

Budgeting for Educational Equity



PODCAST SERIES 2 Episode 3



LAUNCHING MAJOR NEW INITIATIVES: UNIVERSAL TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN: STATE AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

Budgeting for Educational Equity is made possible by support from both the Sobrato Family Foundation and CASBO. Budgeting for Educational Equity is a podcast series that explores how education resources can be allocated to better meet the needs of all students. This brief is designed to provide opportunities for the listener to engage in tangible, practical application of the lessons derived from each podcast episode. The brief can serve as a launching point for cultivating discussions about equity within communities and school district administrative offices. Episodes can be found on the [Budgeting for Educational Equity Podcast Series webpage](#).

INTRODUCTION: CONSIDERATION FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE IN UNIVERSAL TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN

Recognizing that the opportunity gap¹ between students is already present by the time they enter kindergarten,² California has launched an ambitious, universal transitional kindergarten (TK) program (the first year of a 2-year kindergarten program) that will be available to all 4-year-olds by the 2025–2026 school year.

Research supports that prekindergarten can have significant short-term and long-term positive impacts on students' academic and life outcomes but only if that prekindergarten program is high quality.³

Given that one third of districts are rolling out their TK programs before the statewide deadline of 2025–2026, it is important to ensure a thoughtful and quality TK rollout before inequitable systems or suboptimal practices can crystalize.⁴ In addition to TK being a key component in fulfilling the promise of educational equity, it could also bring additional funding to districts. State per pupil funding accompanies each TK student in the same way it does for all K–12 students, so TK programs could help mitigate financial stress from declining enrollment across grade levels. And, if handled effectively, increased funding could

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strengthen families' commitment to their local public school system for the long term.⁵

However, implementing TK still presents significant challenges regarding staffing, facilities, and the capacity to serve all learners well. Exactly what these challenges will look like and how best to address them will differ based on student need, geography, and other local circumstances. Education leaders must therefore strategically assess their community's assets and needs when planning to build an equitable and fiscally sustainable TK program in order to actualize the benefits of high-quality early education.

This brief is designed to support school business officials and district leaders in thinking through how their local context influences TK rollout.

STAFFING

To comply with California's required [TK staffing ratios and class size maximums](#), schools will need to hire an estimated 11,900 to 15,600 newly credentialed TK teachers statewide.⁶ Given that teachers are the most important in-school factor in students' learning,⁷ a high-quality TK program should have a diverse staff whose members are knowledgeable about the developmental needs of early learners and skilled at supporting students with a variety of needs.

Considerations for Creating a High-Quality, Diverse TK Workforce

- **State requirements.** California requires particular staffing ratios,

class size, and teacher credentials for TK. In an effort to ensure a high-quality early education workforce, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing has created a new PK–3 Early Childhood Education (ECE) Specialist Instruction Credential that focuses on developmentally appropriate practices for young children.

- **Workforce diversity.** The current early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce more closely matches the racial and linguistic makeup of the state's children than the current K–12 workforce.⁸ Still, the early childhood workforce is less diverse than California's children are.⁹ Research shows there are significant academic and social-emotional benefits to a more racially, culturally, linguistically, and gender-diverse educator workforce for all students. For students of color in particular, research supports that opportunities to be educated by teachers of color have long-term positive impacts.
- **Available teacher pool.** While current ECEC staff have important experience working with 4-year-old children, the majority (51%) do not have a bachelor's degree. This degree and a multisubject credential are required to be a TK teacher in California.¹⁰
- **Up-front costs.** Investments in high-quality, inclusive TK can be expensive up front, but districts may find that making this investment results in fewer special education placements and lower costs in later grades.¹¹

Strategies to Build a High-Quality, Diverse TK Workforce

- **Leverage available grants.** California offers a variety of grant programs that support educator workforce and early learning. Some, such as the Universal Prekindergarten Planning & Implementation Grant, are available as categorical funds. Others, such as the Early Education Teacher Development Grant, are awarded on a competitive basis.¹²
- **Build high-quality, supported pathways for candidates.** Teachers trained in residencies have lower attrition rates, are viewed as effective by their principals, and report feeling more prepared than teachers trained in nontraditional pathways.¹³ Taking this teacher training approach has implications for reducing the immense direct and hidden costs of staff turnover.¹⁴ Furthermore, research suggests that this clinically rich model supports higher retention among diverse candidates.¹⁵ Districts can support a residency program by utilizing California's Teacher Residency Grant Program, which provides \$25,000 per teacher resident in exchange for their teaching in a shortage area.¹⁶
- **Recruit early childhood educators and paraprofessionals from the district.** Districts can create and fund "grow your own" TK teacher programs to support diverse staff who already work with 4-year-olds by utilizing the right grants. California's Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program provides \$24,000 per participant over 5 years to

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preschool staff who have an associate's degree so that they can attain a bachelor's degree and a credential.¹⁷

- **Provide K–12 educators with early childhood training.** Local education agencies (LEAs) can organize and fund cohorts of teachers so that teachers can take ECE-focused coursework at partner universities.¹⁸

- **Recruit nontraditional candidates.** Parents of early learners and people who are changing careers can be trained to fill in gaps in the supply of TK assistants and lead teachers. Through the Universal Pre-Kindergarten Career Development Initiative, a collaboration between the Los Angeles County Office of Education and several institutions of higher education, nonprofits, and school districts, 99 parents are currently training to become TK assistants or lead teachers.¹⁹

- **Create inclusive environments.** Provide incentives or support to teachers who have credentials to teach students who are dual language learners or have special needs. Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) offers inclusive TK with four staff and a teacher-child ratio of 1:6. The staff includes a teacher who holds an Early Childhood Special Education Credential and an aide with special education training. LAUSD fills some of these positions through an alternative credentialing program the district offers for the Early Childhood Special Education Credential.²⁰ Other districts have

funded these inclusive environments by blending and braiding TK and California State Preschool Program (CSPP) funds and utilizing local control funding formula (LCFF) supplemental and concentration grants, Title III for dual language learners, and Title IV for afterschool.²¹

FACILITIES

Research unambiguously links school buildings to student's learning, educational outcomes, physical health, and social-emotional well-being.²² Ensuring a high-quality rollout of TK requires equitable investments in the construction and maintenance of healthy and developmentally appropriate school facilities. California's TK expansion offers an opportunity for a greater number of LEAs to model the development of modern, green, and interactive school facilities.

Considerations for Developing High-Quality Early Learning Facilities

- **State regulations.** Title 5 of the California Code of Regulations sets forth a variety of foundational TK classroom and playground requirements.²³
- **Environmental health.** Research emphasizes that children, especially young children, are more sensitive to environmental exposures such as poor indoor air quality or heat. Sustainable school design offers building approaches that are linked to improved child well-being, learning outcomes, and long-term financial savings.²⁴

- **Interactivity.** For young children in particular, the environment acts as “the third teacher.” Investing in facilities design that maximizes the ability of children to learn through the senses, act on their environment, practice collaboration, and engage in imaginative play can enhance their development and learning.²⁵

- **Inclusion.** Developing inclusive early education environments is a cornerstone of an equitable TK rollout. Inclusive environments offer essential opportunities for safe play and social interaction, which benefits all students, particularly those with disabilities.²⁶

As Maria Cellabos articulated in this episode, the funding of construction or renovation for early learning facilities can be challenging. Some of the state's recent investments include the following:

- the Preschool, Transitional, Kindergarten and Full-Day Kindergarten Facilities Grant Program
 - \$448 million included in the 2021–2022 state budget to be dispersed through March 2023
 - \$650 million included in the 2022–2023 state budget to be dispersed 2022–2023 and 2023–2024²⁷
- Universal Prekindergarten Planning & Implementation Grant
 - \$200 million in base grants included to support the development or expansion of CSPP and TK programs²⁸

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Strategies for Developing High-Quality Early Learning Facilities

- **Utilize existing local bonds.** Some LEA leaders are drawing on existing local bonds to support the renovation or construction of facilities for TK. This may entail delaying other planned projects so that TK expansion can be prioritized.²⁹
- **Build out TK services from existing sites.** Some LEA leaders have reported focusing on expanding TK services at locations that are already designed to serve 4-year-olds. However, a potential equity implication of this strategy is that it may result in diminished access for families.³⁰
- **Braid federal recovery grants and state grants.** Capital-intensive facilities investments—particularly those for early childhood education, for which returns on investment are high—may be well-suited uses for LEAs’ remaining Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds (ESSER I and ESSER II).³¹
- Support the **development of inclusive early learning facilities with the Inclusive Early Education Expansion Program (IEEEP) grant.**³²

SERVING ALL LEARNERS WELL

For TK to be part of ensuring an equitable start to schooling, districts must ensure that the TK programs are enrolling students who traditionally have not had access to a high-quality, culturally responsive early learning environment and who are most impacted by persistent opportunity gaps. In particular, TK programs need

to be able to support the needs of students from low-income families, dual language learners, and students with disabilities.

Considerations for Serving All Learners Well

- **Distinct barriers to access in rural districts.** Currently, rural districts are less likely to offer TK at 80 percent or more of their schools and enroll relatively lower numbers of dual language learners, despite enrollment of dual language learners into TK being relatively high overall statewide.³³
- **California’s young dual language learner majority.** More than 60 percent of California’s children birth to 5 years old are dual language learners.³⁴ While quality TK enhances learning outcomes for all, the positive impacts on math skills, literacy, and English language development are even greater for dual language learners.³⁵ Professional learning on teaching young dual language learners will necessarily benefit educators on the PK–3 continuum and their students.
- **Strategic outreach.** TK enrollment is not required in California, and families may not enroll because they lack awareness of programs, they are uncertain about how to enroll, or programs do not meet their transportation or scheduling needs.³⁶ Thus, strategic outreach may be important for equitable access.

Strategies for Serving All Learners Well

- **Provide information about TK programs.** Provide information that is

targeted to high-need students and is in multiple languages and modalities.

- **Consider facility locations strategically.** If it is not possible to provide TK at all elementary sites, districts can plan to establish facilities in schools with high concentrations of dual language learners and students from low-income families.
- **Provide transportation.** Districts are not required to provide transportation for TK students and may opt not to because providing transportation may add costs. However, transportation may make TK more accessible to families with limited transportation options or inflexible schedules.
- **Invest in home-language supports for dual language learners.** Realizing and sustaining the advantages of TK for dual language learners requires curricula that meaningfully integrates home-language support and linguistically diverse materials.³⁷ Expanding dual language immersion programs to encompass TK can also support critical equity and educational alignment for dual language learners.³⁸
- **Invest in comprehensive professional development.** Embedded and comprehensive professional learning opportunities on how to best understand and support young dual language learners, children with disabilities, and children who may have intersecting needs are important for promoting high-quality best, first instruction practices that enhance children’s learning and thereby help mitigate long-term outcome disparities.³⁹

GUIDING QUESTIONS

Assessing Local Staffing Context

Where might you recruit TK teachers and assistants within your community (e.g., paraprofessionals, retired educators, parents)?

What support would these individuals need to become qualified TK teachers? What barriers exist?

What local higher education partners can you collaborate with to build affordable, accessible teacher preparation pathways?

In rural locations with less access to large talent pools, how can you maximize the number of students you serve with the staff you have?

What grant funds are best aligned to your district's needs?



Assessing Local Facilities Context

What state and local funds that support TK, facilities, or both are available for your district to tap into?

Are there sites already set up for use by 4-year-olds that could serve TK programs? What are the pros and cons of using those facilities?

Are there kindergarten classrooms that could be shared with TK? What are the pros and cons of using those facilities?

If building or retrofitting new facilities, how do the up-front costs of high-quality facilities balance potential future savings?



Assessing Capacity to Serve All Students Well

Based on academic data, which student groups in your LEA would benefit the most from TK?

What schools are your students with the highest needs zoned to?

What do teachers need to be successful with this particular group of learners? Is planned professional development aligned to those needs? Are there creative ways to make sure teachers have the skills to serve all learners well?

How can your district expand access? Think about strategies for locations, transportation, and communication regarding TK enrollment.



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