

# California Transitional Kindergarten

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## Case Study

Early Childhood Policy

Developed by EarlyEdU at the University of Washington

Published October 2022

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*“We have a cautionary tale and a hopeful model.”*

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**Scott Moore, Executive Director, Kidango, Inc.**

California’s Transitional Kindergarten program illustrates the complexity of mixing politics and policy in the early childhood field. This case study incorporates perspectives from major influential organizations and policymakers in early learning, such as district and trade association leaders, researchers, higher education experts, and Head Start association staff. The case study reveals the tension between mixed delivery services and public school-based pre-kindergarten (pre-k) programs and the interplay between state, district, and community priorities. It also shows the potential unintended consequences and implementation challenges of well-intentioned policies meant to expand access and address equity issues.

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## Introduction

California is remaking its public school system to enhance early learning and school readiness by implementing transitional kindergarten (TK), which provides a free option for 4-year-olds whose families do not meet the income limits for state pre-k and Head Start. California's planned implementation of universal TK in 2025–26 will expand preschool access to 400,000 children. Universal TK is intended to close some of the most pronounced achievement gaps in the nation and promote equity in early learning by providing children and families more options and access to free preschool education. While TK offers an additional year of public school to all of California's 4-year-olds, it is one of many options for preschool in the state — including state preschool, Head Start, and community-based programs — that collectively comprise California's universal preschool system.



In March 2021, Governor Gavin Newsom signed the state budget law that included universal TK as part of a historic package of K–12 improvements. He explained, “With these investments, we are creating an educational system that supports students from the day they enter the classroom.”<sup>1</sup>

The program is expensive, with an estimated cost of about \$8.4 billion when it is fully implemented during the 2025–26 school year. It is also complicated as the 2021 state budget law that sets it in motion<sup>2</sup> includes: infrastructure improvements to make public K–12 school buildings and environments suitable for 4-year-olds; provisions for pre- and post-school care; benchmarks for teacher credentials, recruitment, and training; and ambitious student-to-teacher classroom ratio targets.

1 Gov. Gavin Newsom, “[California Roars Back: Governor Newsom Signs Historic Education Package to Reimagine Public Schools](#),” [press release], California Office of the Governor, July 9, 2021.

2 John Fensterwald, et al. [Lawmakers, Newsom Cut Deal on State Budget](#), EdSource, June 26, 2021.

As it pursues these goals, the state faces significant implementation challenges that include:

- Demand for thousands of credentialed teachers and teaching assistants for the new TK classrooms when California is already experiencing a K–12 teacher shortage of 21,000.
- Operating within a persistent philosophical debate about how children learn and gain social confidence in the classroom.
- Recruitment of new educational leadership, primarily principals, in the wake of an exodus from public schools beginning even before the COVID-19 epidemic.
- Provision of social and health services provided in other preschool contexts such as Head Start.
- Coordination across California’s early childhood and K–12 education sectors is not fully aligned, as is the case in several other states.

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## Why Transitional Kindergarten?

State education policymakers have long advocated for expanding access to high-quality early childhood education, based on a growing volume of research indicating the importance of early brain development and social and emotional learning. Studies have shown the benefits of quality teacher-child interactions and higher levels of children’s school readiness.<sup>3</sup> We also know that the quality of classroom instruction is often related to positive child outcomes in language, reading, and math skills.<sup>4</sup>

California’s experience with TK dates back more than a decade, and the role of the state in supporting early learning is considerably longer. But the state’s systems of early childhood education and care, as well as its vast K–12 apparatus, have been severely taxed by the COVID pandemic, which has drawn children and staff out of both systems. Proponents of universal TK support the expansion of early learning through California’s public schools as one way to reverse these trends while increasing access to early learning opportunities. In some ways, the timing of this step is propitious: California is experiencing sizable budget surpluses while Governor Newsom has expressed his commitment to serve as a champion of early childhood learning.

The TK expansion addresses long-term declining enrollment in California’s public schools — particularly those in urban districts — as a result not just of the COVID pandemic but because of out-migration of families from the expensive state, recently implemented immigration curbs, and declining birth rates of Latino families. California’s public-school districts vary in size from fewer

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3 Bridget E. Hatfield, et al, “[Thresholds in the Association Between Quality of Teacher–Child Interactions and Preschool Children’s School Readiness Skills](#),” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 36, (3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 2016), 561–71.

4 Margaret Burchinal, et al, “[Threshold Analysis of Association Between Child Care Quality and Child Outcomes for Low-Income Children in Pre-Kindergarten Programs](#),” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 25, no. 2, (2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter 2010), 166–76.

than 100 children in small rural districts to more than 600,000 children in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The districts vary widely in wealth, administrative framework, and their local school boards' political make-up and policies.

Of California's 500,000 4-year-olds, the state Department of Finance estimates that about 20% are likely to attend private programs; some will also attend state pre-k or Head Start, so policymakers predict about 400,000 will attend publicly supported TK when the program is fully implemented. The 2021 budget law expanding TK allows children to become eligible for the program in 3-month increments until all 4-year-olds are eligible. (The 2021–22 school year was considered a “planning year” for the program.) The phased implementation will expand the program by more than 200,000 additional children by the 2025–26 school year. TK serves as the first year of a 2-year kindergarten experience for families who want to participate.



**[VIDEO] Interview Clip (1 min 34 sec):** Sarah Neville-Morgan, Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction, California Department of Education, shares how California's public education funding structure (through Proposition 98) and the presence of public schools in all communities make TK the most viable option to guaranteeing access to free early education for all 4-year-olds.

Some early learning advocates express concern that universal TK could uproot mixed systems of care for California's young children and their families by focusing exclusively on public schools. Free TK in public schools will likely compete for children with private and nonprofit preschool systems, which include family-owned small childcares, center-based programs, state preschool, and Head Start. Early education advocates in the state are divided in their views of what this trend could mean for communities of providers that have long met childcare needs and for low-income children and their families.

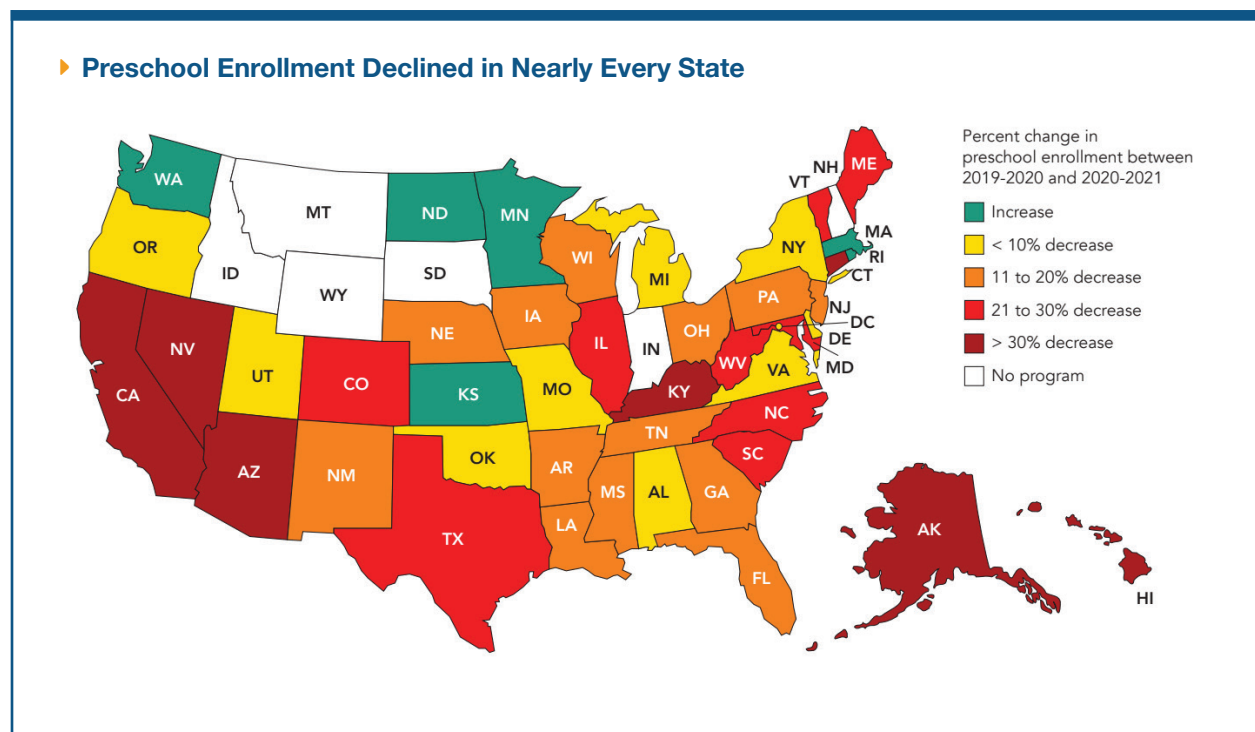


The California Department of Education is committed to universal TK as part of an overall expansion of early learning throughout the state and a step toward a comprehensive model of preschool–grade 3 alignment. [The state recently approved a P-3 teaching credential to encourage this policy.](#) But as policymakers, advocates, schools, families, and other stakeholders move ahead with universal TK, they continue to grapple for answers to the question of what problem the program is supposed to address and whether universal TK is the best approach to solving it.

## National Preschool Policy Trends

Forty-six states offer some form of publicly financed preschool, pre-kindergarten, or TK — through public schools, separate preschool systems, or a mixed-delivery system. Until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic early in 2020, the share of 4-year-olds enrolled in some type of publicly financed preschool had been climbing for more than two decades, to a peak of 34%, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) *State of Preschool 2021*. If private preschool enrollment were added, the share of 4-year-olds enrolled in some type of academic program exceeds 70%. A year into the pandemic, the percentage of 4-year-olds in public programs had dropped to 29%. Nationwide, low-income children were most likely to lose access to preschool during the pandemic, according to the NIEER analysis. NIEER found sweeping disparities in enrollment across states, though several states have achieved stable programs.

The following figure shows a collection of data taken from the NIEER 2021 *State of Preschool Yearbook*, to show trends in California's pre-k/TK enrollment and those of other states:

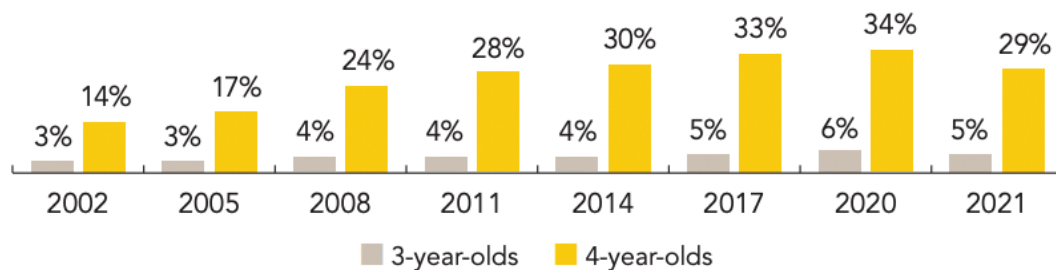


The following collections of charts show national trends in pre-k/TK enrollment and funding.

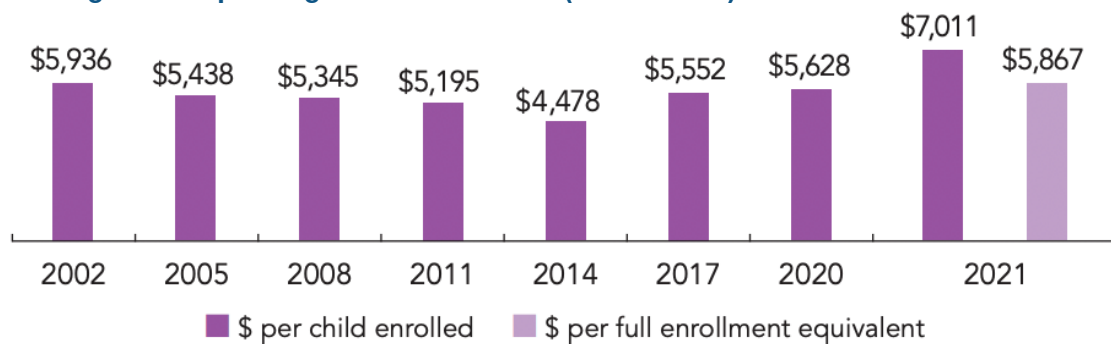
► **Ten States That are Close to Serving 70% of the 4-Year-Old Population**

| State          | % of 4-year-olds served in 2019-2020 | Enrollment gap to reach 70% of 4-year-olds | Additional funding needed to serve 70% of 4-year-olds |               |
|----------------|--------------------------------------|--|---|---------------|
|                |                                      |  | Full cost   | State share   |
| Georgia        | 63%                                  | 8,696                                      | \$100,091,892   | \$39,136,539  |
| Maine          | 47%                                  | 2,965                                      | \$33,430,665  | \$12,392,887  |
| New York       | 60%                                  | 19,195                                     | \$317,213,375   | \$135,352,501 |
| Arkansas       | 48%                                  | 8,599                                      | \$92,420,532  | \$45,342,300  |
| California     | 46%                                  | 110,787                                    | \$1,707,675,146                                       | \$878,305,270 |
| Louisiana      | 45%                                  | 15,327                                     | \$167,817,953   | \$30,626,758  |
| Maryland       | 48%                                  | 16,454                                     | \$226,182,219   | \$121,995,435 |
| New Mexico     | 55%                                  | 3,582                                      | \$46,470,602  | \$22,288,161  |
| South Carolina | 53%                                  | 9,931                                      | \$114,822,222   | \$30,908,206  |
| Texas          | 54%                                  | 60,812                                     | \$753,892,023   | \$178,860,335 |

► **Percent of U.S. Population enrolled in State-Funded Preschool**



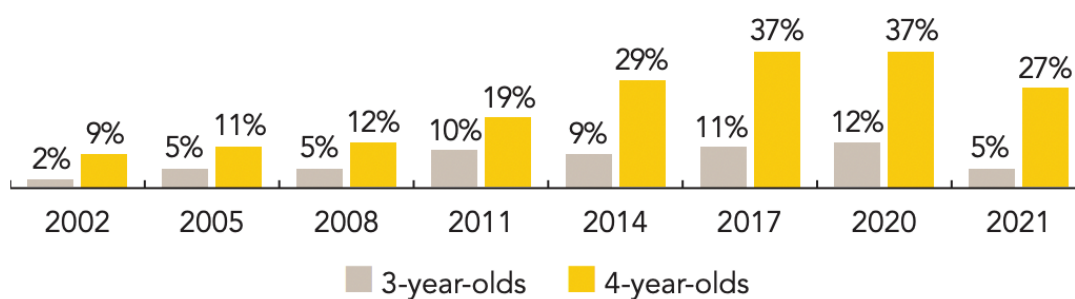
► **Average State Spending Per Child Enrolled (2021 Dollars)**



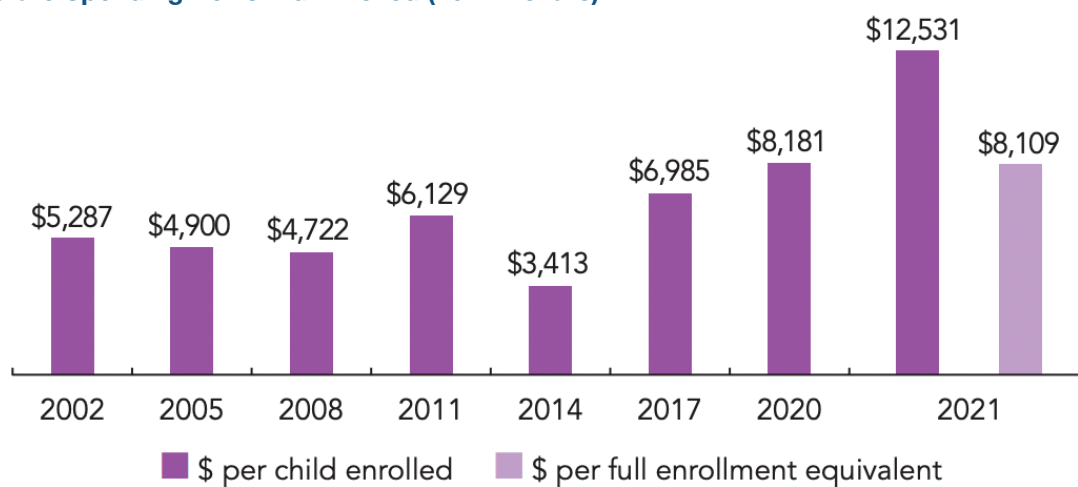


The following collections of charts are California pre-K/TK trends in enrollment and funding.

#### ► Percentage of State Population Enrolled



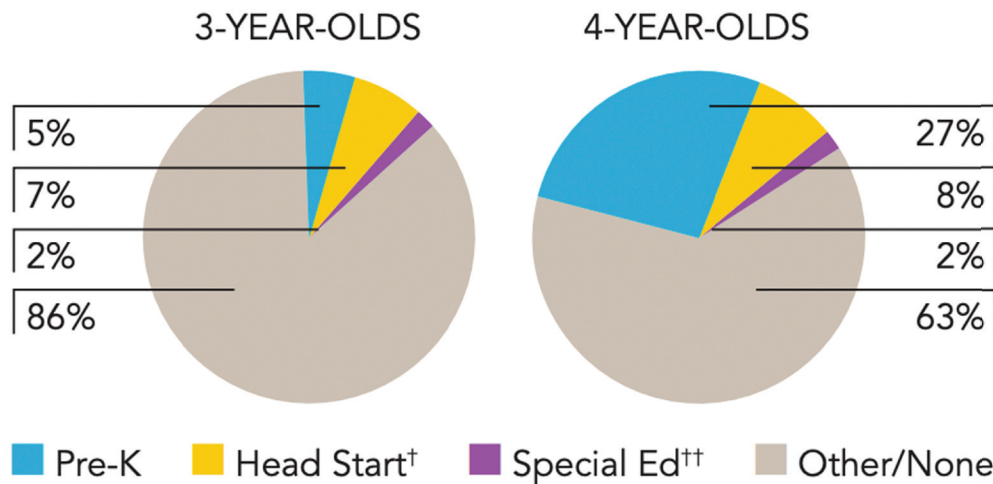
#### ► State Spending Per Child Enrolled (2021 Dollars)



#### ► Resources

|  |                 |
|--|-----------------|
| Total state pre-K spending .....               | \$1,968,721,367 |
| State Head Start spending .....                | \$0             |
| State spending per child enrolled .....        | \$12,531        |
| All reported spending per child enrolled ..... | \$12,542        |

► **Percent of Population Enrolled in Public ECE**



<sup>†</sup> Some Head Start children may also be counted in state pre-K.

<sup>††</sup> Estimates children in special education not also enrolled in state pre-K or Head Start.

**Source: NIEER 2021 State of Preschool Yearbook**

The Biden Administration has strongly supported public, universal pre-k, though the policy has not yet won congressional approval. Recent studies have generated mixed findings on its effectiveness in supporting school readiness and long-term performance, indicating successful outcomes in some cities and states but alarmingly poor long-term outcomes in others. Program quality varies widely, depending on application of evidence-based practices, financing, the balance of basic skills instruction vs. play, infrastructure, and many other variables. Quality remains a problem in California. As University of California (Berkeley) sociologist Bruce Fuller, a former education adviser to the California Legislature, acknowledges, “We’ve done well on access but it’s not clear how we’ve done on quality.”<sup>5</sup>

Even states that have achieved significant enrollment gains in programs for 4-year-olds struggle to maintain quality programs. The following table, with information also taken from the NIEER 2021 yearbook, provides a brief description of eight state preschool programs\* across the nation that have provided the most access to 4-year-olds. NIEER found, however, that the states with the highest enrollment do not necessarily show the strongest performance on NIEER’s quality benchmarks.<sup>6</sup>

5 Bruce Fuller, interviewed by Alice Porter, June 24, 2022.

6 National Institute for Early Education Research. “[The State of Preschool Yearbook 2021](#).” New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University, 2021. NIEER quality benchmarks: teachers have bachelor’s degrees; teachers have specialized training in pre-K; assistant teachers have CDA or equivalent; professional development coaching for staff; class size of 20 students or fewer; staff-child ratio 1/10 or better; vision, hearing, health screenings, and referrals; curriculum supports; continuous quality.

► **Table 1. State ranking by most access to pre-k for 4-year-olds**

| States Ranked by Pre-K Access to 4-Year-Olds   | Performance on NIEER Quality Benchmarks | Share of 4-year-olds Served |
|--|---|-----------------------------|
| <b>Ranking 1. District of Columbia.</b> Washington, D.C., has offered some form of pre-k since the 1960s, and in 2021. The district also ranks first in the nation in spending, at more than \$19,000 [BHS1] per “full enrollment equivalent.” The school day is mandated at 6.5 hours or more, five days a week.  | 4/10                                    | 84%                         |
| <b>Ranking 2. Oklahoma.</b> Oklahoma launched its Early Childhood Four-Year-Old Program in 1980 and mandated free preschool for all age-eligible children in 1998. All school districts in the state participate along with community-based programs. Enrollment and state spending on preschool both dropped significantly during the COVID epidemic.   | 9/10                                    | 64%                         |
| <b>Ranking 3. Iowa.</b> Iowa’s Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program, launched in 2007, is open to all 4-year-olds. Shared Visions, which dates from 1989, provides services to 3-5-year-olds through competitive grants to schools, nonprofit centers, and Head Start. The Iowa General Assembly has approved incentive awards to school districts that have increased preschool enrollment.  | 7/10                                    | 59%                         |
| <b>Ranking 4. Florida.</b> Florida voters approved an amendment to their state constitution in 2002, assuring pre-k access for all 4-year-olds. Florida’s Voluntary Prekindergarten Program enrolled 80% of 4-year-olds in the state in 2014, but that share had dropped steeply to 58% in 2021. Children attend public schools, accredited non-public schools, licensed childcare centers, accredited faith-based centers, and licensed family childcare homes. | 2/10                                    | 58%                         |
| <b>Ranking 5. Vermont.</b> Since 2014, Vermont has required all its school districts to offer pre-k options. The state also uses contractual partnerships with public and private programs to expand access. Vermont’s program enrollment fell by 2,000 children from 2020 to 2021. The state closely monitors quality.  | 7/10                                    | 57%                         |
| <b>Ranking 6. West Virginia.</b> West Virginia approved legislation to mandate preschool for all 4-year-olds in the state by 2021. Today the state’s Universal Pre-k system serves all West Virginia counties and partners with childcare centers, private pre-k programs, and Head Start to meet demand.  | 9/10                                    | 56%                         |
| <b>Ranking 7. Wisconsin.</b> Wisconsin’s Constitution has required the state to provide free education to 4-year-olds since statehood was achieved in 1848. Public schools receive state grants for preschool, but they may subcontract for services with childcare centers, Head Start, and other community-based providers. The state served 56% of those eligible in 2021 but experienced an eight-percentage point drop from the previous year’s enrollment. | 3/10                                    | 56%                         |
| <b>Ranking 8. Georgia.</b> The state’s Pre-k Program is financed by lottery. It experienced a 10- percentage point drop from its pre-COVID share in 2020. The instructional day is 6.5 hours, with before- and after-school care available in some areas. Demand often outstrips available spaces, and most participating programs maintain waiting lists.   | 8/10                                    | 49%                         |

**Source: NIEER 2021 Yearbook.** NIEER defines a state preschool program as one that is financed, controlled, and directed by the state.

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## California's Early Learning Landscape

Nearly 3 million children ages 0–4 live in California. According to California's Department of Education, only about 32% of the state's 4-year-olds and 13% of its 3-year-olds are enrolled in some form of publicly supported preschool, pre-k, or TK. (Some early learning advocates consider these percentages underestimates because they do not account for children attending non-profits and fee-for service programs.) Along with TK, California's publicly supported preschool system includes Head Start, which served more than 28,000 4-year-olds in 2021, and the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), which serves 3–4-year-olds from lower-income families, children in foster care, children experiencing homelessness, and other targeted groups. In addition to these programs, the long-established California Alternative Payment Program Association (CAPPA) connects low-income families to childcare and early learning opportunities and distributes federal and state childcare subsidies.

Before passage of the state Kindergarten Readiness Act in 2010, California's children could enter kindergarten — effectively entering the state's public school system — if they turned 5 by December 2, of their kindergarten year. The 2010 law rolled back that cutoff to September 2, forcing about 100,000 children to wait an extra year to begin public school. In 2012, the state implemented TK to provide a free steppingstone from preschool to public school for these *older* children.

Participation in TK has been inconsistent across the state's more than 1,000 school districts. According to a 2022 Berkeley Children's Forum<sup>7</sup> report, about 40% of eligible children participating in California's TK programs are enrolled in 30 “mostly urban” districts, concentrated in populous Orange, Los Angeles, and San Diego counties and the East Bay area of Northern California. These districts, according to the report, have the benefit of “stronger organizational capacity” to equip classrooms and recruit teachers. By contrast, the more numerous small, rural, and exurban school districts struggle to provide TK; in 2019–20, a third of the state's school districts enrolled 12 or fewer children in TK, often integrating them into existing kindergarten classrooms.

Like so many other states, the COVID pandemic has severely impacted California's public schools. It is believed to have caused an exodus of over 150,000 children and youth from the system, including over 60,000 from kindergarten. But the most significant COVID-inflicted blow has been to what Edgar Zazueta, executive director of the Association of California School Administrator calls the *human capital* that keeps schools running not just teachers but administrative or classified staff and support staff, including food service workers. Human capital was further compromised by attrition prior to the pandemic and unprecedented expectations during the pandemic. Two-thirds of California school districts surveyed in 2021<sup>8</sup> reported that they had faced an increased number of vacancies before the pandemic, mostly the result of retirements and resignations. The pandemic forced principals and other public-school leaders into decision-making roles they could not have prepared for, like addressing public health decisions such as social distancing and the necessity

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7 Abigail Slovick, Carla Bryant, Chunhan Huang, and Bruce Fuller, “[Transitional Kindergarten in California: Early Growth and Uneven District Capacity](#),” Berkeley, CA: Children's Forum, (2022), 1.

8 Desiree Carver-Thomas, Dion Burns, Melanie Leung-Gagné, and Naomi Ondrasek, “[Teacher Shortages During the Pandemic: How California Districts are Responding](#),” Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, January 26, 2022.

for remote learning. COVID has also disrupted the long pipeline of training and experience that generates new educational leadership.



**[VIDEO] Interview Clip (1 min 43 sec):** Edgar Zazueta, Executive Director of Association of California School Administrators (ACSA), shares that in addition to the teacher crisis, there is also an administrative and leadership shortage affecting the implementation of TK.

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## Education Finance and Education Policy

California's share of the 2021 American Rescue Plan (about \$43 billion), along with state reserves generated through tax policies targeting the wealthiest California residents, helps fund educational improvements including Universal TK.

Two key features of California's system of public-school financing loom over education policy. The first is Proposition 98, which state voters approved in 1988 to address extreme inequities across the state's public-school districts. Proposition 98 sets aside a mix of tax revenue that can be used exclusively for public institutions of education such as K–12 and community colleges. It also confers on the governor broad powers to shape education policy. Governor Newsom used this authority to include universal TK as part of a trailer in the state's 2021–22 budget law, bypassing some level of legislative and public scrutiny of the proposal.

Despite the guaranteed funding stream provided through Proposition 98, the share of state spending allocated to public institutions has been threatened by a decline in K–12 enrollment that was underway before COVID. Considering this, the promise of added resources following 4-year-olds into public schools garnered support for universal TK from the California Teachers Association (CTA), the state's largest teachers' union. With 310,000 members, the CTA has a strong voice



in state education policy. By tapping the vast Proposition 98 spending pool for universal TK, the state can help public schools recover from COVID impacts while offering early childhood educators better pay, increased job security, and generally better working conditions.



**[VIDEO] Interview Clip (3 min 47 sec).** Bruce Fuller, Professor of Education and Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, explains how funding TK through school districts provides better wages and benefits for teachers as a function of 45% of the state budget is allocated to funding public schools through Proposition 98. The downside is the money cannot finance mixed delivery systems.

Deborah Stipek, emeritus professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, explains that bringing the early childhood workforce into K–12 environments “is a way to ensure that people caring for and teaching 4-year-olds are paid a living wage.”<sup>9</sup> Stipek and other supporters of the universal TK approach contend that higher pay and benefits for K–12 teachers make for a more stable workforce. On average, California’s preschool teachers earn \$16 an hour compared with \$40 an hour for kindergarten teachers.

The second feature of California’s public school spending mechanism that drives early childhood policy is average daily attendance (ADA), which guides the allocation of public-school financing through the state to localities. The Berkeley Children’s Forum points out that gains in ADA represent an incentive “embedded” in the state’s school financing structure that can produce a resource infusion for school districts that embrace TK. During the 2021–22 school year, the forum estimates, a TK classroom with 20 children elicited \$280,000 in state revenue for local districts. In addition, districts serving larger shares of disadvantaged children receive additional resources, which may partly explain why poorer urban districts have expanded TK more quickly than middle-class ones.

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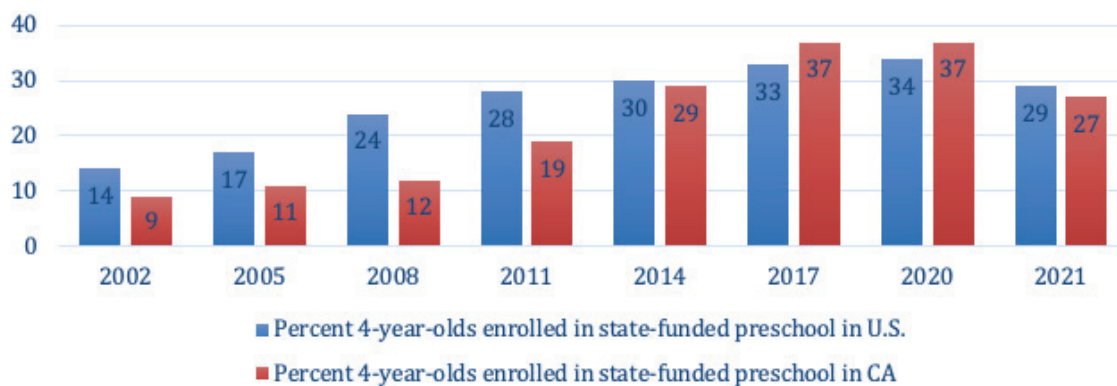
9 Deborah Stipek, interviewed by Alice Porter, May 12, 2022.



The budget law that established universal TK left a key financing problem unresolved: How will the state's more than 100 *basic aid districts* support the program? Basic aid districts finance their K–12 activity entirely through taxes on high-value residential and commercial properties and not through the ADA-driven state formula. As of yet, these districts do not receive specific funding for TK. Many of these districts are in wealthy areas, but those that are not have large shares of low-income children. Fuller suggests that the state explore “surgical incentives” to support these children, such as providing TK financing for children from families with incomes below the federal poverty line.

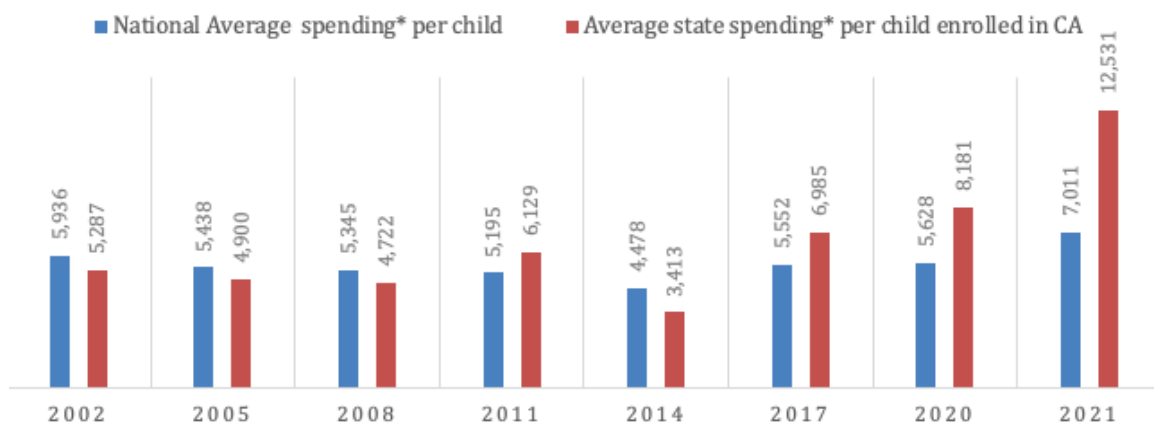
Figures 2 and 3 below use enrollment of 4-year-olds in California's state-funded preschools and spending as reported in the 2021 NIEER yearbook compared to national enrollment and spending. The goal is to show how California's method of preschool financing has driven both enrollment and per-capita spending in the state.

► **Figure 1. Enrollment trends for California pre-k/TK, 2002–2021 compared to national enrollment**



Source: 2021 NIEER Yearbook, Enrollment Trends for California Pre-K/TK, 2002–21

► **Figure 2. Spending trends for California pre-k/TK, 2002–21 compared to national spending**



Source: 2021 NIEER Yearbook (\*in 2021 dollars, not including the TK expansion)

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## Impetus for Action

The current vision for early childhood education in California is laid out in the state's *Master Plan for Early Learning and Care: California for All Kids*, which the state's Health and Human Services Agency released in December 2020. The master plan, which was developed with significant family and stakeholder input, outlines steps to building a "comprehensive and equitable early learning and care system in the state" including universal preschool and funding reforms to support the ambitious early learning policies to be developed over time. The plan repeatedly references equity issues — for young children and the ECE workforce — and proposes prioritizing the phased-in expansion of universal preschool in high-poverty elementary schools. It references the need for TK and "preschool options offered by family childcare homes and centers that meet comparable standards."<sup>10</sup>

Salient throughout the master plan is a commitment to parental choice of programs. Proponents of the TK expansion say the policy directly addresses this goal. The state's 4-year-olds "now have an amazing array of options," says Scott Moore, chief executive officer of the Bay Area childcare and preschool nonprofit Kidango. These options do not ensure access to families that do not meet income eligibility requirements — a key difference from TK. Moore, who served as executive director of California's Early Learning Advisory Council, advocated strongly for the expansion, which he says provides children and families with a permanent choice for 4-year-olds: "We can never say you can't come."<sup>11</sup>

In addition to preserving options for children and families, the plan makes specific references to early learning to break the cycle of poverty and improve long-term education outcomes for all children. These goals are closely tied to children's performance in school over time, and in this area, California's schools are widely acknowledged to be falling short. A 2020 report from the state Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO)<sup>12</sup> reveals the dimensions of California's significant and persistent achievement gaps, which are closely tied to race, ethnicity, and family income:

- Standardized test scores from 2018 reveal that African American children in the state ranked considerably lower in performance than Latino, White, and Asian students.
- Students from low-income families across all racial and ethnic groups performed lower on the tests.
- Children from low-income families, those in foster care, and youth experiencing homelessness, English language learners, and children and youth with disabilities have lower graduation rates than the state average and are significantly less prepared for college and work.

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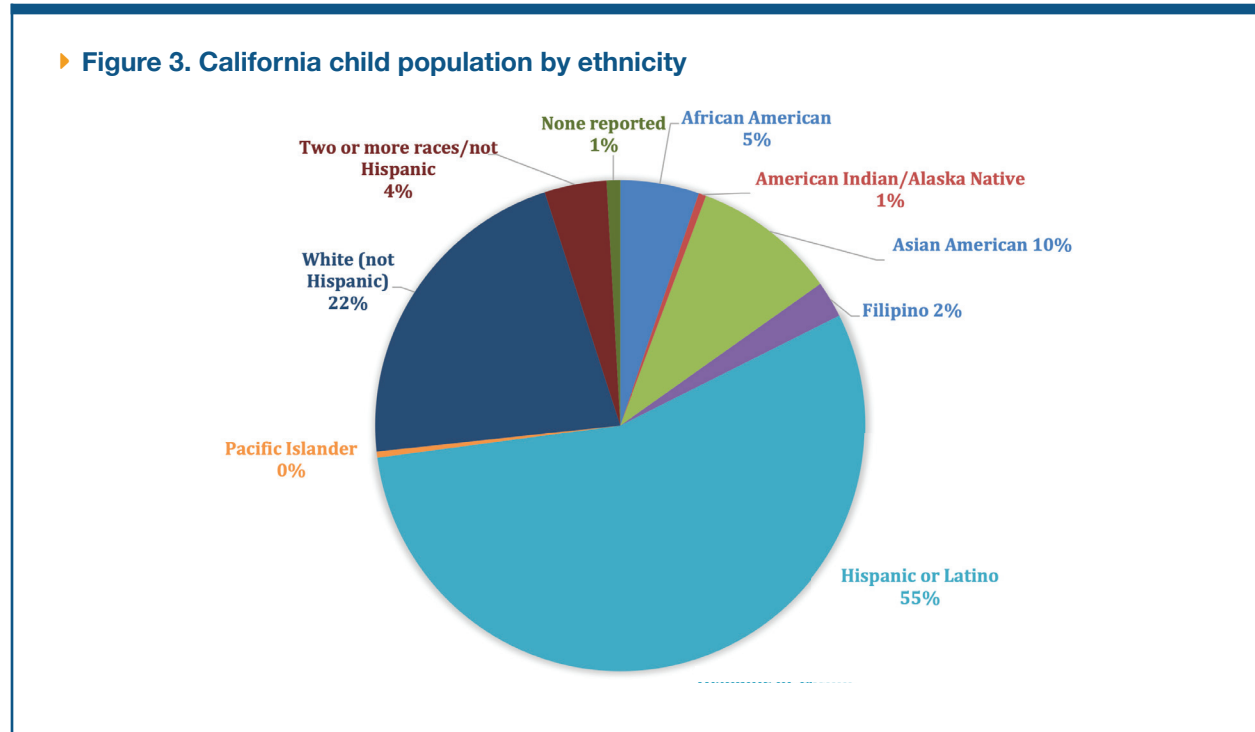
10 "Master Plan for Early Learning and Care: California for All Kids," California Health and Human Services Agency, (December 2020).

11 Scott Moore, interviewed by Alice Porter, August 10, 2022.

12 California Legislative Analyst's Office, "[Narrowing California's K–12 Student Achievement Gaps](#)," (January 31, 2020), 4.

- Foster children and youth and African American children have higher than average rates of chronic absenteeism, and foster youth also experience the highest rates of suspension.

The following figure uses data from California Department of Education to represent the ethnic diversity of California's child population.



Source: California Department of Education, 2020–21

The LAO recommends that the state support intensive intervention in districts with persistent achievement gaps. Early education advocates contend that the problem begins when large groups of California children enter kindergarten without sufficient preparation to succeed. School readiness — incorporating physical, cognitive, and social and emotional development — is widely recognized as a powerful tool to achieve more significant equity in primary education. A 2018 technical report on student achievement gaps in California found that *large socioeconomic achievement gaps* emerge even before children enter kindergarten.<sup>13</sup> The table below shows the achievement gap by ethnicity and income.

13 Sean F. Reardon, et al, "Getting Down to Facts II: A Portrait of Educational Outcomes in California," Stanford University, Rand Corporation, (September 2018), 30.

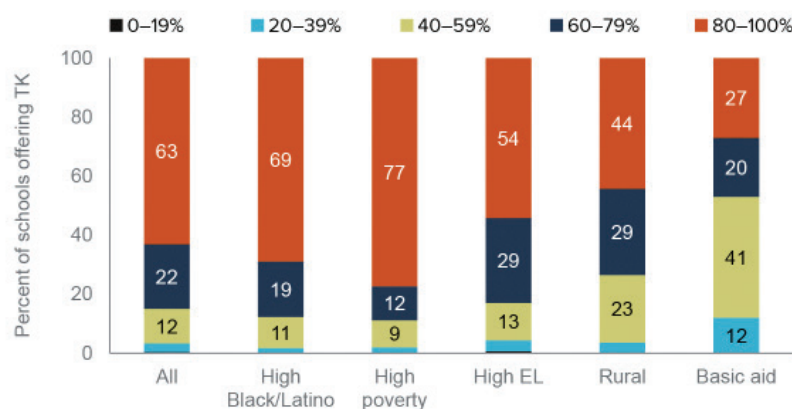
► **Table 2. Achievement gaps: Graduation rates of California’s K–12 students**

| By Race and Ethnicity | Percentages | Selected other groups      | Percentages |
|-----------------------|-------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| African American      | 73%         | Low income                 | 80%         |
| Asian                 | 94%         | Homeless youth             | 69%         |
| White                 | 87%         | Foster youth               | 53%         |
| Latino                | 81%         | English learners           | 68%         |
|                       |             | Students with disabilities | 66%         |

**Source: Narrowing California’s K–12 Student Achievement Gaps, LAO, 2018**

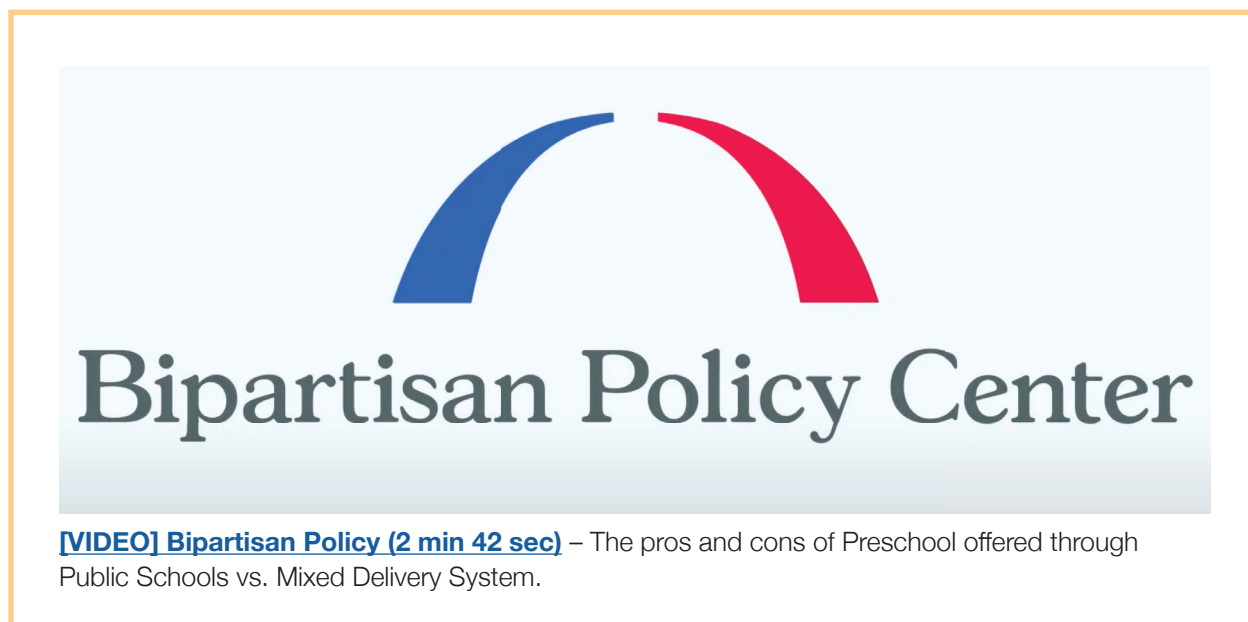
A recent analysis by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC, 2020) found that through the 2019–20 school year, 60% of TK students came from low-income families, which is consistent with the share for all public-school students in the state. Statewide, TK has attracted high numbers of Latino children, but African American children are under-enrolled in the program. Participation in TK has also varied widely across school districts, with take-up rates in the largest districts ranging from 10% in San Francisco’s to 36% in Los Angeles’s unified school districts. The PPIC found that the most common reason for unenrolled eligible students is that their local school does not offer the program. The following figure taken from the PPIC 2020 report, shows that districts providing TK, tend to offer it at the majority of schools.

► **Figure 4. Percentage of schools offering TK by district type**



**Source: Public Policy Institute of California (2020), Setting the Stage for Universal Preschool, May 2022**

## Preschool Public Schools vs. Mixed Delivery



Nearly all states and localities have expanded public programs for 4-year-olds using a mixed delivery model. Mixed delivery allows children to attend private and nonprofit preschools with the state covering tuition costs and childcare for low-income families. California currently spends more than \$1 billion annually in vouchers and other supports to nonprofit, community-based preschool programs. With the expansion to universal TK exclusively through public schools, many California families with 4-year-olds are faced with whether to remain in their current childcare programs or pre-k settings organized for working parents—including Head Start—or transition to TK in public schools. Stipek says this choice sometimes boils down to a free but inconvenient option or a convenient alternative in which the family pays, often, for a childcare scenario. By working through public schools, the TK expansion is triggering a clash of cultures in the early learning field that is sometimes expressed as a resistance to *academizing* the early childhood learning experience. Some early education advocates view preschools and pre-k environments as places of play and social and emotional development, not focused on subject matter learning. Some people in the ECE field are worried that placement in elementary schools will undermine the focus on play and social and emotional development and lead to developmentally inappropriate practice.

Some early education advocates have questioned whether California should emphasize public school-based TK over other local options for 4-year-olds. Carla Bryant, who was associate superintendent for early learning for the San Francisco Unified School District and one of the authors of the Berkeley Children’s Forum report explain, “We’ve had 10 years of learning” about TK, and the experience has revealed the benefits of a “proactive, community-based approach” to state-supported preschool. “Not all public schools are the best for each kid,” Bryant explains. “If we have to give true access, we have to give true choices as well.”<sup>14</sup> Bryant contends that communities of color are not prepared to surrender the control and autonomy of community-based programs to public schools.

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14 Carla Bryant, interviewed by Alice Porter, May 16, 2022.

Also aligning against the rapid expansion of TK through public schools is Head Start California, which represents 147 grantees serving more than 100,000 children, including Early Head Start, from among the lowest-income families in the state. Executive Director Christopher Maricle believes that “TK can be part of a mixed delivery system,” but the 2021 budget law expands the program in public schools too quickly, leaving thousands of families uninformed about the consequences of moving children from Head Start into public school settings.<sup>15</sup>



**[VIDEO] Interview Clip (2 min 6 sec):** Christopher Maricle, Executive Director, Head Start California, explains that not only does TK corner the market for 4-year-olds to districts only, but also, parents will not have a way of knowing the various pre-K options available to them.

Maricle points out that families with 4-year-olds who leave Head Start for TK in public schools risk losing the wraparound services that at-risk children need, including healthcare, that come with participation in the program. Maricle explains that Head Start is a poverty intervention program that supports children and their caregivers, whereas TK is not. It is important to note, however, that the school package does include \$3 billion to build capacity to offer mental health and social services in full-service community schools.

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<sup>15</sup> Christopher Maricle, interviewed by Alice Porter, May 17, 2022





**[VIDEO] Interview Clip (1 min 47 sec):** Christopher Maricle explains the difference in services offered to families through Head Start vs. TK and the federal funding that could be leveraged to serve families.

Maricle and his colleagues communicated potential concerns with universal TK, from the Head Start perspective, to Newsom's office before approval of the program, including the issue of destabilizing the finances of grantees by drawing away 4-year-olds and replacing these spaces with younger children, who cost more to serve. There is also concern that TK expansion will drain an already lean workforce from other early childhood programs. Maricle contends that the K–12 environment is not developmentally appropriate for a large share of 4-year-olds. Finally, Maricle is concerned that, "many parents do not want their younger children in structured, center-based programs." The bottom line: The state should "encourage and incentivize" the mixed delivery network, but instead, TK will "decimate" it.

Alternatively, Scott Moore, whose agency Kidango is a large Head Start grantee, believes that the TK expansion, along with other state programs targeting early learning, will boost the entire range of services for children ages 0–5, and offer families stability in affordable care. Scott points to a significantly expanded level of state support for the California State Preschool Program (CSPP) and general childcare providing an infusion of resources to programs for infants and toddlers. The new funds will enable providers to offer more services to the youngest children and their families and to increase wages for early learning educators. Moore is prepared for a possible exodus of educators from community agencies to public schools: "We will cheer them on," he says, "We have been teaching 4-year-olds for decades. We will show them [public schools] how to do it."



**[VIDEO] Interview Clip (2 min 10 sec):** Scott Moore, Executive Director at Kidango, Inc., discusses the potential of a coordinated birth-to-five partnerships that could support the teacher pipeline, and support families to have affordable access to 0–5 care and education.

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## Scaling Up Challenges

Lawmakers and early childhood education advocates who have supported universal TK in California acknowledge that program quality in the state has been uneven. NIEER reported in 2020 that California TK fell short of 7 of 10 quality benchmarks including teacher credentials and class size. (The new universal TK policy addresses both issues.) In contrast, the PPIC (2020) report points to two recent studies that indicate short- and long-term benefits from California's TK programs, especially for specific groups such as English language learners. One of these studies is from the American Institutes for Research<sup>16</sup>, which surveyed 6,000 children and found that those who attended the program “were better prepared for kindergarten than those who did not” and that they experienced a 3- to 6-month learning advantage in mathematics and literacy skills.

UC Berkely's professor Bruce Fuller, whose research also indicates gains from TK programs, writes, “We have about a half century of research now showing that quality pre-k for 4-year-olds and 3-year-olds yields strong and sometimes sustained effects for poor kids. We know much less about the effects of pre-K or TK on middle-class kids. But the evidence is clear that for lower-income kids — if we can get the quality right — [preschool] will yield strong effects in early language development, pre-literacy skills, social agility for young kids in the classroom, and emotional

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16 Karen Manship, et al, “The Impact of Transitional Kindergarten on California Students,” San Mateo, CA:American Institutes of Research: (June 2017) Executive Summary.

growth.”<sup>17</sup> The 2021 education package provides several tools to improve program quality, starting with efforts to recruit, train, and retain teachers. Fuller cautions that a steep learning curve is ahead: “A lot of districts have never had TK and don’t have a single early childhood specialist.”<sup>18</sup>

Beth Meloy, a consultant with the California’s Department of Education who works on P-3 alignment policy, predicts that the state will need from 11,000 to 16,000 new teachers by 2025–26 for universal TK. With full implementation of the state’s comprehensive preschool expansion, the need arises to 21,000 new educators. Driving the demand for teachers is ambitious teacher student ratios in the 2021 law: 1:12 by the end of 2022–23 school year and 1:10 by the 2023–24 school year, compared with 1:24 before implementation of universal TK. Contributing to this ambitious target is the fact that every TK classroom is required to have, in addition to a fully credentialed teacher, an instructional aide. “It’s going to be a huge lift” recruiting and training the needed teachers, Meloy predicts.<sup>19</sup>

Another resource challenge concerns school facilities. The 2021 budget law that authorizes universal TK includes \$490 million to support the construction and renovation of state preschool, transitional kindergarten, and kindergarten facilities. That task is ambitious, given that most K–12 school environments can be unworkable for 4-year-old children. “You need little toilets, you need little desks,” writes Fuller, who also points out that the state has moved more slowly than expected in allocating money for new facilities and classroom renovation. Edgar Zazueta, Executive Director of Association of California School Administrators, cautions that some schools in urban areas may lack the physical footprint to expand to any great extent.

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## Conclusion: Learning from Experience

The challenges in early learning—including access to high-quality programs, demand for a highly qualified and well compensated workforce, and effective use of all delivery methods — are not unique to California. As California districts and state agency leaders grapple with the policy choices and implementation challenges surrounding full expansion of TK, they will closely watch the experiences of other states. For those working toward attaining early childhood policy degrees, we believe this case offers a window into the interplay between funding streams, the crafting of public policy, the goals of equity and access issues, the balancing of multiple stakeholder perspectives, and the influence of policy leadership.

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17 *California Schools*, California School Board Association, Spring 2022.

18 Bruce Fuller, “[A Conversation with Bruce Fuller](#),” Interview by California Schools, California Schools, Spring 2022.

19 Beth Meloy, interviewed by Alice Porter, May 26, 2022.

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## Glossary

**Mixed delivery system:** Most states support Pre-k programs in public, private, and nonprofit settings. Mixed model delivery systems offer families affordable program choices that are within a manageable distance from their homes.

**Pre-k:** Pre-kindergarten refers to any structured learning programs for children in the year before they begin K–12 education. These programs, which vary in size, access, financing, and structure across states and localities, are administered in public, private, and nonprofit settings, with varying degrees of government support and regulation.

**Preschool:** This broad term refers to any group learning activity for children before they enter K–12 education. It is most often used to identify early learning programs for children older than 3 and younger than 5 years.

**School readiness:** Head Start defines school readiness as “children possessing the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success in school and for later learning and life.”<sup>20</sup> This includes physical, cognitive, and social and emotional development.

**Transitional Kindergarten (TK):** TK is the form of Universal Pre-k that California will offer to all 4-year-old residents in public schools by the end of the 2025–26 school year. The state launched TK in 2012, and in 2021, began to implement a phased-in, statewide program open to all 4-year-olds.

**Universal pre-k:** A widely held goal of local and state early learning policy, Universal Pre-k offers structured care and learning environments to all age-eligible children in the year before kindergarten, usually with some form of government support.

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20 Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, [School Readiness](#), website, n.d.

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