

Advancing Universal Transitional Kindergarten — Questions for School Board Members

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IN THIS BRIEF, YOU WILL FIND:

- ▶ A description of California's policy and funding goals to expand universal transitional kindergarten (UTK)
- ▶ Five essential questions for school board members to ask when implementing a new or expanded TK program in their district
- ▶ Resources for board members to begin planning their district's UTK program

Pioneering Policy: Widening Access to Early Education

A half-century of research and the countless experiences of elementary teachers support the idea that high-quality preschool can lift the early learning and social development of children.¹ Since the 1960s California's parents and local school boards have pushed to widen the availability of quality pre-K programs, especially for disadvantaged children who benefit most.

For nearly a decade, the inclusion of transitional kindergarten (TK) as an early education option has unfolded across California, with the program serving 4-year-olds who turn 5 between September 2 and December 2 to access the kindergarten curriculum. Yet, this rendition of pre-kindergarten has not taken hold in every district—blossoming mainly in larger districts as detailed later in this brief. Small- and medium-size districts have experienced varying success finding new teachers and establishing classrooms for 4-year-old children.

In the summer of 2021, California's policy leaders dramatically expanded a variety of child care and early learning options. As the state's revenues roared back, Governor Gavin Newsom and legislative leaders committed to fund a half-million new child care or preschool slots over the coming four years.

The cornerstone of this effort—growing annual state and federal support for the early education sector from \$7 billion to \$13 billion—will extend TK to every 4-year-old whose family opts-in.² This broader access is referred to as universal transitional kindergarten (UTK). The Governor and state lawmakers are asking school boards to eventually provide TK spots to the majority of 4-year-olds.

Sacramento policymakers are also calling upon local school boards to partner with community-based organizations, such as private child care providers, First 5 commissions, Head Start and California State Preschool Programs (CSPP), for afternoon and summer programs. These partnerships could increase access to high-quality early education year-round for young children—creating opportunities beyond what districts can provide through UTK programs.

School Boards at the Center

As early childhood education expands across California through the new UTK program, governing boards from districts of all sizes will encounter key questions and decision points identified in this brief. Local board members may take on a larger role in early childhood education decisions as UTK rolls out, becoming a sizeable element of district operations. Board members will want to collaborate with a wide range of district staff to shape the overall contours of new or existing TK programs, and their understanding of the key issues will help provide guidance to align programs with the board's vision and goals for the district.

This policy brief addresses five pivotal issues that board members might tackle to ensure children's access to high-quality TK:

- 1) Identifying key tasks, local dynamics, and district leaders that will shape initial planning, while obtaining resources from the California Department of Education (CDE).
- 2) Streamlining district operations by blending pre-K programs with TK to form a local leadership team, achieve consensus over age-appropriate learning goals and classroom practices, and establish a process for monitoring classroom quality.

- 3) Collaborating with training institutions and labor partners to find teachers and classroom aides with relevant training and experience with preschool-age children.
- 4) Finding sufficient classroom space—perhaps constructing or renovating facilities—to allow for steady growth of TK access for children.
- 5) Reaching out to nonprofit preschool and child care centers to ensure full-day and full-year coverage for young children with working parents.

Key Elements of California's UTK Policy

- ▶ Starting in 2022–23, local education agencies (LEAs) must offer UTK to children turning 5 between September 2 and February 2 of that school year. Students turning 4 years old by September 1 must be offered a UTK slot by 2025–26.
- ▶ Student-to-staff ratios will be lowered by adding a new adult to TK classrooms in 2022–23. The proposed budget includes funding to lower the adult-to-child ratio from 12:1 to 10:1.
- ▶ CDE will revise the Preschool Learning Foundations, aiming to align pre-K-to-grade-3 approaches to child development and academic learning.
- ▶ The state requirement that incumbent teachers must acquire 24 units in early childhood education before being assigned to TK classrooms was pushed back to 2023–24.
- ▶ Basic Aid Districts will not receive additional Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) dollars for UTK, but are still subject to the same legal requirements.

The Big Lift: A Quarter-Million New Kindergartners

Local school boards will assume greater responsibility for nurturing the early learning of 4-year-old children under the UTK initiative. California's budget trailer bill for the 2021–22 fiscal year (Assembly Bill 130) requires that local districts must increasingly provide a TK program for 4-year-olds, expanding eligibility in two- and then three-month increments starting in 2022–23. By 2025–26, all 4-year-olds would be eligible for TK. One key fact: one-third of California's districts currently enroll 12 or fewer children in TK, according to the analysis for this brief.

Lead TK teachers must be credentialed and assisted by one additional adult in each classroom.³ This requirement entails a big lift

for most local leaders. Compared to 2021–22 enrollments, 250,000 additional children are expected to enter the UTK program state-wide. This expansion requires at least 11,000 new teachers and a much greater number of classroom aides at a time when many local educational agencies (LEAs) are already experiencing staff shortages. Classrooms must be developmentally appropriate, which may require renovation or the construction of new classrooms to accommodate younger children, which will require districts to look for local funding or appeal to the State Allocation Board for state facilities funding.

In anticipation of some of the challenges facing local school boards, Governor Newsom and legislative leaders expanded facilities funding and introduced three new funding streams for local planning and for training additional teachers. CDE is distributing planning and implementation grants to districts, which help cover the cost of new TK enrollments within LCFF. Additionally, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) has convened a work group to develop program standards and teaching performance expectations for an early childhood specialist credential that would authorize teachers to work in PK-3 classrooms.

Still, board members must set the contours of their local UTK program. They face many complexities, from finding enough teachers to streamlining management inside district offices. Unanticipated costs and organizing hurdles are to be expected as board members navigate these changes.

Questions for Board Members to Consider

Governing boards can help frame the next steps by addressing key issues to widen family access to UTK. Board members might ask the following questions that delve into these core issues and aid implementation.

How will your district create and coordinate UTK plans?

CDE is distributing \$300 million in 2021–22 to support initial planning and implementation. District leaders must submit detailed plans to their local boards by June 30, 2022, about how they will expand TK spots.

Several decisions must be addressed, including: What is the likely demand for new TK slots in our community? How quickly can we expand slots for 4-year-olds, given facilities and workforce constraints? Should we reassign existing teachers to TK classrooms, or hire new teachers with strong early childhood expertise?

Board members may want to consult their Local Child Care Planning and Development Council or Regional Child Care Resource and Referral Network to gauge child population growth (or decline) within district boundaries. Already existing options for 4-year-olds must be weighed, including the pre-K offerings of charter schools, local nonprofits, and family child care providers. To refine projections

on the number of slots to consider in TK planning, districts may survey community members beyond existing families.

Another important question is whether your current administrative structure is ready to facilitate the growth of TK enrollments and lift the quality of programs simultaneously. For smaller districts, this may require collaboration with your county office. For larger districts, careful integration of early childhood programs (at times funded and regulated in fragmented fashion) and the elementary education division could yield high returns in quality and pre-K-to-grade-3 alignment. Engaging site administrators is key for working toward seamless blending of TK teachers with their peers in elementary classrooms.

Under the new provisions, each TK student will generate K-3 Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) dollars, with the notable exception of basic aid districts. Districts in areas with lower concentrations of wealth will receive more funding in supplemental and concentration grants via the LCFF.⁴ But unanticipated costs should also be considered, including capital spending required to renovate or establish new classrooms; recruiting and training newly credentialed teachers; and contracting with pre-K nonprofits for wraparound services to help working parents. Districts may also want to invest in professional development for staff to advance the pedagogical skills and child-development knowledge of incumbent teachers who might have limited early childhood education experience or coursework.

UTK Planning Funding Details

- ▶ Local boards must consider their plan for implementing UTK by June 2022. CDE is distributing \$300 million in planning and implementation grants to LEAs into 2022.
- ▶ Districts serving higher shares of disadvantaged children will receive a greater share of planning grant dollars—signaling the Legislature’s priority to narrow disparities in children’s early learning.
- ▶ \$100 million will be distributed as competitive grants, aiming to “increase the number of highly qualified teachers... to serve state preschool programs and transitional kindergarten pupils.”

Are there opportunities for your district to consolidate and streamline existing programs?

Board members should ask how district administrators will guide a smoother and enriching transition for preschoolers into the early grades. This transition requires informed discussion of learning and developmental goals that advance young children’s early growth while considering the diversity of 4-year-olds enrolled in the TK program. The early education community has long weighed the balance

between nurturing social-emotional proficiencies with getting a head start on early language and literacy skills.⁵

The fact that 4-year-old children will now move into formal school districts that are often under pressure to raise standardized test scores worries many early educators. Board members should engage in candid conversations about the learning and developmental priorities of TK classrooms that address how teachers, principals, and curriculum coordinators seek to balance cognitive learning with broader social-emotional growth. This involves recognizing how classroom environments support the foundations upon which young children reach developmental milestones, contributing to a child’s academic progress.

District planning discussions might broach several issues related to how to simplify and expand TK operations. These issues include:

- ▶ *Who should help plan local UTK expansion?* Pre-K and elementary sectors have long been shaped by differing professional and policy ideals that manifest in staffing rules and underlying learning aims. Superintendents must think carefully about the mix of district staff who oversee the expansion of TK, including curricular and facilities planners, human resources, and labor partners. Districts may consider aligning or merging pre-K operations with their elementary division to help simplify day-to-day management, including staffing and labor decisions.

County demographers can inform the pace of family demand for TK classrooms. Local Child Care Planning and Development Councils, First 5 commissions, and Regional Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies can help board members understand the population of pre-K organizations who already serve 4-year-olds locally.

- ▶ *Will child-development goals for UTK mesh with academic priorities in elementary grades?* Pre-K professionals often urge attention to the social skills and emotional growth of young children, while recognizing the pivotal importance of early cognitive growth. Many developmentalists value the utility of developmental observations and learning through “guided play” in soundly arranged classroom activities that engage 4-year-olds.⁶

These notions of “best practices” for preschoolers may conflict with the pressure felt by some elementary teachers to focus on academic skills. Board members should inquire if district planners are considering these essential issues. These are important conversations that affect which teachers are deployed to TK classrooms and the forms of nurturance and learning they foster. CDE recently put forward a detailed guide for how to smooth the pre-K-to-grade-3 continuum, blending academic goals with children’s underlying social development.

- ▶ *How can district leaders continually assess and improve UTK classrooms?* It can be daunting to simultaneously expand enrollment and improve quality. Young children enjoy strong developmental benefits from high quality pre-K programs, but gains are compromised when quality lags.⁷

The selection of new teachers or redeployment of incumbent teachers to UTK classrooms will shape the quality of activities and nurturing that young children experience. Observational tools can help gauge variation in the quality of classroom practices and guide coaching efforts to improve practice. Local First 5 agencies have long advanced these forms of professional development.⁸

Gains in pre-K quality and fostering children's growth often overlap with issues of language and culture, a necessity in conversations about TK. Early educators can work to build from the home language of 4-year-olds. This includes the option of integrating TK classrooms into a district's bilingual or dual-language immersion program.

As district leaders shape a continuous improvement strategy, they might consult parents and community groups on their conceptions of essential learning and socialization goals. Many districts benefit from the lessons learned from existing bilingual programs at the elementary level, along with recent growth in dual-language immersion. Leaders in schools and the research community may help shape culturally competent TK programs.

How can your district find qualified teachers and instructional aides?

Some 83,000 teachers with training in child development already lead pre-K classrooms statewide—47 percent of whom hold a bachelor's degree.⁹ Recognizing the experience and proficiencies of these teachers—and facilitating their credentialing—could advance the quality of UTK, provide stronger wages, and yield a teaching force that better matches California's children.

At least 11,000 new teachers must be found to staff TK classrooms—either incumbent teachers with a multiple subject credential, staff moving from existing pre-K programs (who may lack credentials), or new individuals hired to staff TK classrooms. Districts may use part of their implementation grants to support teacher preparation for individuals who lack credentials.¹⁰ An allied effort, aiming to increase classified aides, will be supported through local grants equaling \$125 million.

One key priority is to carve out pathways for incumbent pre-K teachers, often women of color serving low-income communities. Golden State Teacher Grants are funded at \$500 million to support credential trainees. An early childhood “bridge credential” may ease promotional pathways for pre-K teachers with a bachelor's degree and ample experience with young children. The CTC recently convened the Early Childhood Education Workgroup to develop plans for addressing this issue at the state level.

To produce newly credentialed TK teachers, support will flow to training institutions and directly to districts. The 2021–22 state budget provides \$350 million, which CTC oversees, to support districts and county offices, in partnership with universities and training organizations, to expand or create teacher residency programs. In addition, local districts can apply for grants from CDE (totaling \$100 million) to help “increase the number of highly qualified teachers available to serve California state preschool and transitional kindergarten

pupils.” Initial planning and capacity-building grants totaling \$25 million have gone to consortia to a consortium of districts, county offices, and universities. Operational grants will later support new residency programs, including \$25,000 to cover each trainee's costs.

Still, board members and superintendents must weigh the optimal mix of TK teachers. These planning discussions hold implications for quality and wage costs over time. A key decision for board members will be whether to require reassigned teachers to obtain stronger training in child development and pedagogies for young children. Evolving ties with preservice training institutions, especially local universities, remain important for that reason.

The full extent of staffing considerations for serving students with disabilities remains unknown as districts begin to enroll a quarter-million additional 4-year-olds. State dollars invested in special education will rise in the current year to nearly \$5.5 billion dollars, a 16 percent boost over last year. TK teachers will likely serve many young children with cognitive or developmental delays, as well as behavioral issues, placing greater demands on resource specialists. Yet, the benefits of early intervention are well-documented.¹¹

These staffing decisions will occur in the context of a worsening teacher shortage. New credentials issued by the CTC dropped by nearly one-third during the pandemic, while retirements were up 26 percent in the second half of 2020.¹² This is on top of the fact that, nationally, anywhere between 26 to 50 percent of teachers leave the profession within five years.¹³

Does your district have the infrastructure necessary to increase enrollment of UTK students?

To serve rising counts of 4-year-olds, some districts may need to renovate or construct new classrooms. The extent of this challenge will depend on rising or falling K-12 enrollments, along with the age and character of available classrooms. Ideally, UTK classrooms will be outfitted for 4-year-olds. Some of the requirements for UTK classrooms include clear visibility for teachers to see all children, appropriately sized plumbing and furniture for young students, and proximity to safe outdoor space.

State allocations for UTK and full-day kindergarten facilities continue to grow, partially targeting districts with modest tax bases by the State Allocation Board. The state Legislature earmarked \$490 million in Senate Bill SB130 to expand the existing Full-Day Kindergarten Facilities Grant Program to include TK. This grant provides a one-time payment to districts to build new facilities or retrofit old classrooms for TK students. In addition, revenues from LCFF, district bonds, and federal stimulus dollars (through 2024) can be used for classroom renovation and small capital construction.¹⁴

Facilities staff inside districts and nonprofit pre-Ks have learned how to secure financing and construct age-appropriate classrooms, as detailed in a recent guide by researchers at the American Institutes for Research and UC Berkeley. Many school districts, for example, contract with community-based nonprofits to provide full-day, full-year pre-K programs which often extend beyond what K-12 financing and labor contracts presently allow.

Transportation will be another essential infrastructure concern for UTK. Dropping a child at preschool, while rushing to work, has long spurred early morning stress for parents, and now there is the added consideration of how to move 4-year-olds to afternoon care when TK lets out early in the afternoon. The Legislature has provided zero dollars for transportation, although local board members could allocate LCFF funds for this purpose. Otherwise, parents may opt for more flexible forms of child care prior to kindergarten.

Is there an opportunity to collaborate with nearby pre-K organizations?

The expansion of UTK will preoccupy many district leaders, but board members should remember that schools operate in a community that includes nonprofit pre-Ks, licensed child care homes, and individual caregivers (often supported with public dollars). Boards should consider if there are opportunities to collaborate with these community partners.

Few districts can provide full-day and year-round pre-K services, given fiscal constraints, facility capacity issues, and labor agreements. So, collaboration with this ecology of organizations becomes essential. School leaders and teachers hold a shared interest in improving the quality of local child care and all pre-K options since K-12 educators will now be responsible for supporting 4-year-olds.

Diverse School Boards Face a Shared Opportunity

More than 1,000 school boards in California will endeavor to serve young children across a variety of communities. How UTK sprouts and matures in Eureka or Fresno will differ from program trajectories taking shape in Roseville or San Diego. Most local boards serve families of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, which means that each district will build from those unique experiences in developing their pre-kindergarten programs. Districts will likely display uneven capacity to apply for UTK planning grants and/or team up with community-based pre-K organizations.

Board members and district leaders can learn from one another—taking lessons from nearby peers that hold greater experience with pre-K or TK programs. Below, we list experts and organizations already at work to expand and improve TK efforts, including leaders of districts, large and small.

Every school board in California now holds the rare chance to dramatically lift up young children—advancing early cognitive and social proficiencies, along with their emotional well-being—before entering kindergarten. If this challenge is taken up and carried out with high quality, kids and teachers alike will benefit greatly.

Additional Resources

CSBA's UTK Resources webpage includes additional resources such as data on UTK enrollment by district size and location, a map of UTK enrollment patterns across the state, and demographic breakdowns for UTK. Some school districts in California have already gone through the process of planning and implementing UTK programs, including San Diego Unified and Palermo Union School District. The lessons that leaders from these districts learned can be found in short case studies on the resources webpage.

California Department of Education's FAQ webpage offers resources that address funding logistics, teacher workforce considerations, program information, and other critical questions board members may have. The department's main [elementary page](#) contains a copy of their January 13, 2022, webinar that covered a range of important topics including funding timelines, implementation considerations, and UTK program regulations. The page also includes a downloadable planning template, which offers board members a focused set of considerations for how districts can plan for and spend new UTK funding from the state.

CDE's Preschool through Third Grade Alignment guide, which includes both horizontal and vertical alignment and coherence across grades and systems to improve coordination of policies and practices in preschool, across transitions to TK and kindergarten, and through third grade and beyond.

CDE created the [Universal Pre-Kindergarten and P-3 Group](#) to provide a centralized webpage to share resources and guidance on implementation and curricular resources. The page includes collections of documents, webinars, and trainings specifically tailored for the UTK planning and implementation template.

Resource experts and collaborating organizations:

- ▶ [Center for District Innovation and Leadership in Early Education](#)
- ▶ [Early Edge California](#)
- ▶ [Kidango](#), a nonprofit pre-K partnering with multiple districts
- ▶ [Office of Public School Construction](#) for info on TK facilities development
- ▶ [Low Income Investment Fund](#) for loan capital and technical assistance LEAs
- ▶ [Early Childhood Facilities: Local Challenges and What's Working](#) is a 2020 report containing lessons from districts and nonprofit pre-Ks on facilities development from the American Institutes of Research and University of California, Berkeley

CDE also maintains a [central elementary resources page](#) that contains all of the most updated UTK guidance documents for LEAs, webinar recordings, and other valuable information.

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Endnotes

- 1 Several reviews detailing pre-K's benefits for children from low-income families have been published over the past quarter-century. For example, Fuller, B. (2007). *Standardized childhood: The politics and culture of early education*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press. Li, W. et al. (2020); *Timing in early childhood education: How cognitive and achievement program impacts vary by starting age, program duration, and time since the end of the program*. Washington, DC: Child Trends. Yoshikawa, H. et al. (2013); *Investing in our future: The evidence base on preschool*. New York: Foundation for Child Development; Zigler, E., Gilliam, W., & Barnett, S. (eds., 2012). *The pre-K debates: Current controversies and issues*. Baltimore: Brookes Pub.
- 2 A 2019 [overview](#) of state and federal spending on early care and education in California . Legislative leaders detailed their 2021–22 initiatives in a June 2021 [summary](#), essentially the same provisions approved by Gov. Gavin Newsom.
- 3 California Legislature, Assembly Bill 130. Reg. Sess. 2021–2022 (2021). <https://bit.ly/3K1YEjG>.
- 4 California Legislature, Assembly Bill 130. Reg. Sess. 2021–2022 (2021). <https://bit.ly/3K1YEjG>.
- 5 Many readings and empirical studies delve into the right balance between academic skills and nurturing the underlying social and emotional growth of young children. For example, Neuman, S. B., Copple, C., & Bredekamp, S. (2000). *Learning to read and write: Developmentally appropriate practices for young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children; Jones & Kahn (2017). *The evidence base for how we learn*. Aspen, CO: Aspen Institute; Fuller (2007). *Standardized childhood*.
- 6 For details on “guided play,” along with initial evidence on possible empirical benefits for children’s growth, see Skolnick Weisberg et al. (2016). *Guided play: Principles and practices*.
- 7 On the empirical benefits of transitional kindergarten, from the program’s earliest years in California, see a 2017 [evaluation](#) report: Quick, H., & Manship, K. (2017). *The impact of transitional kindergarten on California students*. Palo Alto: American Institutes for Research.
- 8 First 5 Santa Clara County, for instance, has mounted over the years a variety of quality improvement efforts, including in-service training and classroom assessment for teachers.
- 9 Williams, A., Montoya, E., Kim, Y., & Austin, L. (2021). *New data shows early educators equipped to teach TK*. Berkeley: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, Berkeley.
- 10 For details on the count of teachers required to fully implement UTK, see initial [research](#) from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment.
- 11 National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007). *The science of early childhood development: Closing the gap between what we know and what we do*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2Fas2Bp>.
- 12 A review of the teacher shortage and original statistics are reported by Hong, J. (2021). *Not enough subs: California schools face severe teacher shortage*. *CalMatters*, September 1.
- 13 Hoyer, Eric. (2020). *Creating and maintaining a pipeline for K-12 STEM teachers in California*. The California School Boards Association. <https://bit.ly/3u7oxZA>.
- 14 CSBA hosted an earlier [discussion](#) with the State Allocation Board regarding the finance of construction projects for full-day kindergarten, the same revenue stream that supports classroom construction for UTK.