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A New Model for Expanding P–3 Leadership Development in California

Introduction

California’s 2021 legislation launching Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) represents one of the most ambitious expansions of public education in the state’s history. With full implementation now expected as of the 2025–26 school year, UTK is backed by \$2.1 billion in state investment and new requirements for a 10:1 student-to-adult ratio in every transitional kindergarten (TK) classroom (Early Edge California, 2025). TK enrollment more than doubled between 2021–22 and 2023–24, from about 75,000 to over 151,000 children, and grew an additional 17% in 2024–25, though take-up rates have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels, and implementation quality remains uneven across districts (Hill & Lawton, 2025).

School leaders play an essential role in UTK implementation, and research has consistently found that they are underprepared for it. Principals who have spent their careers leading K–5 or K–8 schools now find themselves responsible for programs with distinct developmental frameworks, different instructional approaches, new community partnership requirements, and teachers who hold a different range of credentials and professional backgrounds. Studies of school principals in states with pre-K expansion have found that few

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have received adequate training in early childhood education (ECE) curriculum, developmental assessment, or age-appropriate instructional supervision, and that the preparation systems that shaped today’s administrators were simply not designed with P–3 leadership in mind (Brown et al., 2024; Jackson, 2023).

The statewide 21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy), led by the University of California, Berkeley, launched a multifaceted UTK Leadership Initiative to increase P–3 leadership capacity across the state. The initiative includes eight equity-centered professional learning modules, a statewide trainer certification pipeline, and the P–3/UTK Leadership Certificate, a two-course program developed in partnership with UC Berkeley Extension. The certificate’s two courses map comprehensively across all six standards of the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders (CPSEL), the state framework that anchors administrative credentialing and defines what effective school leadership looks like across vision, instruction, management, family engagement, ethics, and policy. By intentionally aligning the certificate to leadership standards, the certificate extends the work of credential programs rather than adding a separate layer on top of it. That connection carries real weight when making the case to districts and county offices for why this investment matters.

Together, the 21CSLA UTK Leadership Initiative has served more than 1,800 leaders across California and produced 165 certificate completers through May 2026. A formal program evaluation of the certificate found strong results: Across both courses, 94% or more of participants rated the coursework useful or extremely useful, and nearly all reported meaningful gains in knowledge, skills, dispositions, and confidence, including participants who already had significant early education experience before enrolling (SRM Evaluation Group, 2025). At the same time, participants identified two priorities for growth: more sustained connection with peers engaged in similar work, and expanding how and to whom the certificate is delivered. Rebecca Cheung, Director of the 21CSLA State Center, shared:

“The evaluation pointed to an important need related to UTK implementation. The leaders in the certificate program desired that their daily collaborators have the same knowledge and background as they did. They wanted more certificate completers as their colleagues so that their daily leadership actions could be more infused with the concepts that they learned.”

Those findings point directly to what the partnership models described in this brief are designed to address.

Professional learning certificates serve an important purpose: deepening individual knowledge, conferring

recognition, and signaling commitment to a field. The P–3/UTK Leadership Certificate is a rigorous, equity-centered program grounded in both the developmental needs of P–3 learners and the instructional leadership moves principals must master. Research on effective principal development points to an additional lever: When that learning happens in cohorts, where leaders engage together, reflect collectively, and carry shared frameworks back into their work, the impact on both leadership practice and student outcomes is significantly stronger (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Sutchter et al., 2017).

That insight is at the heart of what 21CSLA has been piloting. In addition to offering the certificate as a powerful standalone professional learning opportunity, 21CSLA has started embedding it into existing structures through two strategic partnerships: a district-wide cohort for school leaders in San Francisco Unified School District, and an administrative Clear Credential program at Sacramento County Office of Education. These partnerships represent a next layer of the initiative’s work, one that asks: How do we take what the certificate does well and amplify its impact by connecting it to the contexts where leaders actually work?

This brief describes those two models, examines what makes each distinctive, and makes the case for why this approach represents a replicable and scalable strategy for building the P–3 leadership California’s youngest learners deserve.

A District-Based Cohort: San Francisco Unified School District

A Design Rooted in How Leaders Learn

In the 2025–26 school year, the P–3/UTK Leadership Certificate was delivered as a yearlong district-based cohort professional learning program for 29 San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) principals, assistant principals, and district office leaders. The

design embedded the certificate into existing structures wherever possible. Thursday afternoons, SFUSD’s established professional learning time for principals, became the primary session slot, held in person. Saturday sessions, held once to twice per month, provided additional hours—a new ask, but one the district backed with compensation, treating it as part of formal professional learning rather than an add-on.

What Has Emerged

The San Francisco pilot has surfaced something that the district model makes uniquely possible: collective sensemaking across a complex system.

SFUSD is not a uniform district; its schools are extraordinarily varied in instructional program, neighborhood context, population, and physical design. Principals spend most of their professional lives deeply embedded in their own unique school environments, often with limited opportunity to learn from or with peers across the system. As a result, it can be difficult to perceive the patterns that cut across the district’s diversity—the systemic issues that look different at each site but are, in fact, similar.

The certificate cohort changed that. By bringing together principals from across the city’s different regions and program types, including Montessori schools, Mandarin bilingual programs, Spanish bilingual programs, and neighborhood schools, the cohort created the conditions for leaders to see what they could not see alone. Each principal brought their own data point, and together those points revealed the shape of the system. Common challenges emerged: TK and preschool teachers who lack shared professional learning time, ECE and K–12 leadership meetings that are siloed rather than coordinated, and principals who have rarely had access to the resources the certificate introduced.

The certificate's P–3 scope pushed participants beyond TK classroom implementation toward what coherent alignment across preschool, TK, kindergarten, and early elementary actually looks like as a system.

ECE leaders and coordinators who participated alongside site principals proved to be especially powerful contributors, bringing deep early learning expertise that expanded what principals understood about the populations they serve and modeling a kind of cross-sector professional exchange that rarely happens in traditional principal professional development.

Christopher Thomas, P–3/UTK Leadership Certificate Coordinator at the 21CSLA State Center and facilitator of the SFUSD cohort, describes what made this model distinctive:

“In our closing session, people were thanking each other for school visits, saying things like ‘I wouldn’t have thought about that space the same way if we hadn’t been in this together.’ They could see how different their jobs actually are, even with the same principal title—and that kind of cross-school understanding just doesn’t happen in traditional professional development.”

That shift showed up in concrete practice changes. One principal shared that the cohort pushed her to completely rethink how her school connects with TK families: “We’re not doing back-to-school night for our TK families the same way anymore. We’re meeting with them at the beginning of the year, and it’s really just a listening session now.”

A Clear Credential Partnership: Sacramento County Office of Education

A Design Rooted in How Leaders Learn

In the 2026–27 school year, the Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) School of Education will integrate the P–3/UTK Leadership Certificate into its administrative Clear Credential induction program.

Participants in the two-year Clear Credential program will have the option to fulfill their entire professional learning requirement—40 hours across the two-year program—through the certificate, rather than selecting from the menu of three-hour standalone workshops that has historically comprised that component. Critically, participants will move through the certificate together as a cohort, building shared knowledge and professional relationships across the full two-year induction cycle.

The certificate coursework will be delivered virtually, aligning with how SCOE already conducts Clear Credential professional development. Sessions are designed to fit within the rhythm of the induction calendar rather than imposing a separate, semester-based academic schedule on already-busy administrators. Because the certificate totals 60 hours across the program, candidates who opt into this pathway will also receive 20 additional hours of professional learning beyond what the credential requires, a tangible added value.

A Natural Fit for Induction

The Clear Credential context creates a particularly fertile environment for this kind of learning. Participants are already in a structured, supported, two-year developmental process. They are actively reflecting on their practice, working with coaches, and building their identities as educational leaders. Adding the P–3/UTK Leadership Certificate into this structure does not create a new burden; it offers something sustained and directly relevant to what districts in the region are prioritizing.

SCOE’s Clear Credential program already asks participants to identify an area of focus, whether elementary, secondary, or district-level, and assigns coaches accordingly. For those focused on elementary leadership, the P–3/UTK Leadership Certificate is a natural and compelling fit. The timing is not

The partnership models... represent one concrete, near-term response. They do not require new legislation or the creation of new systems. They use existing structures, Clear Credential programs, district professional learning time, certificate coursework that already exists and has already been validated, and they ask: How do we combine these in ways that are smarter than the sum of their parts?

incidental: District leaders across the region are actively grappling with TK implementation, and the certificate equips emerging administrators with exactly the leadership knowledge and frameworks they need to support that work in their schools.

Steven Winlock, SCOE School of Education's retired Executive Director and developer of SCOE's Clear Credential program, describes how he makes that case:

"I lead with the CPSEL alignment when talking to districts and county offices about this certificate. Building P-3 leadership capacity and meeting your credential obligations aren't two separate things. They're the same work."

The cohort structure amplifies all of this. These are not individual enrollees who happen to be sitting in the same virtual room; they are colleagues moving through a shared credential process, building relationships that will persist into their careers. When they eventually work in the same county, collaborate on regional initiatives, or find themselves on the same district leadership team, they will carry a common language and a common framework. That continuity of shared learning is what moves systems.

Shared Design Principles

Across both models, the same foundations prove essential—drawn from the SFUSD pilot and reflected in the design of the SCOE partnership.

Cohort matters more than modality. Whether delivered in person, virtually, or in a hybrid format, what makes these partnerships work is that participants go through the experience together, and that those participants share a professional context. They are not strangers who may never meet again; they are colleagues who will encounter each other in the work. That changes how they engage with the content, and how the learning persists.

Embedding beats adding. A key design principle in both models is fitting the certificate into existing structures wherever possible, minimizing the ask on already-busy leaders. The Clear Credential model fits within the existing professional learning requirement. The district model uses Thursday professional learning time. And across both models, the certificate's comprehensive alignment to the CPSEL ensures that this learning connects directly to the foundational standards California expects of its education leaders.

Shared Design Principle Foundations



Cohort matters more than modality. Participants go through the experience together as colleagues who will encounter each other in the work.



Embedding beats adding. Both models fit the certificate into existing structures wherever possible, rather than asking leaders to take on something additional.



The certificate travels. The content, the cohort experience, and the rigor remain; the logistics flex.



P-3 is bigger than UTK. Grounded in the full P-3 continuum, the certificate is essential for districts and counties grappling with preschool through early elementary alignment.

The certificate travels. The flexibility of the certificate, its ability to be delivered virtually or in person, compressed or spread across a year, aligned to a credential calendar or a district calendar, means that it can be adapted without losing fidelity. The content, the cohort experience, and the rigor remain; the logistics flex.

P-3 is bigger than UTK. Both models draw on the certificate's grounding not just in TK, but in the full P-3 continuum. For districts and counties grappling with the alignment of preschool, TK, kindergarten, and early elementary, this broader frame is essential, and it is what makes the certificate relevant not just to site principals but also to ECE coordinators, district office staff, and instructional coaches.

Why This Matters Now

California's TK expansion is placing new and unprecedented demands on school and district leaders. Administrators who have spent their careers leading K-5 or K-8 schools are now responsible for programs serving 3- and 4-year-olds, with developmental needs, instructional approaches, and community partnership requirements that differ significantly from what they were prepared for. The infrastructure for preparing those leaders, through the Preliminary Administrative Credential, through Clear Credential programs, through district professional development, needs to catch up.

The partnership models described in this brief represent one concrete, near-term response. They do not require new legislation or the creation of new systems. They use existing structures, Clear Credential programs, district professional learning time, certificate coursework that already exists and has already been validated, and they ask: How do we combine these in ways that are smarter than the sum of their parts?

As more districts move toward implementing their own cohort models, the lessons from these two pilots offer a foundation to build on: Attend to cohort composition, include ECE voices, and align to existing schedules. The certificate is an infrastructure piece that can be connected to other systems, amplifying its impact and extending its reach.

The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing is in the process of revising the standards that will govern administrative credential programs for the next decade. The work described here offers an evidence-informed perspective on what belongs in those standards, and on how preparation programs can be structured to build the P–3 leadership capacity that California’s youngest learners and the educators who serve them deserve.

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21CSLA Equity Statement

21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that ultimately improve success for all students.

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized, so that they can thrive. All 21CSLA offerings are open to all educational leaders regardless of race, color, national origin, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, or any other protected class status. We are committed to fostering an inclusive environment that welcomes participants of all backgrounds.

About 21CSLA

21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) is dedicated to providing high-quality, no-cost professional learning to California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that ultimately improve success for all students, as well as implementing statewide special projects such as Universal Transitional Kindergarten. A key member of California's Statewide System of Support, 21CSLA State Center is headquartered at UC Berkeley School of Education and led in partnership with the UCLA School of Education & Information Studies and seven Regional Academies located throughout the state.

Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education for educational leaders. We coordinate and facilitate Research–Practice Partnerships among California educational leaders and educational researchers by creating connections and providing research support. The briefs compile and present current research in a concise format, including reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. 21CSLA regularly produces Research–Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. We also curate a variety of resources for educational leaders to learn about current and important topics in education (e.g., webinar video recordings and highlights, briefs, podcasts). For more information, visit 21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research.

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