence of a co-teacher as well as smaller class sizes than many TK classes provided prior to the UTK expansion.¹⁶ Additionally, the state has designated specific qualifications for both a teacher and a second adult (typically a paraprofessional), creating a new TK–3 teaching credential and a series of pathways for individuals to become credentialed to teach TK, depending on their current education and work experience in early childhood settings.¹⁷ The governor's January 2023 budget proposal also recommends increased qualification requirements for paraprofessionals (beyond the current requirements of high school equivalence, background check, and passage of a local basic skills test¹⁸). These policies will ensure that those working in TK have more education specific to their roles, but it will also further restrict who is eligible to fill those jobs.

Districts' staffing approaches have been variable and often ad hoc for many reasons, including that most preschool providers do not currently meet the requirements to teach TK.¹⁹ At the extreme, one district leader reported reassigning a middle school teacher to teach TK because she had the required early childhood units on her transcript and so was deemed "qualified," even though she did not want to teach TK and no one believed she was as effective

with 4-year-olds as she was with adolescents. District leaders reported even greater concerns about their ability to find fully qualified TK teachers as UTK expands because much of the existing PK workforce cannot meet the requirements for a TK–3 credential (bachelor’s degree, coursework, and practicum) while teaching preschool.

“ I would say the first thing is that—as much as I appreciate it that they said, ‘Let’s educate 4-year-olds and make that a universal thing’—nobody gave us any kind of plan for how that should take place. We were really left to our own devices to figure all of the logistics out and just to make the system work. ...

I would say the other piece was they ... said, ‘Okay, well, if you’re going to have TK, you’re going to have people who have this authorization.’ Then [they] said, ‘Yes, good luck finding them and good luck preparing them,’ and the universities who have teacher preparation programs didn’t receive any accommodation for that. We had to figure out how to find these people.”

DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

Another facet of the staffing challenge is that the general K–12 workforce does not closely mirror the characteristics of the communities they serve, unlike the current early childhood workforce. The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment reported that in 2020, 76 percent of students ages 0–4 (the cohort that includes TK students) were children of color; while 70 percent of center-based early childhood educators were also people of color, only 39 percent of California’s K–12 teacher workforce were. Although there are paths for early childhood teachers to meet the qualifications required to teach TK, 51 percent of the existing preschool teacher workforce would need to acquire a bachelor’s degree in addition to a teacher credential to qualify as a TK teacher.²⁰ Unfortunately, absent innovative measures to ensure that those holding a credential appropriate for TK will be more diverse than the current K–12 workforce, the adults teaching 4-year-olds will likely be decreasingly connected to the communities they serve as districts expand UTK.

A final staffing challenge consistently raised by experts we interviewed as well as existing research²¹ is that principals typically lack readiness to lead schools that include 4-year-olds. As California adds a new grade to schools, it goes without saying that few existing principals will have had experience with instructional leadership at this grade level. High-quality, developmentally appropriate instruction for TK is largely play based and, as a result, should look quite different from appropriate instruction for older students.²² Most districts do not appear to have a sufficient plan to address their administrators’ learning needs, even if they are aware that their school leaders are unprepared.

Standards and Assessments

In most districts, facility and staffing issues—which are obvious preconditions to providing access to TK—dominate leaders’ thinking. Yet research shows that only “high-quality” preschool programs lead to improved student outcomes, so it is critical at this juncture that district leaders provide a high-quality experience (i.e., with clear learning goals that are coherent for P–3, developmentally appropriate instruction towards those goals, and measurement of students’ progress). For those few leaders who are already focused on quality, interviewees report that the state provides insufficient guidance about what TK should cover and how to assess student progress.

“ If this is a play-based program, that’s completely different than what a second-grade teacher is going to be used to doing in their classroom. I think that’s going to be one of the really tough things: where districts get personnel and help them make that mind shift. I don’t think the state has defined for us whether this is a developmental program or an academic first year of a 2-year kinder[garten]. ... If it’s the first year of a 2-year, it’s easy to just split those kinder standards, [for example] ‘You’ve got to know half the letters in TK.’ ”

INSTRUCTIONAL COACH

One aspect of the problem is that key documents are not coherent for P–3 and are currently being revised. The California Preschool Learning Foundations lay out learning expectations in academic, cognitive, social-emotional, and physical domains for developing 3- and 4-year-olds in preschool. The Foundations are paired with the DRDP, an eight-domain observation-based tool designed to help teachers document and reflect on early learners’ growth. Preschool educators collect relevant data on an ongoing basis, using the accumulated evidence to complete the DRDP for each student every 6 months. Starting in kindergarten, the Common Core State Standards and a range of subject-specific frameworks provide guidance about what students are expected to know and do, and most districts track student progress using locally selected assessments. Our interviews also make clear that CDE’s description of TK as “the first year of a 2-year kindergarten program”²³ is confusing and (in the absence of clear guidance from CDE) is currently leading some TK programs to de-emphasize play-based learning and other developmentally appropriate practices for 4-year-olds. Finally, it is not until third grade that the state tests and reports on student progress. Our interviewees described this patchwork of standards and assessments as incoherent and confusing because it does not articulate the desired similarities and unique features of TK relative to preschool for 4-year-olds and kindergarten.

“ I think TK itself, too, has been in this limbo of, ‘We don’t really have our own—’ They thought of themselves as a mini kindergarten. It’s like, ‘Where are our TK standards?’ Well, you kind of combine some kinder, some preschool. Within our particular district, because there wasn’t that connection and link up to preschool, I would say it leaned much more to the kindergarten. Even coherent assessment systems and things like that, and data—it’s not there. It’s fully plugged in for kindergarten on up, but I think that’s where you need all of those pieces in place and where everybody is working together.”

DISTRICT PRESCHOOL DIRECTOR

CDE is currently revising the Preschool Learning Foundations—anticipated to be released in November 2023—and work is underway to revise the DRDP (at the time of this writing, there was no publicly announced release date). When released, the Preschool Learning Foundations will articulate alignment with the Common Core State Standards, but there is currently a gap in guidance around the appropriate content of TK and how to measure student progress. While the state is determining what should be happening in TK classrooms, many teachers, schools, and districts are moving ahead, figuring out on their own how to implement their programs locally and laying the groundwork for the long term; alternatively, they have paused in making thoughtful decisions as they wait for state guidance.

“ There are a lot of rumors out there that the state is going to say TK needs to use DRDP. ... [W]e’re holding off on choosing an assessment because I don’t want to go down one route, then the state’s going to go down another. That’s a waste of time of professional development ... resources [and] of political [capital].”

DISTRICT DIRECTOR OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

A second aspect of the problem may be the way districts access support through state websites and state and COE webinars. Although these resources provide a wealth of information, many district leaders and educators described the volume of information—and the fact that many policies, tools, and resources are in development and (as a result) are constantly changing—as overwhelming. For example, our interviews found little awareness of existing state documents²⁴ that could have been helpful to districts in their early TK rollout. The result of rolling out TK in advance of clear guidance using a communications system that provides a deluge of scattered resources will necessarily be idiosyncratic practices, which will start to form both professional and parental expectations for what a TK experience should be.

Stakeholder Communication

A central tenet of California’s education governance under the LCFF is the importance of facilitating local engagement with education systems by informing the public about how well schools are meeting students’ needs. Under current policy, there are minimal comparable data across all districts that could help community members understand districts’ work in UPK. CDE currently administers a survey that requires each COE and LEA to describe its plans for early childhood programs, even though the state has yet to provide guidance on curriculum, assessment, or pedagogy for TK. Although data are provided to CDE and researchers on program inputs, these data are not aggregated, and districts are currently not required to present them publicly at predictable intervals. There are also currently no elements on the California School Dashboard or any other public reporting space that capture any aspect of schools’ and districts’ K–2 performance or basic information about enrollment, implementation, or outcomes of TK. As a result, the public has limited information with which to engage productively with school systems about whether the district is meeting the needs of TK through second-grade learners. This absence of public information violates a core principle that LCFF uses to ensure quality and removes incentives for school systems to focus on the outcomes of early education.

A Path Forward

The size of California’s investment in early childhood education, the urgency for California to improve student learning in preschool through third grade, and the risk of not attaining the potential benefits mean that the stakes for providing effective policy are high. The state’s guidelines for staffing and facilities fall far short of ensuring the quality programs that research shows are needed to benefit students. Unfortunately, current policies incentivize only offering programs and do not provide either the motivation or capacity for most districts to develop high-quality programs. To incentivize and support districts to engage students in *high-quality* TK as part of a broader Universal Prekindergarten mixed-delivery model, California needs to do the following:

- set a vision, establish goals that incentivize high-quality TK, and measure progress towards those goals in terms of student enrollment, key implementation features, and student outcomes for P–3;
- align resources and support to advance high-quality implementation of UTK at scale; and
- publicly communicate key aspects of implementation and outcomes, enabling communities to monitor whether their districts are serving them well.

The state has begun taking some steps in the right direction. In this section, we lay out what it would look like for the state to better fulfill its role of supporting a high floor for quality in UTK.

Set Goals and Measure Progress for Student Enrollment, Key Implementation Features, and Student Outcomes for P–3

Enrollment. It became clear in our interviews with district leaders that many districts are rolling out TK very slowly and do not currently perceive a strong mandate for enrolling a high proportion of 4-year-olds in TK. Although they are meeting the requirement to offer TK to students at the required age level, they do not necessarily have the staff and facilities to serve many students and are not doing the community-engagement work that might drive a high level of participation. The complexity of California’s early childhood policy means that, in the absence of guidance from the state, district leaders lack a clear goal for what overall participation in UPK should be and how much they ought to seek to enroll 4-year-olds in TK to meet policy goals. It is also unclear to district leaders whether it is important to offer both state preschool and TK for 4-year-olds, whether full-day TK is preferable to half-day TK, what roles and responsibilities LEAs have for supporting quality programming in ELO-P, and what the differences ought to be in learning experiences across TK, CSSP, and ELO-P environments. An important step would be for the state to set enrollment targets that provide clear guidance to districts as they expand TK and specify how other early childhood providers should complement TK in each community’s UPK ecosystem.

Implementation. The state currently provides very broad guidance around program features in terms of facilities and staffing. Given prior research showing the benefits of aligning preschool and early elementary learning experiences,²⁵ the state needs to articulate goals for P–3 coherence that make sense in urban areas with high needs and a diversity of resources as well as in rural settings where there are not many entities beyond the LEA to support students’ needs. Ideally, the Preschool Learning Foundations would have been revised before the launch of expanded TK; that is no longer possible, although releasing them on an advanced timeline would be beneficial. When they are released, there needs to be a major redesign of implementation supports (as we describe in the next section).

Student outcomes. To date, California has not created any requirements for measuring student learning in TK; in fact, there are no requirements for measuring student learning until students finish third grade. This creates a problematic void in monitoring student learning and continuously improving if learning does not meet expectations. In the UPK space, it is critical that any measures capture whole child learning and are developmentally appropriate. The state has invested in work to revise the DRDP, but current experience with it suggests that although the DRDP is a high-quality measure, it takes substantial time for educators to get comfortable administering it and interpreting the results.²⁶ As the state rolls out the revised DRDP for TK, it needs to provide substantial professional development support to ensure high-quality use by PK and TK teachers. Additionally, the state needs to ensure vertical alignment with the DRDP, as with standards and frameworks, so that LEAs can track student progress from PK/TK into kindergarten and beyond. Ideally, in lieu of state assessments for primary grades, the state could require

districts to select assessments for students from kindergarten readiness through second grade to monitor student progress and drive continuous improvement.

Align Resources and Support to Advance High-Quality Implementation

Once the state has articulated a vision and goals for P–3 learning, educators will need to adapt their practices to meet them. Therefore, the work California needs to do to support strong implementation will just be starting when the Preschool Learning Foundations and DRDP are complete. Documents, workshops, and webinars—the types of resources CDE and COEs typically provide—can give some of the factual knowledge that teachers and administrators need. But an abundance of research shows that these types of professional learning opportunities are vastly insufficient for tasks like helping teachers and administrators, who are accustomed to traditional ways of teaching and assessing student learning, to adopt the play-based approaches and performance assessments that research tells us are the cornerstone of high-quality PK and TK.²⁷ Instead, educators need initial exposure to new information and practices to be supported by a coherent adult-learning system, with job-embedded opportunities to practice and receive feedback as well as appropriate instructional materials that match student learning goals and a vision of high-quality instruction.²⁸ One challenge to providing these types of adult-learning opportunities is the dearth of teachers' collaborative time for learning and ongoing supports for principal learning in many California school districts.

The state needs to provide guidance and support to COEs and districts on policy goals and key tools (e.g., the revised Preschool Learning Foundations and DRDP) that specify California's vision for high-quality P–3 learning. It should also support districts to reconceptualize their adult-learning systems so that they correspond to the knowledge base of effective teacher professional development systems. In turn, districts need to provide professional development for teachers to learn new instructional and assessment practices. Teachers and principals will also need time to collaborate on vertical articulation with P–3 educators within their district.

Require Public Communication of Key Aspects of Implementation and Outcomes

The public needs a way to understand all LEAs' progress in implementing universal, high-quality PK and TK. To understand whether new and expanded programs are successful, districts need to be able to see the impacts of their offerings as students move from PK and TK into the primary grades. The state could address the public's right to know the extent to which this investment is paying off by either adding components to the state Dashboard or creating some other requirement for public reporting around, at a minimum:

- foundational conditions for quality programs (staffing qualifications, facilities);
- UPK enrollment by program type (e.g., TK, CSSP, Head Start, full-day, half-day) and student subgroup (e.g., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status);

- identification of students who require special supports for equitable learning (e.g., special education and English learning); and
- measures of student progress (e.g., DRDP, kindergarten readiness, ELPAC, locally administered measures of student progress K–3).

This array of program measures and student outcomes would also form a foundation for districts to continuously improve their offerings.

Conclusion

California has taken its first steps towards improving student outcomes in our state’s public schools by making a massive investment in UPK and TK expansion. As they currently stand, the policies provide funding for TK expansion but few resources or incentives for implementing high-quality programs at scale. This is a critical shortcoming, given ample research over many years showing that participation in preschool is most strongly connected to positive student outcomes when the programs offer developmentally appropriate instruction oriented towards vertically coherent student learning goals. To close the gap between current policy and the state’s needs, California should complete the process of articulating a vision for TK as a coherent part of students’ P–3 experience, provide support for high-quality implementation, measure program outcomes as well as inputs for PK and TK, and require districts to share publicly the measures of program quality to support continuous improvement and public engagement.

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Author Biography

Alix Gallagher is the director of strategic partnerships at PACE, where she leads PACE's partnerships with California Education Partners and the CORE Districts.

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Improving education policy and practice and advancing equity through evidence

PACE is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. Founded in 1983, PACE bridges the gap between research, policy, and practice, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local decision makers to achieve improvement in performance and more equitable outcomes at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. We do this through:

- 1 bringing evidence to bear on the most critical issues facing our state;
- 2 making research evidence accessible; and
- 3 leveraging partnership and collaboration to drive system improvement.

Related Publications

Baron, K., et al. (2019, June). **Quality teaching and learning in pre-K classrooms: What it takes** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Koppich, J., & Stipek, D. (2020, January). **PreK–3 alignment: Challenges and opportunities in California**. Policy Analysis for California Education [Report].

Kurlaender, M., Reardon, S., Kalogrides, D., Reed, S., Brighthouse, H., & Reber, S. (2018, September). **Getting down to facts II: Outcomes and demographics of California's schools** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Stipek, D. (2018, September). **Getting down to facts II: Early childhood education in California** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.



Stanford Graduate School of Education
520 Galvez Mall, Suite 444
Stanford, CA 94305

Inquiry: info@edpolicyinca.org
Media: press@edpolicyinca.org

Office: 650.576.8484

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