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CSCCE Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

Data Snapshot | June 2025

TK Teachers Need Principals to Be Mentors, Not Just Cheerleaders

In Spring 2024, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) asked a small sample of transitional kindergarten (TK) teachers: "When your supervisor visits your classroom, what kind of feedback or suggestions do they give? What do they comment on?" One respondent wrote, "She will give feedback on how my lessons went according to what she saw. She has also supported me by allowing me to visit other preschool/TK classrooms." By contrast, another teacher merely stated, "They say how cute the kids are."

These two responses hint at a looming challenge for California's elementary schools: as TK becomes a universal grade level in Fall 2025, are principals ready to serve as supervisors and mentors to the growing body of TK teachers? While the first quote shows there are principals who are rolling up their sleeves, the second doesn't inspire confidence.

In this snapshot, we share survey data collected from TK teachers in Spring 2024 as part of the **California Early Care and Education Workforce Study**.

Key Findings

1. TK teachers are more likely to look to central office staff than to their principal to help them grow their expertise.
2. TK teachers are skeptical about their principal's ECE knowledge—so they lean on one another instead.
3. Principals give praise more often than constructive feedback during their TK classroom visits.

By Anna Powell, Wanzi Muruvi, Lea J.E. Austin, and Abby Copeman Petig

Principals can make a difference to teachers.

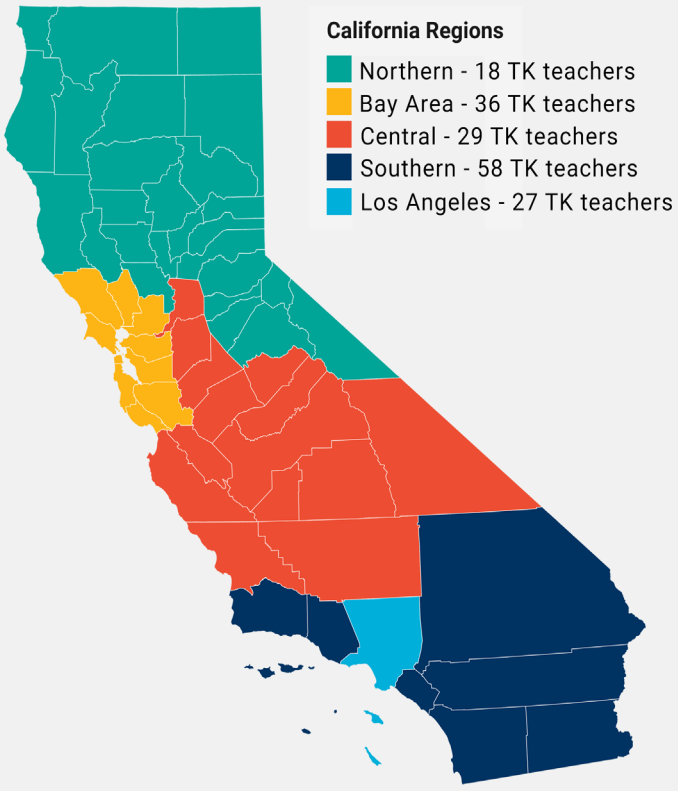
Our survey of 168 TK teachers finds that public school principals tend to demonstrate limited experience or coursework related to early care and education (ECE). This finding isn't unexpected: according to a 2022 summary of peer-reviewed research, approximately one half of elementary principals have prekindergarten at their school site nationally, but multiple studies confirm that the credential programs for principals rarely include early childhood. In our case study of New Jersey's principal preparation programs, we similarly found that universities did not have enough faculty with expertise in pre-K.

California's school leaders want to know more, and 91 percent of districts offered them ECE professional development in the 2023-2024 school year. Yet the specific content and rigor of the training are unknown. Fortunately, a few organizations in California are working with districts and schools to address the gap. The 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) runs a Universal TK Leadership Initiative geared primarily toward principals and administrators. Intensive technical assistance on ECE leadership and governance is also available with the Center for District Innovation and Leadership in Early Education (DIAL EE).

Principals' levels of participation and buy-in with any of these programs are unclear, however. Despite these important investments, our survey suggests there is a great deal more work to be done, and more research is desperately needed related to all dimensions of TK implementation.

Figure 1. Sample of TK Teachers

California ECE Workforce Study, 2024



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

About the Data

In this snapshot, we share data collected in Spring 2024 as part of the California ECE Workforce Study, which included a convenience sample of approximately 168 TK teachers. The teachers in our sample worked in districts scattered across California (**Figure 1**).

Readers should note that this group of TK teachers is not necessarily representative of the broader TK teacher population. While these takeaways don't serve as an evaluation of administrators' preparedness to support TK, they do provide insight into trends that merit further attention.

The 2024 survey first gathered basics on TK operations: around 97 percent of respondents considered their school fully staffed with lead TK teachers, but only 87 percent said the same for TK assistants or paraprofessionals. Additionally, 77 percent reported the site to be fully enrolled in TK. Finally, one half of respondents reported their school site offered preschool alongside TK, most often run by the district or county, but a few school-based preschool programs were run by partner organizations.

TK teachers are more likely to look to central offices to help them grow their expertise.

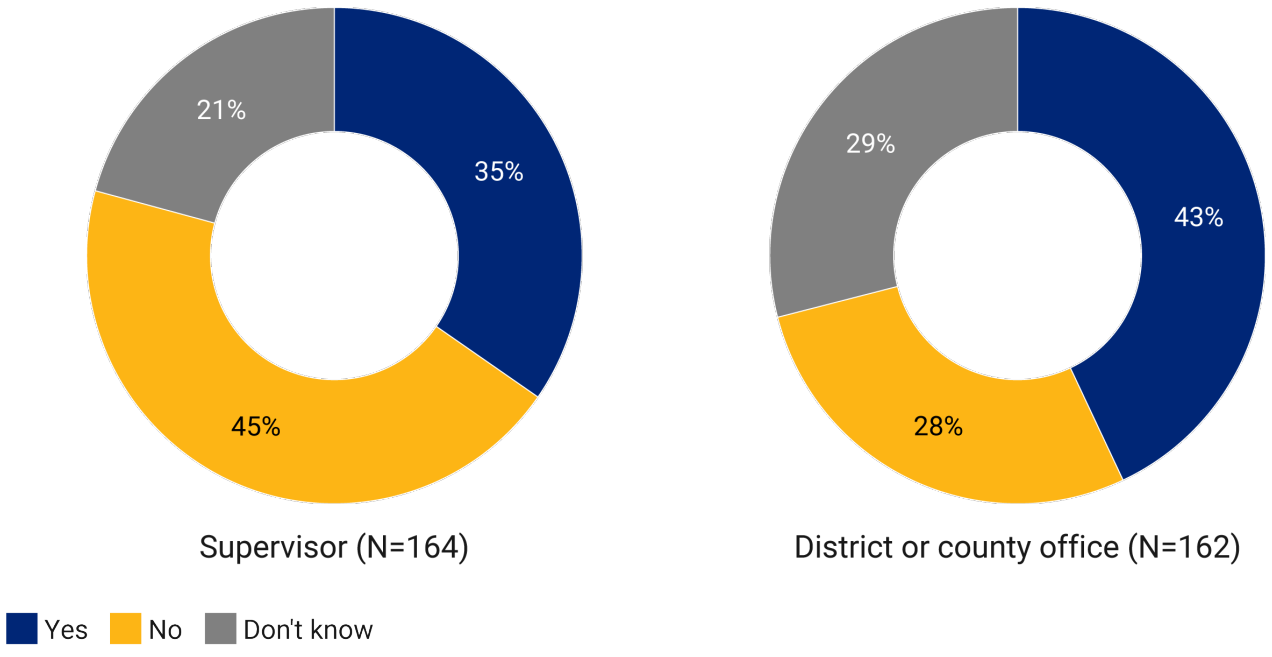
Our 2024 TK teacher survey included a series of questions on supervision. Nearly every TK teacher (96 percent) in our survey sample said their supervisor was an elementary school principal. While there are a few examples of districts with distinct campuses for TK—sometimes co-located with other early learning offerings—our data suggest this arrangement is rare.

Principals can be **highly effective** sources of support for their teachers, particularly when they, too, have access to ongoing opportunities for applied learning. However, because professional learning on TK is relatively new for California principals, they are unlikely to have expertise or learning opportunities related to TK-age learners. Their options for better preparation would ideally include not only attendance in workshops on transitional kindergarten, but also updated higher education coursework and new credentialing requirements, which were originally designed with a focus on kindergarten and older children.

Our 2024 survey asked teachers whether their supervisor (most often their school leader) and/or central office staff can help them with their top professional learning needs (**Figure 2**). Approximately 35 percent of TK teachers agreed their supervisor could help, and 43 percent felt central office staff could help. By contrast, nearly one half (45 percent) of teachers did not think their supervisor could help, compared to only 28 percent who did not think central office staff could help. The remainder were unsure. Districts and county offices may have other staff with ECE-related expertise, such as coaches, curriculum specialists, universal prekindergarten (UPK) coordinators, and more.

Figure 2. Do TK Teachers Think Supervisors and Central Office Staff Can Address Their Learning Goals?

California ECE Workforce Study, 2024



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

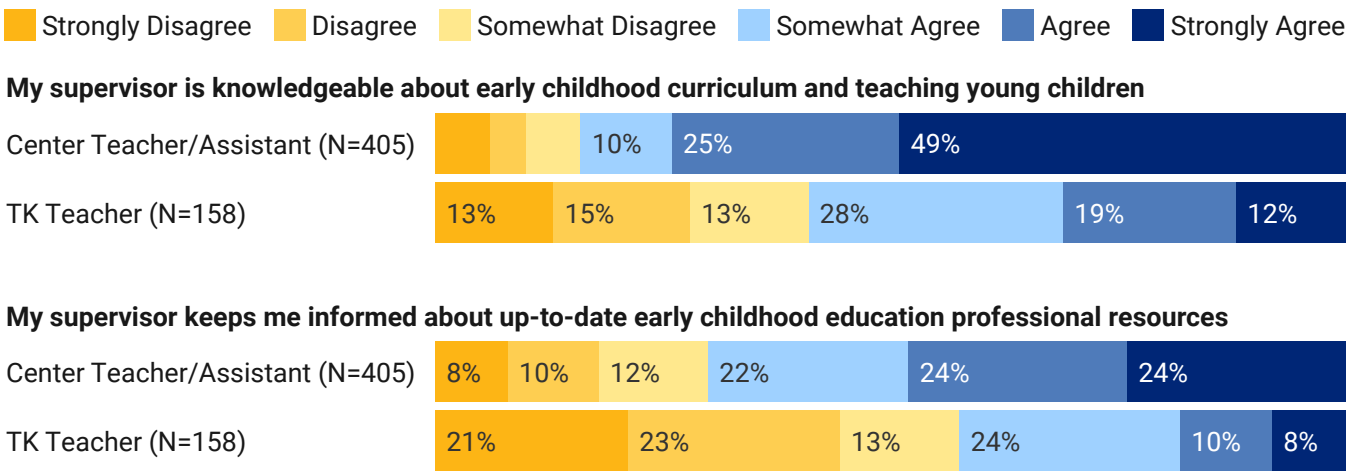
TK teachers are skeptical about their principal's ECE knowledge—so they lean on one another instead.

The 2024 California ECE Workforce Study included teachers from child care centers as well as transitional kindergarten. To compare perceptions of supervisor knowledge, we asked teachers in TK and other ECE settings to rate their agreement with two statements about their supervisor.

The survey provided a six-point response scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" (**Figure 3**). For both prompts, TK teachers' level of agreement fell below that of center teachers. Directors and site supervisors in other ECE settings have more **years of experience** teaching and leading programs for children birth through age five than elementary principals.

Figure 3. Early Educators' Perceptions of Their Supervisor

California ECE Workforce Study, 2024



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

School leaders and teachers involved in transitional kindergarten rely heavily on support from their peers, and a recent study from 21CSLA suggests they perceive peer support as more beneficial than professional support. Our survey echoes the importance of peer support: TK teachers in our sample are three times more likely to turn to one another "for guidance on pedagogy and classroom management for four-year-olds" than to seek support from their supervisor. (Teachers could select more than one option.)

73% turn to another TK teacher for guidance

24% turn to their assistant or paraprofessional

23% turn to their principal

Principals give praise more often than constructive feedback during their TK classroom visits.

School leaders bear the **responsibility** of "instructional leadership," and they should offer teachers guidance that helps them embrace effective strategies in the classroom. To better understand how principals of TK teachers approach instructional leadership, our survey asked about the frequency of supervisor visits. Teachers' responses varied widely, from 14 percent reporting a visit at least once per week to 10 percent reporting no visits (**Figure 4**). Many teachers (27 percent) only received a supervisor visit once or twice a year. In some cases, supervisors are not the only individuals conducting visits or observations. About 41 percent of our TK teacher sample reported observational or coaching visits from a difference source, including assistant principals, TK coaches, UPK support specialists, literacy and/or curricula coaches, mentor teachers, and others.

Figure 4. Frequency of Classroom Supervision Visits

California ECE Workforce Study, 2024



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley
N=164

The differences in frequency of classroom supervision visits may hint at different styles of leadership. In general, principals deliver support through classroom observations or evaluations. In some cases, however, principals may also conduct informal "walk-throughs" to connect with teachers. Evidence suggests time spent on walk-throughs has a negative relationship with achievement, especially when contrasted with coaching or other intensive strategies.

Our survey also provided some open-ended questions for TK teachers: "When your supervisor visits your classroom, what kind of feedback or suggestions do they give? What do they comment on?" The questions did not ask TK teachers to report on structured evaluations only, so it is likely that some of their comments reflect informal walk-throughs.

Let's take a look at some of the themes in their comments.

TK Teachers Speak

A total of 139 teachers commented, with nearly 40 reporting their supervisor mentioned or praised something specific—most commonly related to topics like classroom management, organizing the room, or interactions between students.

"It's all positive feedback. He comments on my classroom management skills, positive classroom environment, instructional strategies used."

"They say that my management is good, the kids are engaged and having fun, my room is set up very well."

"They comment on the student engagement and organized chaos of learning that is happening."

A few teachers reported positive reinforcement or feedback related to developmentally appropriate practice or play-based learning. The presence of these comments is promising, since principals are typically more familiar with pedagogy in older elementary grades where play-based learning is considered less valuable.

"They comment on the activities the students are participating in. They are happy to see a play-based classroom and age-appropriate activities."

"She will give feedback on how my lessons went according to what she saw. She has also supported me by allowing me to visit other preschool/TK classrooms."

"They comment on classroom management, classroom environment, and strategies for setting up center-based learning."

Unfortunately, 10 percent of teachers reported comments that ran in the other direction: negative comments on play-based learning. The examples below reflect a common misperception that early education teaching practices and preparation are not rigorous.

"My principal tells me I'm doing things wrong in my TK classroom but doesn't offer actual solutions She also is incredibly lacking in knowledge on TK requirements, DAP [developmentally appropriate practice], and how to support TK teachers."

"They say I have too many 'things,' that the students play too much, that their outdoor education time should all be scheduled. She doesn't believe in free choice time."

"They notice that kids are playing. Or that they don't sit very long. They want to see what they see in other grades. They don't understand what is developmentally appropriate."

Meanwhile, around one half of respondents described little-to-no feedback or only generic praise. Some of these respondents explicitly mention that their school leader comes from a middle or high school background. While praise may encourage a positive teacher–principal relationship, teachers benefit from actionable feedback to improve their practice.

> *"They say everything is great, [and give] no constructive feedback. Their only experience teaching was in high school, so very very limited knowledge of ECE."*

> *"They really do not have a lot of feedback. Her experience is in the middle school setting, so she usually praises me, but [provides] no real constructive criticism."*

> *"I have a very supportive administrator. He listens to our needs. However, he (like the higher up administrators) does not know much about early education."*

In sum, principals are most often providing positive reinforcement, but we do not see much evidence of specific understanding of what TK instruction and classrooms should look like.

California owes TK teachers a stronger foundation for instructional leadership.

As TK expansion nears full implementation, most TK teachers do not have a supervisor who can act as an effective instructional leader. Learning opportunities for principals are growing, but California's policymakers need more information on the quality and reach of these offerings. Fortunately, while principals are still building their capacity, TK teachers often feel that their districts or county office can support them. Ultimately, since TK is sometimes spread thinly across campuses, investing in centralized coaching and expertise may be necessary, regardless of the evolution of school leader knowledge. However, county offices may rely on state funding like the UPK Planning & Implementation grants to support technical assistance. As these one-time dollars wind down, it is unclear whether counties will be able to sustain centralized resources.

Currently, the greatest resources for TK teachers are other TK teachers. School and district leaders can help by giving teachers space and resources to connect and share knowledge. Nonetheless, many teachers of TK themselves have little preparation in early care and education (instead, they have **greater familiarity** with kindergarten through third grade). Districts can maximize the power of peer learning by hiring experienced early educators into the TK workforce. This endeavor will require investing in pipeline programs that help preschool teachers attain credentials.

In summary, California needs to double down on school- and district-level technical assistance to ensure that principals and administrators are becoming early learning experts. There will also be a role for institutions of higher education to update their credentialing programs for the next generation of school leaders. TK implementation is a moving target: new educators and school leaders enter the fold every year. Realistic, longer-term funding for district and county support will be necessary, paired with emphasis on principal participation to ensure the learning takes place. Additionally, pathways for experienced early educators to become TK teachers—and district advisors or coaches!—should be a top priority so California can take advantage of its largest untapped group of experts: preschool teachers.

Suggested Citation

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Editor: Deborah Meacham

About CSCCE

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE), founded in 1999, is the national leader in early care and education workforce research and policy. CSCCE provides research and analysis on the preparation, working conditions, and compensation of the early care and education workforce. We develop policy solutions and create spaces for teaching, learning, and educator activism. Our vision is an effective public early care and education system that secures racial, gender, and economic justice for the women whose labor is the linchpin of stable, quality services.

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