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Insights from California's TK Educators and Leaders

This brief is designed to be read by researchers to help bridge the gap between research and practice.

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Executive Summary

As California's Transitional Kindergarten (TK) efforts expand following new 2021 legislation, district and site leaders are tasked with making TK implementation and expansion a reality within their schools for all four-year-old children by 2025–2026. As many as 250,000 students are estimated to enroll in these expanded kindergarten programs statewide in the next three years as part of the Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) effort. In this process, leaders are coordinating with multiple stakeholders to ensure their school sites, districts, and counties are prepared with structures, spaces, funding, and staffing to support new students. Much has been written in scholarship about the developmental approach to UTK curriculum, effective educational practices for young learners, and high-quality, integrated UTK programs (see **21CSLA Research Brief** for a summary of research).¹ However, UTK leaders are still navigating an emerging landscape and new dilemmas, signaling future areas for research and study.

In this practice brief, we underscore four key themes from UTK educational leaders as areas ripe for further research. These findings underscore current pressing challenges and dilemmas facing UTK leaders and speak to the larger context in which UTK expands. We draw from semi-structured interviews with four California UTK leaders to illuminate the challenges, opportunities, and ingenuity of educators and districts in supporting UTK implementation and/or expansion.

¹Luo, H., Sánchez Castillo, M., Esboldt, J. & Kim, M. (2022). *Preparing California school leaders for young learners in the UTK initiative* [Research Brief, 2(1)]. 21CSLA. <https://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/publications/21csla-research-brief-preparing-california-school-leaders-young-learners-utk-initiative>

Methods

The research team recruited district-office-level and county-office-level leaders through the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) and selected a cross-section according to their different regional locations and leadership positions within districts and counties. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and then coded with flexible coding. Following coding, we condensed the codes into four themes: Information Access, Networking, and Flow; Hiring Challenges; Desired Partnerships; and Sustaining Equity in Schooling and Staffing. For each of these themes, we highlight perspectives from participating leaders, drawing out similarities and differences across contexts. We then offer questions corresponding to each theme for scholars to consider as areas for further research.

“I’m just trying to get information—from colleagues, the state, wherever I can get the information—so that I can stay up to date, because the information is constantly changing. And sometimes, the management bulletins or emails that come out from the official sources aren’t the clearest, or in the easiest language. We have to figure out, okay, when they say this, what does that really mean? I’m always just striving to figure out what the most up-to-date information is and stay on top of everything.”—District Leader

Information Access, Networking, and Flow

As information, resources, and regulation around UTK continue to evolve, leaders rely on a dynamic information network to obtain and make sense of new information on the one hand and to inform and shape evolving state and local guidelines on the other. Leaders indicated the importance of official sources of information such as state and association webinars, websites, and conferences. However, many leaders underscored the crucial role of informal information networks among UTK providers in their area and across the state as well in helping them access and make sense of evolving information. Several leaders spoke about an informal, inter-district monthly Zoom meeting or happy hour that centered on sharing information. For leaders in smaller districts, these external connections were particularly important, as UTK supervisors found themselves as the only ones among their district’s leaders who understood the work. Larger districts and counties were able to offer more coordinated networks across internal and external sites and programs. However, these networks required substantial efforts to create and were still not comprehensive, particularly when it came to supporting and coordinating with community-based UPK organizations.

In addition to working to obtain quality and up-to-date information from the state and UTK programs in other districts, interview respondents spoke to the need to deliberately disseminate information to shape the implementation of UTK at both the local and state level. District-level UTK directors spoke to their need to educate many of their district’s K–12 leaders and partners in areas such as classroom facility needs, resistance to narrow academic emphases, and standard forms of assessment. As one district-level UTK leader described this gap in understanding, many district leaders “think that these little TK children are just going to be smaller versions of first graders, because they see kindergarteners as smaller versions of first graders right now.” Instead, UTK leaders are advocating within their districts for bathrooms within each TK classroom, holistic learning curricula, and anecdotal rather than quantitative report cards. Likewise, many leaders described efforts to share information about their district’s experiences and needs with state leaders and policymakers in order to shape state policy for funding to support a 10:1 ratio and additional facilities grants.

Hiring Challenges

Leaders identified UTK workforce needs as the most widespread and pressing concern within their districts and counties. While hiring challenges varied by location and program structure, one district leader captured the shared sentiment: “Finding the personnel—period—is difficult.” Beyond the current staffing shortages shared by K–12 sites, leaders named some UTK-specific challenges in hiring, including credentialing, pay, and demands of the position. Although grants exist to support classified staff to obtain newly required credentials and are highlighted by educators as incredibly important financial support, not all classified staff have the time or desire to return to school to do so. Furthermore, while credentialing comes with an important pay raise for early education professionals, it does not carry over to the aide, assistant, or support positions that leaders named as crucial for robust classroom environments. Leaders noted that well-qualified educators are seeking other positions given low pay rates for assistants and the particularly high hands-on demands of the role compared with other grade-level assistant positions.

Desired Partnerships

Leaders also highlighted the untapped or nascent potential for partnerships with nearby universities and local preschool providers. Indicating a strategy that was immediately available, one leader shared that they were interested in visiting senior seminars for undergraduate students to talk to them about opportunities in the workforce.

Thinking more long term, another leader expressed interest in exploring Grow Your Own credentialing programs, which recruit and train teachers from within communities through multi-organizational partnerships. In the meantime, the leader planned to reach out to their district’s special education department to see what UTK leaders might be able to learn about hiring. The special education department had previously created an

internship program to fill special education teacher vacancies, and UTK leaders wondered if they might be able to take advantage of these existing structures in the case that UTK could not hire enough credentialed teachers.

In addition to creating partnerships with institutions of higher education, some UTK coordinators expressed interest in partnering with community-based early childhood providers to offer more streamlined information to families as they choose what is best for their children before kindergarten. Leaders emphasized the importance of family choice while recognizing the structural barriers of cost and childcare hours that may dictate families’ choices.

Sustaining Equity in Schooling and Staffing

All leaders emphasized that the implementation and expansion of UTK must meet the needs of the most historically underserved students, but different leaders emphasized different challenges and resources required to meet those needs. For example, only one leader highlighted their district’s commitment to full inclusion of all students within UTK, including students with

disabilities, as it was best for learners. Yet, to do this, the district has had to allocate additional funding to ensure all student needs are met with additional special education training for teachers and lower teacher-to-student ratios, and it is not clear how long they will be able to sustain this additional funding. Although other leaders did not speak of inclusion efforts within their site’s UTK approach, several leaders echoed the call for more funding to ensure an equitable, developmental approach to UTK.

In terms of employment needs, much has been written about the low pay of the majority woman-of-color early childhood workforce. However, while credentialed teaching positions in UTK promise a much-needed pay raise for some educators, aides and assistants without required credentials may be left behind in terms of pay. Multiple leaders named the low pay of the assistant positions despite assistants’ integral role in classrooms. One leader reflected that the majority of their educators of color were in these assistant positions, while their credentialed staff reflected the majority white teacher population across the country. In some districts, addressing equity dilemmas consisted of open and ongoing conversations. In other districts, leaders said that while colleagues expressed a commitment to equity, engaging in conversations about equity was relatively new within their context and many found it hard.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In response to the experiences, dilemmas, insights, and perspectives from these school leaders, we offer suggested questions for further research. Some of these questions came directly from leaders’ experiences; others are more broadly inspired by what they shared. If you are already engaged in research in these or related areas, we’d love to hear from you. Please email us at 21csla-briefs@berkeley.edu to share your work with us.

Information Access, Networking, and Flow

- 1. Given the importance of information access that leaders spoke to, what types of information and networking structures already exist for sharing information between different states that have expanded UTK? What attributes contribute to more effective and accurate information sharing among educational leaders?
- 2. How are leaders creating local, organic, and/or grassroots information networks around UTK? What is the result of these networks for sensemaking and implementation?

Hiring Challenges

- 1. How have educational agencies creatively addressed the long-standing challenge of hiring educators? What are effective short-term strategies for getting qualified educators and support staff into the classroom? What long-term investments might have the biggest benefits?
- 2. How do local conditions shape innovative hiring approaches within districts? How do districts’ proximity and/or previous relationships with teacher certification programs shape current hiring challenges and successes?

Desired Partnerships

- 1. What are the various ways in which universities, as teacher credentialing institutions, are partnering with local educational agencies to support the UTK transition? What characteristics are associated with equitable and successful partnerships? What are some innovative ways in which universities have partnered on this front?
- 2. What do partnerships and coordination among district-based UTK and community-based preschool programs look like across the state? How are families making sense of different options and learning about different opportunities?

Sustaining Equity in Schooling and Staffing

- 1. What ideas and topics of equity are forefront within different local conversations about UTK implementation? How does the larger sociopolitical environment shape this?
- 2. What districts and/or locations are engaging in culturally responsive UTK approaches? What resources do they draw on? What challenges and constraints do they face?
- 3. How do educational leaders center equity in the challenging transition to UTK? What structures and resources enable leaders to maintain that focus rather than primarily emphasizing administrative and logistical needs?
- 4. What avenues exist to work for more sustainable and equitable pay for UTK classroom assistants and non-credentialed educators?

About 21CSLA

The original California School Leadership Academy was established by Senate Bill 813 in 1983 and administered by the California Department of Education until 2003. Senate Bill 75 re-authorized the 21st Century School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) in 2019. The grant is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. Headquartered at UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education, 21CSLA is led in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, the California Subject Matter Project, and seven Regional Academies across the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California that receive Title II funds. Programs are free to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve instruction and achievement outcomes for multilingual learners, students with disabilities, low-income students, and other historically marginalized students.

21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

21CSLA Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education, especially for educational leaders. These Research Briefs compile and present current research in a concise format. They also include reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. Companion Practice Briefs gather and lift the voices and the experiences of educational leaders for dissemination among researchers.

21CSLA also regularly produces Research-Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. For more information, visit <https://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research/webinars>

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Recruitment

Are you an educational leader willing to share your experiences to be highlighted in a future 21CSLA Practice Brief? Visit <https://tinyurl.com/sharewith21CSLAPracticeBrief> to let us know!