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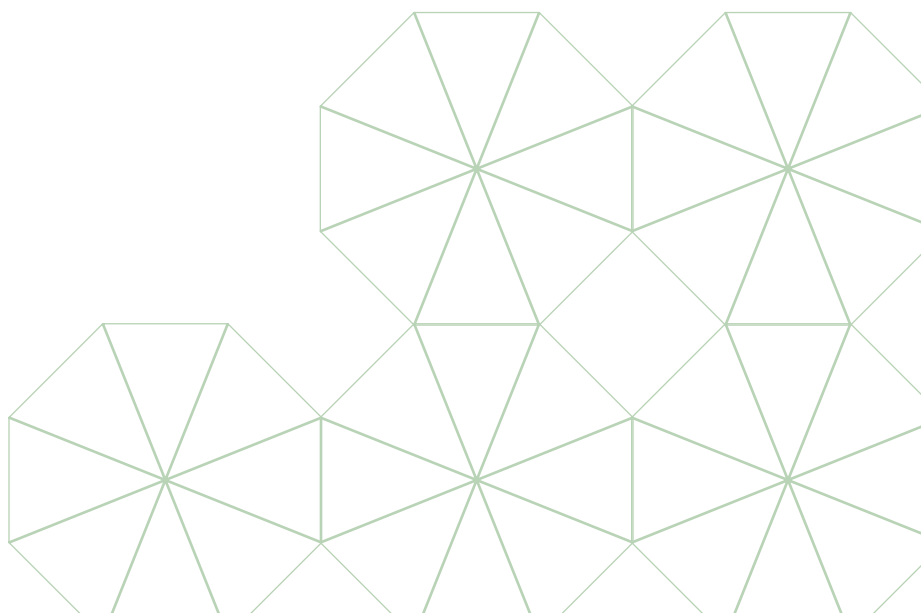
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Background/Introduction

In summer 2021, California's legislature approved a significant expansion of Transitional Kindergarten (TK). TK is a school-based early-education program serving four-year-old students who turn five after September 1 to access a robust learning experience before kindergarten.¹ California's effort, namely Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK), attempts to make TK available to every four-year-old over the next three years (by 2025–26).¹ According to the California Department of Education (CDE),² Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) is a mixed-delivery system that includes CDE-operated California State Preschool Programs, federal Head Start Programs, and community-based family childcare or private preschool, whereas UTK refers to school-based early-learning programs as part of the K–12 public school system. This brief centers UTK. It is projected that an additional 250,000 students will enter UTK programs statewide by the 2025–26 school year, leading to an increased need for an additional 11,000 new early-childhood education (ECE) teachers.³ As the UTK rolls out, school leaders play an essential role in its implementation.

Knowing that adding a preschool program is more complex than adding one more grade level,⁴ school leaders anticipate facing many challenges in the midst of opportunities. In previous research articles on preparing school principals for ECE in states such as Illinois and North Carolina, principals shared their concerns about not having adequate training in areas such as ECE curriculum, developmental milestones, age-appropriate disciplinary practices for younger learners, and proper support for TK teachers.^{5,6} After reviewing the states' professional-learning requirements for school leaders, policy analysts echoed principals' concerns that few professional trainings focused on helping principals develop essential skills and knowledge to lead ECE programs.⁷

In this research brief, we shed light on three key findings from the ECE research literature that could be informative for school leaders when implementing UTK. We conclude this brief with reflection questions that may help frame the next steps for school personnel at different levels.



Finding #1

A developmental approach to curriculum, assessment, and school environment is imperative.

Understanding the developmental characteristics and trajectories of young learners allows school leaders and teachers to provide students with educational experiences that align with their developing abilities. The importance of early-childhood education cannot be overstated, as it has long-lasting effects on a child's future learning. In the critical period of preschool, child development is often rapid and uneven. A student's learning during this developmental stage is highly influenced by the child's proximal environments and their social interactions with parents, teachers, peers, and others around them.

As a result of the nonlinear nature of development during early learning years, curricula and instructional strategies in ECE are distinct from those in other grade levels.⁸ Preschool curriculum is often interactive, play-based, and non-scripted, allowing for changes depending on students' interests, needs, and readiness. Similarly, from a developmental perspective, educational assessments during preschool years should be flexible, with a focus on young children's capacities to grasp math concepts, acquire complex language(s), and make cooperative friendships with peers, instead of a focus on test outcomes.⁴ Selection and use of assessment tools should take into consideration children's cognitive abilities, such as language, logical reasoning, and perspective-taking; socio-emotional skills, for instance, the ability to relate to peers, separate from attachment figures, and self-regulate; and fine and gross motor skills.

Implementation of quality TK programs also entails providing proper support for multilingual learners* and students with special needs.⁴ As multilingual learners constitute more than 18% of the total enrollment in California public schools,⁹ California principals should reflect on their knowledge about the schooling experiences of students. School leaders and teachers may benefit from critically inquiring about whether their school environment allows multilingual learners to engage with both adults and their peers in diverse languages. Early-childhood educators may also work to encourage continued home-language development, both in the classrooms and at home, as robust research has shown that literacy and language skills can transfer across languages.¹⁰ In order to best support students with special needs, early-childhood educators need to be familiar with the process of how to transition children from community early-intervention services (e.g., regional centers) to the school-system individual education program (IEP). These transitions from community services to school IEP when children with special needs enter TK programs need to be efficient and effective so that educators can help prevent the marginalization of these children at this early stage

of their schooling. Close collaboration with children's families in culturally and linguistically respectful ways is optimal for identifying and supporting children's varying needs.

Finding #2

Effective educational practices account for young learners' social and cultural contexts.

Another unique characteristic of ECE are the close connections among learning, playing, and socializing. In addition to paying attention to children's existing academic, psychological, and physical capacities, early-childhood educators should seek to understand the social and cultural contexts in which their preschoolers' learning and development are embedded.⁴ These contexts extend beyond school settings to the children's peer relations, home environment, family relations, community, etc. ECE professionals largely agree that positive peer interactions promote cognitive, socio-emotional, moral, and communicative development. Schools, albeit environments for academic development, are also important contexts for socializing with others. In connection with the next finding in this brief on meaningfully integrating TK with K–12, school leaders can provide students with opportunities for mixed-age and same-age peer interactions to facilitate a greater sense of belonging at school.

A closer look at the role of families in ECE will reveal quickly that family involvement is particularly instrumental in advancing rich language, modeling healthy social relationships, and shaping positive social behavior in encouraging ways. Therefore, in order to facilitate greater family involvement, teachers and administrators would benefit from understanding how to assess students' needs within the context of their family systems. Schools could also partner with community agencies to provide families with the needed care and services, for example wrap-around services, that will allow working families to send their children to TK programs. When connections are built among families, schools, and communities, all three entities can benefit as resources for each other and bring positive change for young learners.¹¹

Finding #3

Quality TK programs need to be integrated into the school settings to optimize young students' learning.

As mentioned in the introduction, TK is more than just another grade added to elementary schools for younger students. The impacts of high-quality early-childhood programs on student

*Although there is much variety in how students with a first language other than English are referred to in federal policies (e.g., English language learners, English learners), many of these labels place English at the center and are deficit-based, as they define students by the knowledge they lack. In this brief, we adopt the term multilingual learners to emphasize the strengths and abilities linguistically diverse students bring into the classrooms.

outcomes are profound and long-lasting, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, if they are integrated fully and meaningfully into a child's learning and into the culture of the school.⁴ Local and statewide policymakers in California have invested in many efforts to create and strengthen pathways for early-childhood students to transition seamlessly into grade school.¹² Two critical factors are consistently at the heart of these efforts: continuity and alignment.

Continuity refers to the degree to which instructions and learning is connected and scaffolded across grade levels. Alignment refers to the level of congruence among various elements of institutional practices (e.g., district curriculum, assessment standards, professional development opportunities) to accomplish a shared vision of school stakeholders across levels of schooling (e.g., preschool or elementary school).¹² Although it is hard to achieve continuity and alignment in every aspect, school leaders can use this two-dimensional framework to better implement and integrate TK in their schools.^{11, 12}

In a case study,¹² researchers showcased how various racially and socio-economically diverse school districts in California used this approach to foster pre-K to elementary alignment and continuity in mathematics teaching and learning. To foster continuity, school leaders and teachers, including math specialists from early-learning departments within the district, developed a math curriculum from pre-K through high school. Their core vision was to ensure that students learn math in ways that are creative,

interactive, and culturally relevant. These curriculum units have a common structure across the grades, adapted slightly for pre-K and TK. To increase alignment, the math teaching department worked with the assessment office to ensure that the district interim exams matched with the math content in their curriculum. Schools also integrated a student-data system from TK through elementary grades in order to track student data as students transitioned between grades. The school district in the case study¹² offered professional learning opportunities both for teachers on pedagogical strategies and for school leaders on matters related to supervising pre-K (e.g., preschool licensing and special education regulations).

Lessons from these previous efforts demonstrate that close communication across grade levels is crucial for building connections among TK programs and other grades and for integrating high-quality UTK programs into current school systems. It is also crucial that education leaders, when making integration efforts, maintain the uniqueness of TK spaces. For school leaders, integrating TK also means added responsibilities to work with and supervise teachers who hold different types of certificates⁴ or have various levels of experience. Therefore, ongoing learning opportunities explicitly dedicated to ECE are critical to preparing school leaders for the steep learning curve. These opportunities should educate leaders on the specific regulations related to ECE as well as prepare leaders to confidently welcome more young learners to their schools.

In light of these lessons learned from previous research, we propose the following reflection questions involving the key findings outlined in this brief for educators to consider in their next steps of providing UTK for all qualified young learners in California.

Reflection Questions

Teacher Leaders:

- ▶ What might be the benefits and limitations of your current assessment tools to measure the developing skills of TK students?
- ▶ How will you take into consideration students' interests, cognitive abilities, and socio-emotional needs in implementing the curriculum?
- ▶ In what ways do you still need to modify or expand your classroom curriculum to meet the needs of multilingual learners and students with special needs?

School Leaders:

- ▶ How, if at all, does your school collaborate with students' families to identify children's varying needs and strengths?
- ▶ How can your school facilitate collaborations among teachers across grade levels to promote alignment and continuity in the curriculum?
- ▶ What pathways might your school implement for UTK students to transition to K-12?

District Leaders:

- ▶ What are the ways in which your school district can offer ECE training to teachers who work directly with UTK students?
- ▶ How can your school district provide school leaders with adequate professional development opportunities not only to supervise incoming ECE teachers but also to support UTK students?
- ▶ Are there opportunities to partner with your county office of education to provide these professional development trainings for teachers and school leaders?

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 our companion 21CSLA Practice Brief? Visit <https://tinyurl.com/sharewith21CSLAPracticeBrief> to let us know!