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Publication Date

2026-11-09

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Report | December 2022

Teaching Transitional Kindergarten

A Snapshot of the Teacher Experience Before UTK Expansion

By Elena Montoya, Anna Powell, Lea J.E. Austin, Yoonjeon Kim, Wanzi Muruvi, and Abby Copeman Petig

Executive Summary

California is expanding transitional kindergarten (TK) to become a universal preschool program for all four-year-old children. Upwards of 300,000 children are expected to enroll in universal transitional kindergarten (UTK) by 2025, requiring thousands of additional lead teachers and classroom aides to meet lower student-to-teacher ratio requirements and new student demand (Melnick et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2021). While previous studies have documented the positive impact of TK on children's learning (Banks et al., 2022; Manship et al., 2017; Sulik et al., 2023), this report presents the first comprehensive data collected from California's transitional kindergarten teachers about their teaching experiences.

Understanding what TK teachers themselves are saying about their preparation, work environments, and experiences is essential to ensuring a quality program as school, district, and state leaders plan for UTK expansion. In the fall of 2020, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) surveyed almost 300 TK teachers in classrooms throughout California as part of the California Early Care and Education Workforce Study. This report provides an exploratory picture of the composition of the TK workforce, the characteristics of the TK job, and the experience of teaching TK.

Key Findings

Demographics, Education, and Experience

- The TK teachers in our sample are predominantly female (99 percent) and White (71 percent). About one fifth of teachers are multilingual.
- Children in TK classrooms are highly diverse in terms of cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. Teachers reported that nearly three quarters of children in their classrooms are children of color. On average, 62 percent of students in TK classrooms speak English only, 33 percent are multilingual, and 5 percent are non-English speakers.
- One third of TK teachers (35 percent) have an associate degree or higher in child development or early childhood education.
- More than two thirds of teachers (67 percent) have met the requirement to complete 24 units of early childhood education or child development coursework. One quarter of teachers were teaching TK before the requirement took effect (26 percent), and 3 percent had the requirement waived by their district.

- The vast majority of teachers (90 percent) have prior experience teaching in kindergarten through third grade. About one third of TK teachers have prior experience teaching in other early care and education settings, such as a child care center or a family child care home.

Teaching Environment

- In the fall of 2020, TK teachers reported a median class size of 18 children. Less than one half of teachers (44 percent) had an aide for any portion of the school day; nearly two thirds of teachers who had an aide reported that their aide was available for only part of their instructional time.
- While more than one half of teachers (54 percent) agreed that their district understands developmentally appropriate practice for working with four-year-old children, this finding declines at the site level: only 40 percent agreed that their school community understands developmentally appropriate practice.
- More than one third of teachers (39 percent) reported that their classroom did not have an appropriately sized bathroom for young children. More than one quarter of teachers reported that their classroom did not have enough floor space for children nor did the school schedule allow for sufficient outdoor time for TK students.
- About one third of teachers reported that they have never had a sufficient supply budget (31 percent), enough supplies for all children in their classrooms (37 percent), or developmentally appropriate materials (31 percent).
- About one quarter of teachers reported that they did not feel part of the larger school community (22 percent) or part of the early care and education field (29 percent).

Recommendations for Policymakers

Recommendation 1: Articulate and enact community-informed strategic plans for effective TK implementation.

- Establish throughways at the district level to systematically gather and incorporate expertise from early education experts who work in TK classrooms, child care centers, and home-based settings.
- Implement community-based learning strategies across schools in order to establish a shared understanding of TK and the value of early learning and early educators to the school and broader community.

Recommendation 2: Fund and provide equity-centered training for school site and district leaders in developmentally appropriate practices for young children to ensure their readiness to provide pedagogical leadership to TK programs and teachers.

- Fund and provide professional learning opportunities for school and district leaders, building on the work of the Center for District Innovation and Leadership in Early Education (DIAL EE) and the UTK Leadership Initiative of the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA).
- Identify and clearly articulate school and district governance structures that identify responsibilities for TK programming and pedagogical leadership.

Recommendation 3: Ensure a supportive working environment for TK teachers to implement developmentally appropriate practice.

- Fund and provide the materials, curriculum, and consumable supplies needed for teaching four-year-old children and ensure that teachers have a classroom setup and facilities conducive to their teaching.
- Ensure that teachers have the support and resources to effectively meet the individual needs of children and families, including communicating with families and supporting children experiencing trauma.
- Ensure that TK teachers have peer support by putting into place formal opportunities for TK teachers to plan, prepare, and learn with other TK teachers in their schools and districts.
- Ensure that districts are enforcing class size limits and the 12:1 student to ratio for the full instructional day and that classroom aides are trained in early learning, supported, and fairly compensated. Clearly define "instructional day" as any contact time with children.
- Limit the use of combination classrooms, which make it difficult for teachers to meet the needs of young students.

Recommendation 4: Ensure a well-prepared and diverse TK teacher workforce reflective of California's children, attending to both the current workforce and the future pipeline.

- Ensure equitable pathways to the PK-3 Early Childhood Education Specialist Credential for experienced early educators from center- and home-based settings who do not hold a teaching credential.
- Provide professional development to TK teachers specific to teaching preschool-age children.

- Identify and fund initiatives to support early educators to participate in the preparation requirements currently required to obtain a teaching credential.

Recommendation 5: Ensure that data collection and program evaluation are an integral part of TK expansion.

- Ensure that TK and kindergarten teacher data are collected and reported separately in California Department of Education data systems.
- Ensure that program evaluation includes data about and from TK teachers.
- Evaluate the impacts of TK on the mixed-delivery early learning system.

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Introduction

California is expanding transitional kindergarten (TK) to become a universal preschool program for all four-year-old children. Upwards of 300,000 children are expected to enroll in universal transitional kindergarten (UTK) by the 2025-26 school year, requiring thousands of additional lead teachers and classroom aides to meet lower student-to-teacher ratio requirements and new student demand (Melnick et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2021). While previous studies have documented the positive impact of TK on children's learning (Banks et al., 2022; Manship et al., 2017; Sulik et al., 2023), this report presents the first comprehensive data collected from California's transitional kindergarten teachers about their teaching experiences.

The Kindergarten Readiness Act of 2010 established transitional kindergarten as the first year of a two-year kindergarten program for children who turned five between September 2 and December 2. The first TK classrooms opened their doors during the 2012-2013 school year. Full UTK expansion will take place over four years, widening the age range for eligible children each year. The 2022-23 school year marked the first year of program expansion. Beginning this year, all children who turn five between September 2, 2022, and February 2, 2023, are eligible for TK, and the student-to-teacher ratio was lowered to 12 students per teacher.

The expansion of TK to all four-year-olds holds promise and represents a step toward early care and education being recognized as a universal public good in California, available to all, regardless of family income. Decades of research have highlighted the benefits of prekindergarten programs (Phillips et al., 2017). For prekindergarten programs to be successful, they must be grounded in child development, focused on play-based and social-emotional learning, support quality interactions among teachers and students, and be taught by teachers with knowledge of child development and early childhood education (Espinosa, 2002; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015; Meloy et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2017).

As school, district, and state leaders plan for UTK expansion, understanding what TK teachers themselves are saying about their preparation, work environments, and experiences will be essential to ensuring a quality program. Despite consensus about the value of data about and from TK teachers, very little data have been available to date. While the California Department of Education's California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) includes data on the kindergarten program, at this point in time TK teachers cannot be separated from kindergarten teachers, posing a challenge for evaluating TK policy. The most recent demographic data about TK teachers available from studies on program impact are from the 2014-15 school year (Manship et al., 2017).

In the fall of 2020, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) surveyed almost 300 TK teachers in classrooms throughout California as part of the California Early Care and Education Workforce Study. The time period of our data collection, 10 years after establishment of the program, will allow us to provide a sense of the TK teacher experience before program expansion began. The perspectives of TK teachers can inform plans to ensure a diverse, prepared, and supported TK workforce, as well as the creation of professional learning to support school and district leaders in implementing developmentally appropriate programs for four-year-old children. This report will provide an exploratory picture of the composition of the TK workforce, the characteristics of the TK job, and the experience of teaching TK.

Key Findings

Demographics, Education, and Experience

- The TK teachers in our sample are predominantly female (99 percent) and White (71 percent). About one fifth of teachers are multilingual.
- Children in TK classrooms are highly diverse in terms of cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. Teachers reported that nearly three quarters of children in their classrooms are children of color. On average, 62 percent of students in TK classrooms speak English only, 33 percent are multilingual, and 5 percent are non-English speakers.
- One third of TK teachers (35 percent) have an associate degree or higher in child development or early childhood education.
- More than two thirds of teachers (67 percent) have met the requirement to complete 24 units of early childhood education or child development coursework. One quarter of teachers were teaching TK before the requirement took effect (26 percent), and 3 percent had the requirement waived by their district.
- The vast majority of teachers (90 percent) have prior experience teaching in kindergarten through third grade. About one third of TK teachers have prior experience teaching in other early care and education settings, such as a child care center or a family child care home.

Teaching Environment

- In the fall of 2020, TK teachers reported a median class size of 18 children. Less than one half of teachers (44 percent) had an aide for any portion of the school day; nearly two thirds of teachers who had an aide reported that their aide was available for only part of their instructional time.
- While more than one half of teachers (54 percent) agreed that their district understands developmentally appropriate practice for working with four-year-old children, this finding declines at the site level: only 40 percent agreed that their school community understands developmentally appropriate practice.
- More than one third of teachers (39 percent) reported that their classroom did not have an appropriately sized bathroom for young children. More than one quarter of teachers reported that their classroom did not have enough floor space for children nor did the school schedule allow for sufficient outdoor time for TK students.
- About one third of teachers reported that they have never had a sufficient supply budget (31 percent), enough supplies for all children in their classrooms (37 percent), or developmentally appropriate materials (31 percent).
- About one quarter of teachers reported that they did not feel part of the larger school community (22 percent) or part of the early care and education field (29 percent).

About the Data

CSCCE conducted the TK teacher survey between October and December of 2020. We distributed an open survey link to California district and county superintendents and partner organizations. A total of 282 TK teachers participated in the survey, representing more than 150 school districts around the state. The survey was conducted online in English, with approximately 100 questions. Topics included demographics, preparation and experience, job characteristics, compensation, economic well-being, pandemic impacts, and classroom/school environment.

CSCCE was not able to survey a larger, representative sample of teachers due to the lack of centralized data on the TK workforce. Data systems in the California Department of Education do not currently distinguish TK teachers from kindergarten teachers,[1] and rosters of TK teachers are not available in a centralized data system. A survey of TK programs by the American Institute for Research required painstakingly collecting such rosters by contacting districts directly over the course of several months (K. Manship, personal communication, 2018).

The California Department of Education has published administrative data for teachers by grade from the 2018-2019 school year (California Department of Education, 2018a; California Department of Education, 2018b). In these datasets, TK and kindergarten teacher data are combined. In presenting data from our sample, we provide some comparison points from the combined California Department of Education TK/kindergarten teacher data to contextualize our findings.

In August 2021, we published highlights on the education and experience of TK teachers in our sample (Williams et al., 2021), and in July 2022, we analyzed their wage and benefits data alongside other publicly available sources for TK/kindergarten teachers (Powell et al., 2022). In this report, we expand on teacher preparation and experience and delve into the domains of job characteristics and classroom/school environment. As such, we aim to explore the unique experience of TK teachers in their public school context prior to program expansion.

The TK Workforce and Children in TK Classrooms

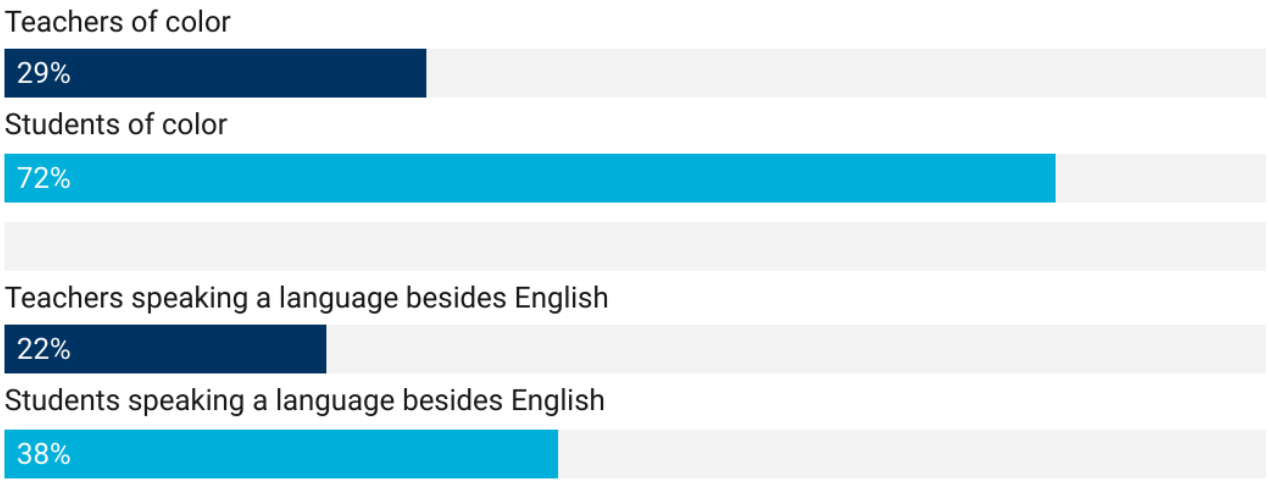
The TK teachers in our sample are predominantly female (99 percent) and White (71 percent). About one fifth of TK teachers are multilingual (22 percent). Spanish is the most commonly spoken language of multilingual TK teachers; 16 percent of all TK teachers speak Spanish. Less than 5 percent of teachers in our sample are under the age of 30, while nearly one half (47 percent) are age 50 or older. Twelve percent of the TK teachers in our sample reported that they plan to retire within five years.

1 California AB 22, passed in 2022, will require data on TK and kindergarten students to be collected and reported separately in the state's data system, CALPADS, starting in 2024.

There were an estimated 68,000 children enrolled in transitional kindergarten in California as of the 2020-21 school year, when our study was conducted (Prunty & Hill, 2022). Research has shown the importance of a diverse teaching workforce (The Education Trust, n.d.; Hansen et al., 2022; Nevarez et al., 2019; Sandstrom & Schilder, 2021) and of a racial, ethnic, or cultural match between children and their teachers (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Downer et al., 2016; Gershenson et al., 2017; Rasheed et al., 2019). The children taught by TK teachers in our sample are more likely to be people of color and multilingual than their teachers. Teachers in our sample reported that nearly three quarters (72 percent) of children in their classrooms are children of color (see **Figure 1**). Nearly all teachers (98 percent) reported that they have at least one English-speaking child in their classrooms, and 89 percent reported that they have one or more students who speak a language other than English, with Spanish being the language most commonly spoken by these students. On average, in the TK classrooms taught by teachers in our sample, 62 percent of students speak English only, one third speak English and at least one other language (33 percent), and 5 percent are non-English speakers.

FIGURE 1. RACIAL/ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC MATCH BETWEEN TK TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

California, 2020



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

To put our sample population into context, we reviewed the demographic data for the full population of TK/kindergarten teachers[2] during the 2018-19 school year, the most recent year teacher data by grade level are available. The teachers in our sample are less diverse and older than the full population of TK/kindergarten teachers. According to data from the California Department of Education, 95 percent of TK/kindergarten teachers are female, and 59 percent are White (California Department of Education, 2018a; California Department of Education, 2018b). In addition, 10 percent of TK/kindergarten teachers are under age 30, and 33 percent are age 50 or older (California Department of Education, 2018a; California Department of Education, 2018b). It will be important to disaggregate TK teacher from kindergarten teacher data to understand how the two populations may differ.

Data are available for the full population of TK students separate from kindergarten students. For example, during the 2018-19 school year, more than three quarters of TK students (78 percent) were children of color (California Department of Education, 2020).

TK Teacher Preparation and Experience

Transitional kindergarten is, by definition, an early learning program, meant to bridge preschool and kindergarten. As the importance of early education has become recognized, we have seen increased attention on ensuring that teacher preparation programs are adequately preparing early educators to meet the needs of their students (Austin et al., 2015; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015). Indeed, as California has been preparing for TK expansion over the past year, preparation for teaching transitional kindergarten has been a key focus of state leaders.

To teach transitional kindergarten, teachers must hold a Multiple Subject Credential, which authorizes the holder to teach preschool through eighth grade, and complete 24 units of early childhood education or child development coursework by August 1, 2023.

Alternatively, beginning in the 2022-23 school year, the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) may issue one-year emergency specialist permits to teach TK to teachers who lack a credential if they meet certain criteria (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2022b).[3] These emergency permits would help meet the increased demand for TK teachers during program expansion and will only be issued at the request of an employing agency.

2 Data for TK teachers alone are not available.

3 To qualify for the emergency permit, teachers must have a bachelor's degree or higher, hold a Child Development Permit at the teacher level or higher, and either a) hold a bachelor's degree or higher in child development or early education; b) have completed 24 units of college coursework in early childhood education or child development; or c) commencing in July 2023, have three years of full-time teaching experience in TK or at a child care center. The permit may be renewed for one year if the teacher is enrolled in a teacher preparation program to earn a credential.

The CTC also recently authorized the establishment of a PK-3 Early Childhood Education Specialist Credential, which would authorize the teaching of preschool through third grade, and be an alternate credential that would allow candidates to teach TK. The CTC is planning for institutes of higher education to be prepared to offer teacher preparation programs leading to this credential as early as the fall of 2023 (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2022a).

Education and Credentials

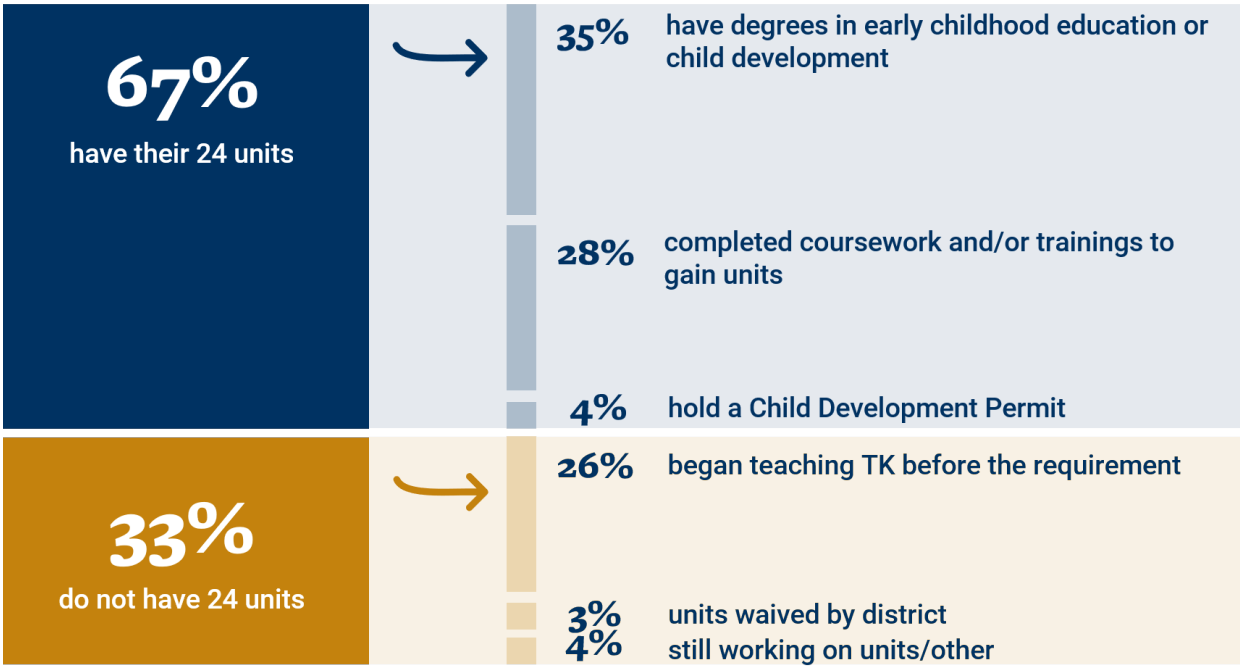
Almost all TK teachers in our sample have a Multiple Subject Credential (96 percent). Two percent of teachers reported having an emergency or intern credential at the time of the survey in the fall of 2020.

About one third (35 percent) of teachers in our sample have an associate degree or higher in early childhood education or child development.

Teachers may be exempted from the requirement to complete 24 units of early childhood education or child development coursework if they began teaching TK prior to July 1, 2015, or they can have the requirement waived if the hiring district deems them to have comparable experience teaching in an early learning classroom. As shown in **Figure 2**, in our sample, more than two thirds of teachers (67 percent) have met the requirement by either: a) having a degree in child development/early childhood education; b) completing 24 units of early childhood education or child development college coursework or community training; or c) holding a Child Development Permit at the teacher level or higher. One quarter of teachers (26 percent) were working in TK before the requirement took effect, and 3 percent had this requirement waived by their districts.

FIGURE 2. TK TEACHER PATHWAYS TO MEETING THE 24 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION UNIT REQUIREMENT, 2020

Have TK teachers met the requirement to hold 24 units of coursework in early childhood education?



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

Tenure and Previous Roles

One half of the TK teachers in our sample have been teaching TK for six years or more, while 43 percent have been teaching TK for one to five years. The vast majority (90 percent) had prior experience teaching in kindergarten through third grade. Nearly one third (30 percent) had experience teaching fourth or fifth grade. About one third of TK teachers (37 percent) have prior experience teaching in other early care and education settings, such as a child care center or a family child care home.

About the TK Job

We asked teachers whether they worked in full-day or part-day programs and whether they worked in standalone or combination classrooms. We also asked about their employment status as well as staffing and class size.

Program and Class Characteristics

Two thirds of teachers (66 percent) reported working in full-day TK programs in the fall of 2020, a finding comparable to the 63 percent of full-day programs found by researchers in a previous study about TK during the 2014-15 school year (Manship et al., 2017). Nearly three quarters of teachers in our sample were teaching in standalone TK classrooms (72 percent), while one quarter (25 percent) were teaching in TK/kindergarten combination classrooms. These findings were similar to those of a 2014-15 study showing that 76 percent of TK classrooms were standalone (Manship et al., 2017).

The majority of teachers reported working full-time (96 percent), although the structures of their days differed. More than three quarters of teachers (77 percent) reported that they taught one TK session and that was their only job at the school, while 13 percent of TK teachers taught one session of TK and had another role at their school. Among those with other jobs, the most common was leading reading intervention or a similar role (42 percent of other positions), followed by assisting in a fellow TK teacher's session (19 percent of other positions). Ten percent of teachers reported teaching two part-day sessions of TK.

Class Size and Staffing

The quality of early care and education programs depends on quality interactions among teachers and students. Teachers rely on a small classroom size or the assistance of an aide to meet individual children's needs and provide a nurturing learning environment. In California, the maximum child-to-teacher ratios in early learning classrooms that serve three- and four-year-olds is 12:1 (California Department of Social Services, n.d.) However, despite also serving four-year-old children, prior to the 2022-2023 school year and at the time of our data collection, TK teachers could have up to 31 students in their classroom, with no requirement for an aide (Melnick et al.; 2022).

More than three quarters of teachers in our sample (76 percent) had a class size greater than 12 students (see **Figure 3**). Of those teachers with 13 or more children in their classrooms, less than one half (46 percent) had an aide. The median class size was 18 children—somewhat lower than the average class size of 20 that was found in an 2014-15 study (Manship et al., 2017)—and was likely influenced by overall lower kindergarten enrollment during the pandemic (Greenberg & Luetmer, 2020; Prunty & Hill, 2022). Overall among TK teachers, less than one half of teachers (44 percent) reported that they had an aide, and nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of those reported that their aide was available for only part of the instructional time.

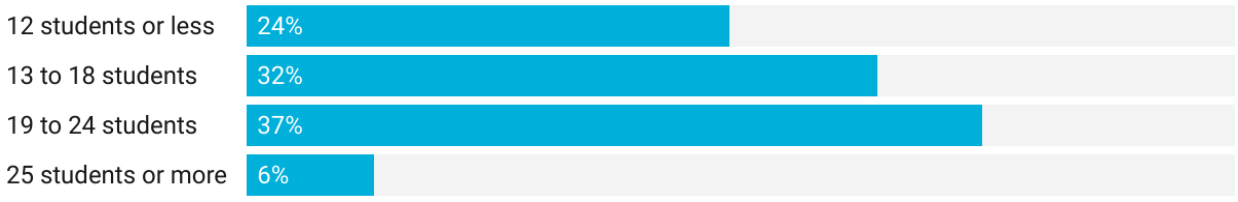
Teachers expressed in their own words the difficulty of teaching large numbers of young children without assistance. As one teacher said:

> *"[Having] no aide is criminal to me—these students are preschool age, yet do not fall under the California law that requires a 8:1 ratio of [state preschool program] students to adults? That is ridiculous. It is so hard to assess when it is just me doing the teaching."*

In recognition of the importance of lower ratios and to bring TK into better alignment with other early learning settings, with TK expansion the maximum classroom size has been lowered to 24, and the student-to-teacher ratio has been decreased to 12:1 for the full instructional day.[4] This change is effective as of the 2022-23 school year.

FIGURE 3. TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN CLASS SIZE

TK Teachers Reporting, California, 2020



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

4 Beginning in 2023-24, the ratio will be one teacher to 10 students, if funding is available.

Teaching TK During a Pandemic

At the time of our survey in the fall of 2020, TK teachers were in the midst of grappling with teaching during a pandemic. This reality impacted their experiences, particularly around teaching challenges and their own emotional well-being.

- **72 percent were teaching in schools that were online only**, while 22 percent were teaching hybrid, and 5 percent were teaching fully in-person.
- **25 percent had been through at least one change in operating status**, transitioning from one form of teaching (online, hybrid, in-person) to another.
- **Higher percentages of teachers cited challenges during remote learning** than in the previous school year, before the pandemic. The increase in teachers reporting challenges was most stark for activities that rely on in-person interaction, such as promoting social interactions among students, facilitating large group interactions, engaging students in social-emotional learning, observing students and conducting assessments, and spending time with individual students. See **Figure 6**.
- **About three quarters of teachers** reported changes in their sleep, difficulty concentrating, feelings of sadness or depression, feeling a lack of control, and anxiety about the future some or most of the time. About 80 percent reported worrying about themselves or their families becoming ill with COVID-19.

Teaching Supports

High-quality early learning programs depend on skilled teachers trained in child development and learning. In turn, teachers depend on a work environment that supports their ability to apply their skills and knowledge and implement developmentally appropriate practice. Important elements of the work environment include: teaching supports such as materials, curriculum, and facilities; support and resources to respond to individual and family needs; supportive workplace practices and relationships; and the support of leadership.

As TK bridges early learning and the elementary years in public school settings typically not designed to serve preschool-age children (Little, 2021), it is particularly important to understand the extent to which TK teachers are working in environments that support their teaching.

Materials and Supplies

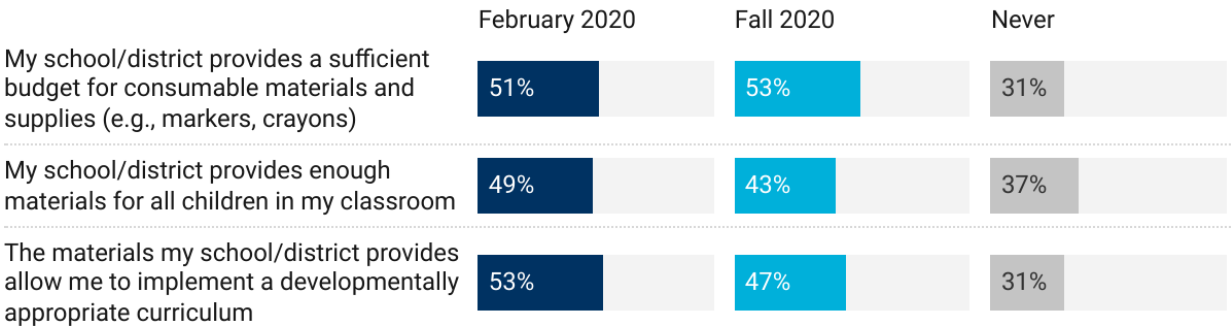
We asked teachers whether they had the supplies and materials they needed both in February 2020 (before the pandemic) and in the fall of 2020 (during the pandemic). As illustrated in **Figure 4**, about one third of teachers reported that they had never had a sufficient supply budget (31 percent), enough supplies for all children in their classrooms (37 percent), or developmentally appropriate materials (31 percent).

TK teachers expressed the challenges of working without needed materials. One teacher said she was "trying to avoid using the TK curriculum the district brought because it is completely inappropriate." Others discussed the need for materials that allow for dramatic play, asking to "bring back a kitchen to play" or explaining that "TK students do not have enough time or materials to learn social skills through dramatic play." Several teachers commented on the need to spend their own money to purchase materials. As one teacher stated:

> *"[It's] hard not having the district provide me with the hands-on learning materials I need for my students. More often than not, I have to purchase these out of pocket or have my kids do without."*

FIGURE 4. TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM SUPPLIES AND MATERIALS, BEFORE AND DURING THE PANDEMIC

TK Teachers Reporting, California, 2020



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

Facilities

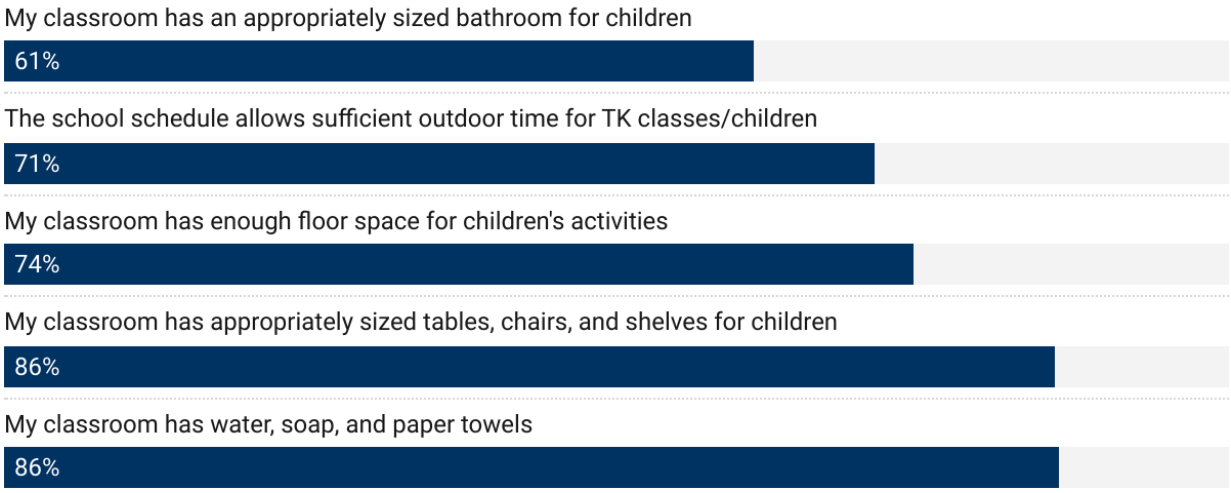
We also asked teachers if their classroom setup and school facilities provided them with the basics of what they needed to perform their job; if they were teaching remotely, we asked them to report on what they had in a typical year prior to the pandemic.

More than one third of teachers (39 percent) reported that their classroom did not have an appropriately sized bathroom for children (see **Figure 5**). More than one quarter of teachers reported that their classroom did not have enough floor space for children (26 percent) nor did the school schedule allow for sufficient outdoor time for TK classes and TK children (29 percent). About 15 percent of teachers reported that their classroom did not have water, soap, and paper towels, nor did they have appropriately sized tables, chairs, and shelves for children.

Teachers reported that they did not have "enough room to spread out and provide play space" and that "outdoor play structures are too large and there is no dedicated space for trikes." Others said that their classrooms were not designed for early childhood. One said, "There are classes with low sinks and bathrooms, [but] my TK class has a regular class with high sinks and bathrooms." Another said, "TK classes are not always equipped with appropriate student furniture or the correct-sized desks and chairs."

FIGURE 5. TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM SETUP AND FACILITIES

TK Teachers Reporting, California, 2020



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

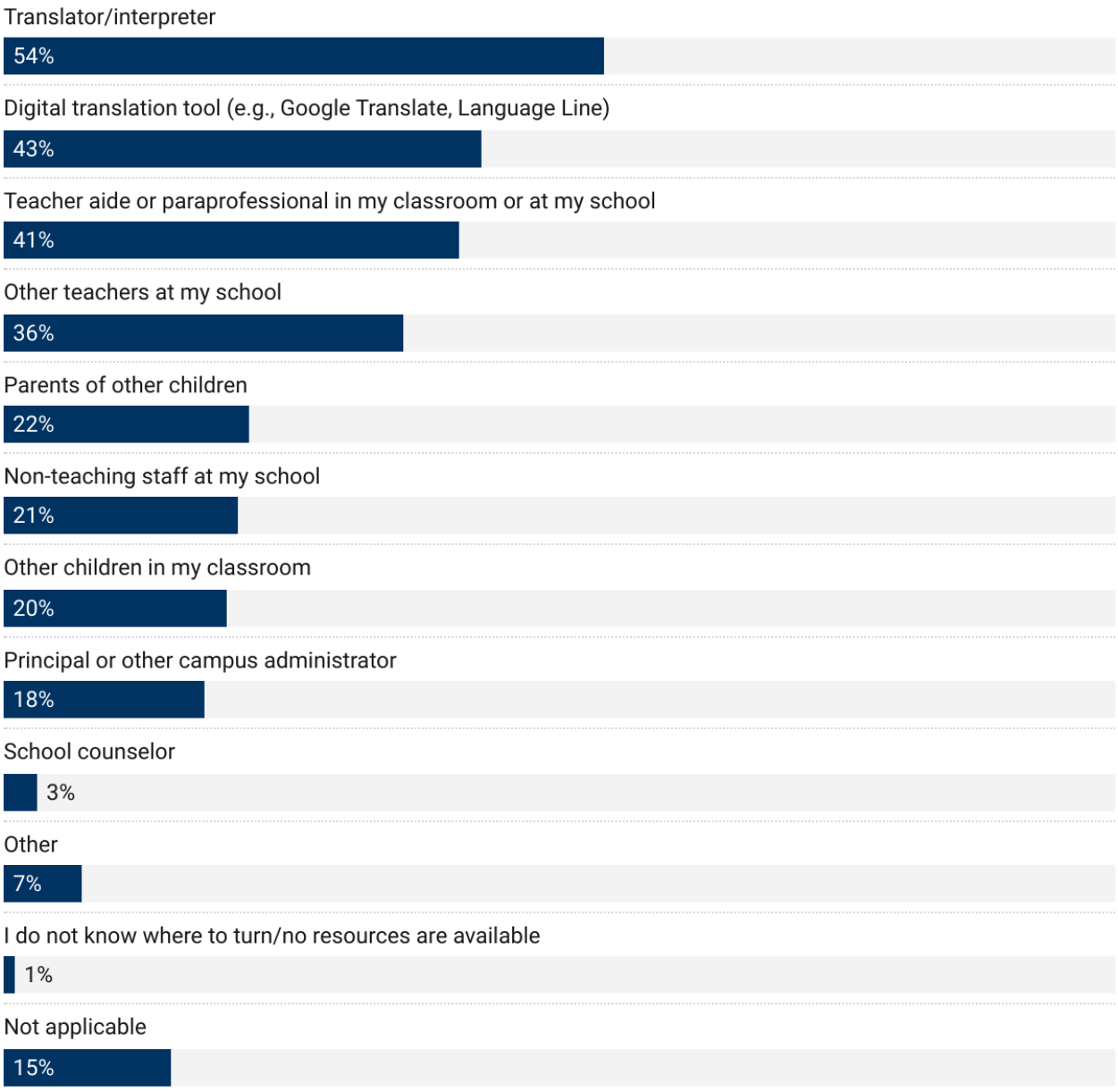
Resources

We asked teachers about the resources and assistance available to support them in responding to the individual needs of the children and families in their classrooms both prior to and in the midst of the pandemic. For this report, we will focus on the pre-pandemic responses since those are most relevant for future planning.

When teachers had difficulty communicating with children and families when a cultural or language barrier was present, teachers turned most frequently to translators (54 percent). The next most common sources of support were digital translation tools (43 percent), classroom aides/paraprofessionals (41 percent), and other teachers (36 percent; see **Figure 6**).

FIGURE 6. RESOURCES FOR COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES WHEN LANGUAGE IS A BARRIER

TK Teachers Reporting, California, 2020



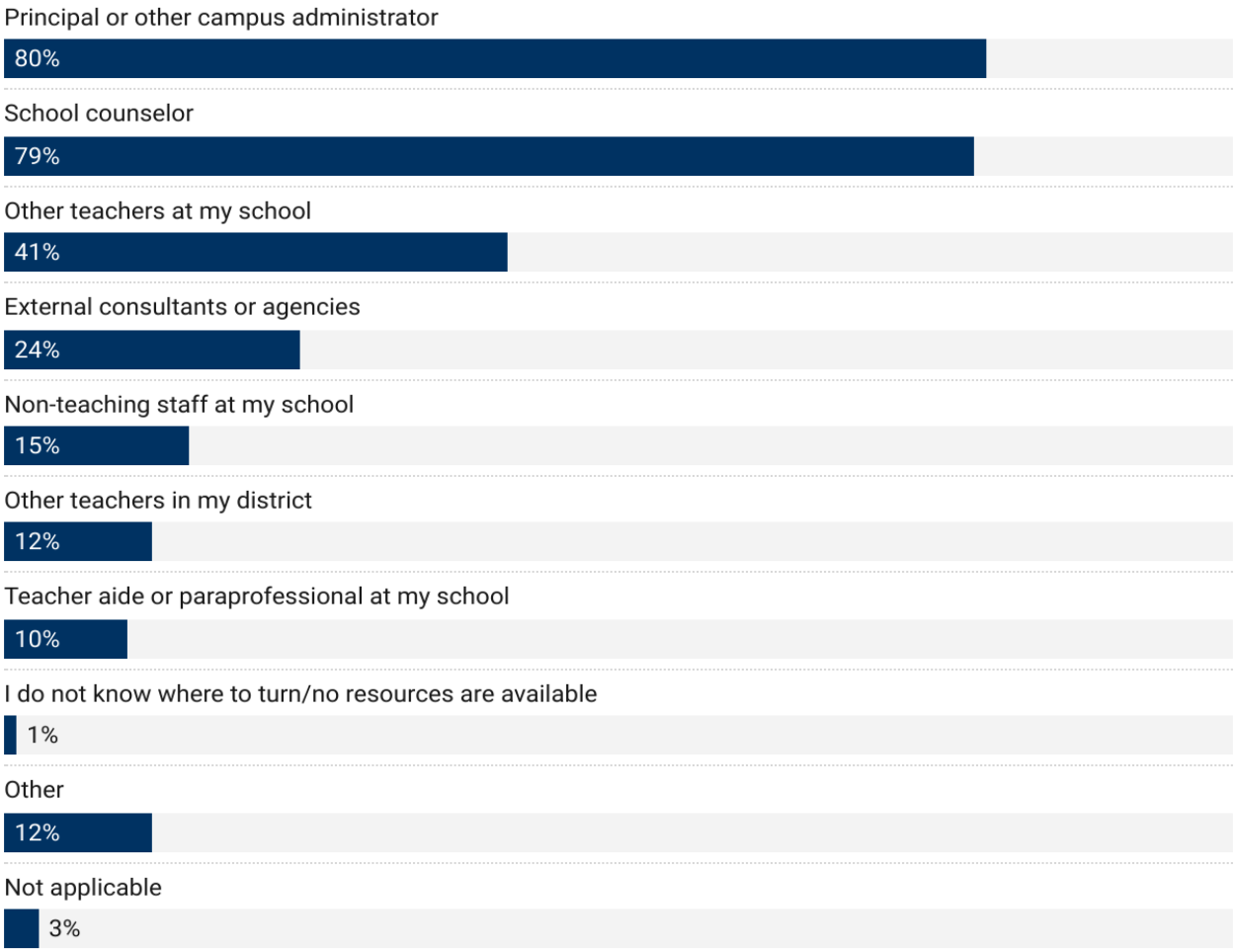
Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Nearly all teachers (97 percent) reported that at times, they sought support for children and families experiencing trauma. Three out of five teachers (58 percent) reported that they had more children in their classroom experiencing trauma in the fall of 2020 than they did prior to the pandemic, while 40 percent said there was no change. However, only about one half of teachers (49 percent) reported they had adequate training to respond to children and families who are experiencing trauma.

Figure 7 displays the resources teachers accessed to support children and families experiencing trauma. The majority of teachers reported that they relied on their principal or campus administrator (80 percent) or school counselor (79 percent) for support with children and families experiencing trauma. Other teachers said external consultants and agencies (24 percent) were also an important source of support.

FIGURE 7. RESOURCES FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES EXPERIENCING TRAUMA

TK Teachers Reporting, California, 2020



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

Teaching Challenges

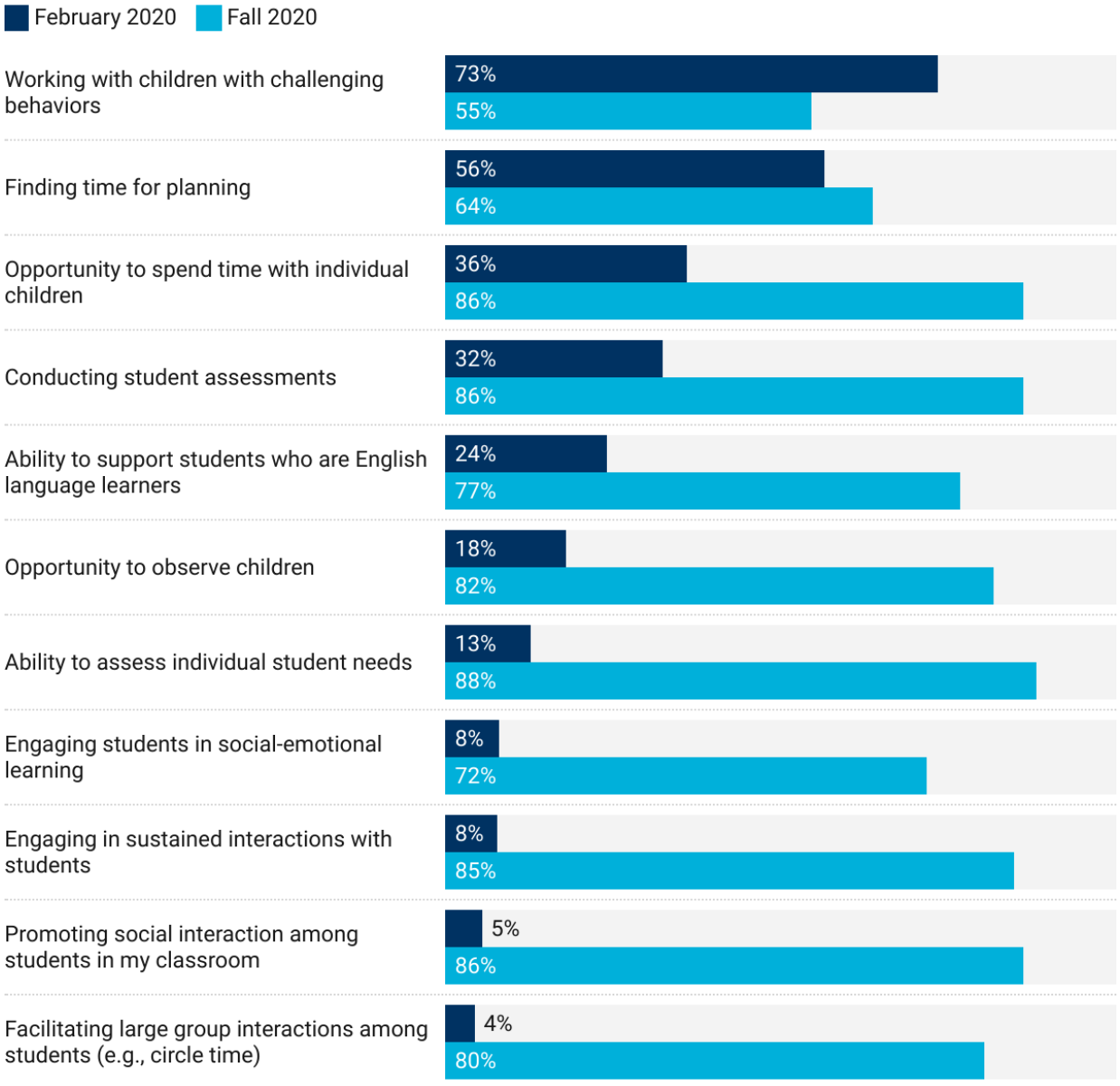
We asked teachers about challenges both prior to the pandemic and during the fall of 2020 (see **Figure 8**).

Prior to the pandemic, about three quarters of teachers reported challenges working with children with challenging behaviors (73 percent), and more than one half reported challenges finding time for planning (57 percent). About one third of teachers reported difficulty finding opportunities to spend time with individual children (36 percent) and conducting student assessments (32 percent).

A much greater percentage of teachers reported challenges during the fall of 2020 than they did prior to the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, the increase in teachers reporting challenges was most stark for activities that rely on in-person interaction.

FIGURE 8. TEACHING CHALLENGES, BEFORE AND DURING THE PANDEMIC

TK Teachers Reporting, California, 2020



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

Challenges in TK Teachers' Own Words

We also asked teachers an open-ended question about the top three challenges they face in their role as TK teachers. The number one challenge teachers identified was delivering developmentally appropriate instruction during remote learning. In addition to the challenges connecting with children over a screen, TK teachers also noted that planning and preparation for a virtual environment was very difficult and time-consuming.

Outside of distance learning, the top three challenges that teachers named were: concerns with developmentally appropriate practice; class size and composition; and lack of valuing and understanding of TK.

Concerns over developmentally appropriate practice were displayed in two prominent themes: lack of understanding by school and district leadership of developmentally appropriate practice for teaching four-year-old children and not having access to developmentally appropriate curriculum and materials. "There needs to be a REAL TK framework," one teacher said. "My district has us testing TK with addition and subtraction to 10. That's a [kindergarten] standard for the END of the year." Other teachers explained:

> *"Often, administrators and even our trainer ask us to teach developmentally inappropriate material to our students. When we explain why teaching the concepts and words "verbs" and "nouns" is not appropriate for TK children, we teachers are often seen as having low standards or being uncooperative."*

> *"TK should be about the social-emotional learning portion. Yes, there should be academics, but there shouldn't be a stress on that. Play should be the center of ALL TK classes. Play is where they learn. Focusing on test scores of four-year-olds ain't cute."*

Teachers also described "not having access to the materials [they] need to engage students" and that "materials are created for kindergarten and [they] have to adapt."

Likewise, teachers identified challenges regarding class size and class composition. As one teacher described, "No help is given. I have no aide and my class is full day, with up to 25 students and myself only." Another teacher expressed concern for basic safety:

> *"The class size our school district allows (26) makes me feel anxious that I will struggle to deal with accidents/incidents, keeping everyone safe and supervised."*

In addition to class size, TK teachers struggled with combination classrooms. One teacher explained, "Because I have a mixed class, I feel I am not able to provide enough art/music/engaging lessons that TKers should get that are appropriate for this grade level." Another teacher said:

> *"Having combo classes is a challenge. I prefer to just have TK students and do more of the social-emotional and verbal pieces appropriate to the TK students. Three months in early childhood development is a big deal."*

Teachers also expressed that TK did not seem valued or understood by others in the school, district, or community. One teacher described, "Because the children are young, our work is taken less seriously than that of upper-grade teachers or administrators." Another teacher commented, "In my district, TK doesn't seem to fit into early learning or K-12 programs." One teacher described "being a 'forgotten' grade level" in these words:

> *"Working in a TK-8 District, TK as a grade level is often forgotten in issues and decisions. We are always told to go with kindergarten even though we are a separate grade level."*

Workplace Climate

School and District Understanding of Early Learning

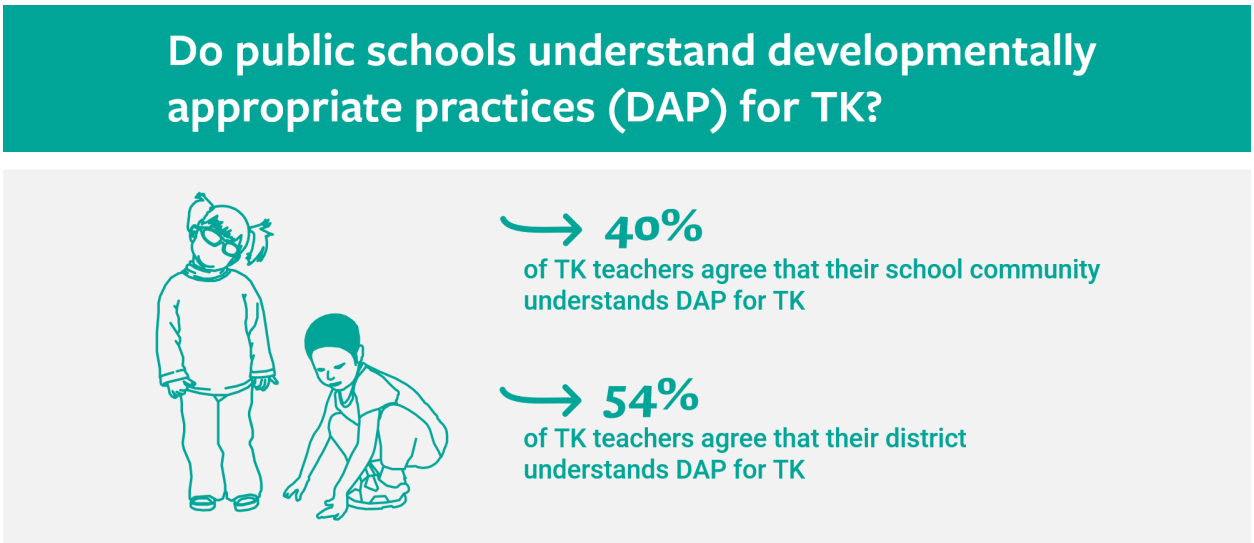
Teachers need guidance and support from leaders who understand child development and developmentally appropriate practice. However, due to their setting in public TK-12 schools, TK programs are led by principals and district leaders who may not have been trained in preschool learning (Little et al., 2022).

As shown in **Figure 9**, just 40 percent of teachers in our sample agreed that their school community understands developmentally appropriate practice for working with four-year-old children. Teachers reported better understanding of working with young children from their district; more than one half (54 percent) agreed that their district understands developmentally appropriate practice.

As one teacher expressed, "Learning through play is 'serious work' that I wish all kids could experience." Other teachers identified the need for professional development focused on TK. One teacher said, "We need district-wide staff training regarding TK," and another teacher summed it up like this:

> *"We're not kindergarten. We're not preschool. We are the only ones that get to do things developmentally but are most often lumped in with kindergarten or ignored. Very few people in the district understand early childhood education."*

FIGURE 9. SCHOOL UNDERSTANDING OF DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE FOR TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN



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

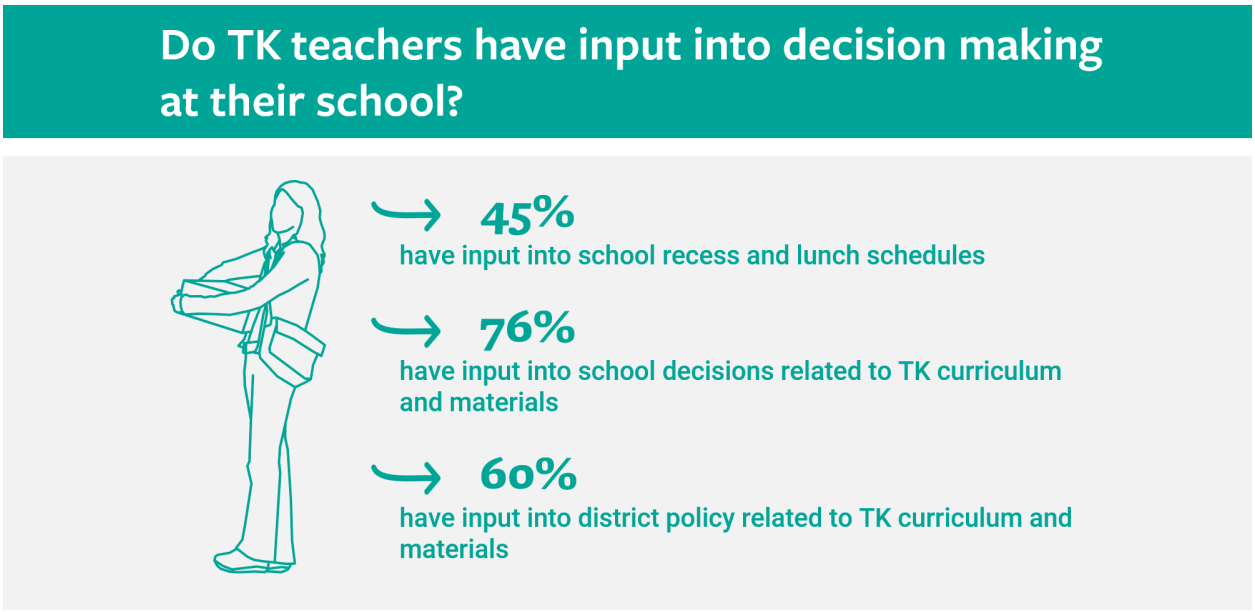
Agency

We asked a series of questions to gauge whether teachers felt they had agency in decisions that affect their classrooms and teaching.

Less than one half (45 percent) of teachers reported that they had input into lunch and recess schedules at their schools; however, three quarters (76 percent) reported that they had input into other school-level decisions. Sixty percent of teachers said that they had input into district-level decisions (see **Figure 10**). Nonetheless, these findings leave between one quarter to more than one third of teachers reporting a lack of input into relevant school and district decisions.

In their own words, one teacher expressed "being left out of decisions regarding school processes and functions." Another said that there is "a lack of support [at the] district level, and no one to hear us out or address TK concerns."

FIGURE 10. TEACHER INPUT INTO DECISION MAKING



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

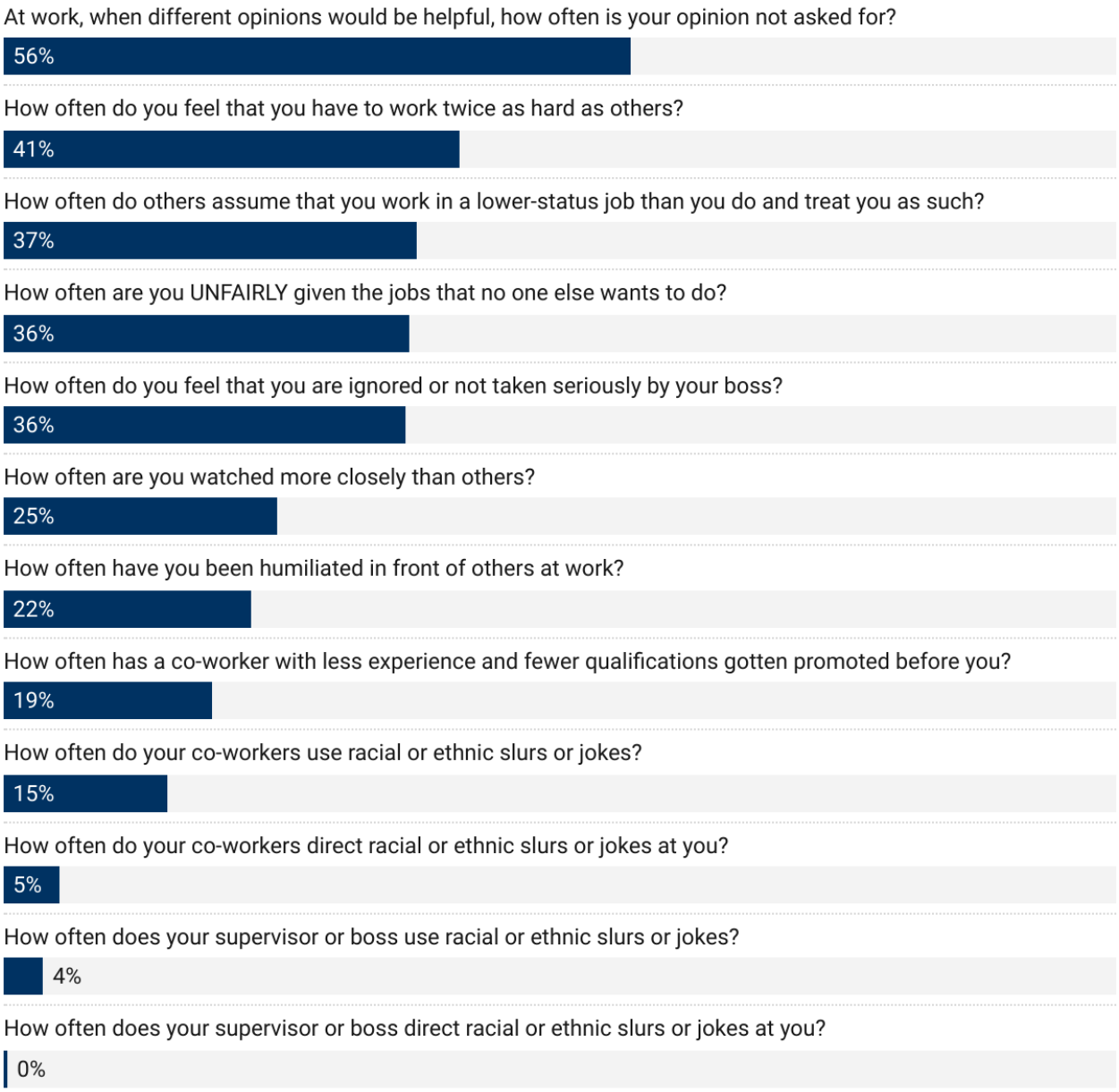
Support From Other Teachers and Leaders

We asked teachers a series of questions regarding how they are supported and treated by other adults in their classrooms and schools (see **Figure 11**). More than one half (56 percent) of teachers reported that at some point they felt their opinion was not asked for when different opinions would be helpful. More than one third (37 percent) reported that at some point others have assumed they work in a lower-status job than they do and they have been treated as such; one fifth of teachers (20 percent) reported that this slight happened a few times a year. Two in five teachers (41 percent) reported that they have to work twice as hard as others, and one quarter (25 percent) reported they are watched more closely than others. More than one third (36 percent) feel they are ignored or not taken seriously by their boss. Fifteen percent have endured racial or ethnic slurs/jokes from their coworkers.

Several teachers commented that they were "thought of as a glorified babysitter." One teacher said she felt "a lack of respect for ECE teachers by colleagues," and another said, "Other teachers view my job as being lesser than theirs."

FIGURE 11. WORKPLACE CLIMATE

TK Teachers Reporting, California, 2020

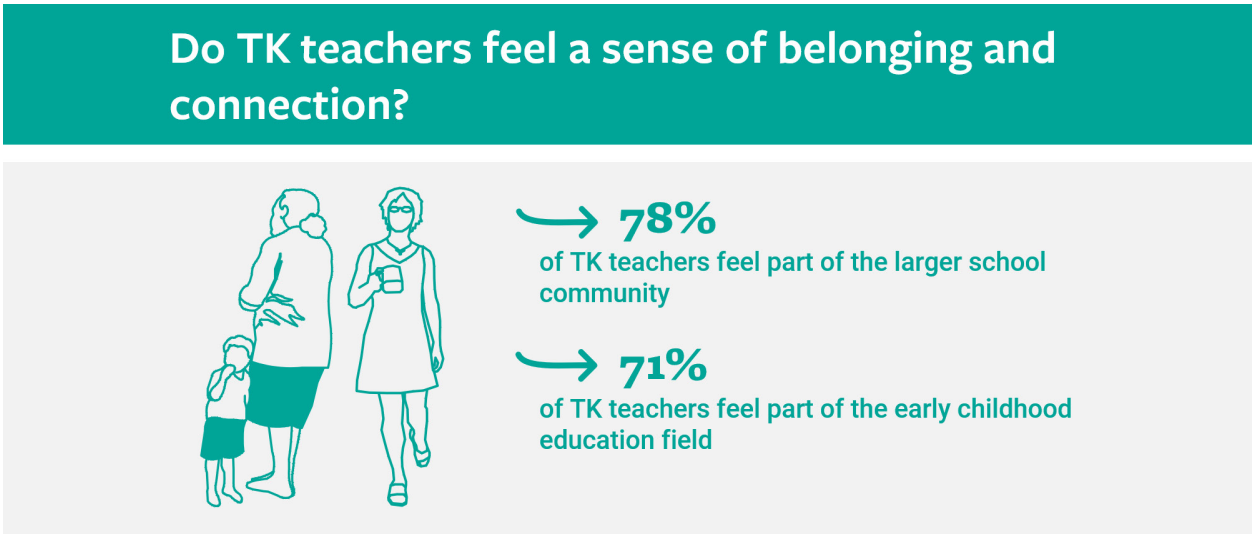


Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Belonging and Connection

TK teachers work in a public school environment with teachers trained and experienced in working with older children and administrators who may not understand the different needs of TK teachers themselves or their TK students. They may also teach in schools where there is only one TK classroom, with no possibility for crucial peer support. About one quarter of teachers reported that they did not feel part of the larger school community or part of the early care and education field (22 percent and 29 percent, respectively; see **Figure 12**).

FIGURE 12. TEACHER SENSE OF BELONGING AND CONNECTION



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

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Expanding transitional kindergarten to be universally available to all four-year-old children in California is a promising step towards establishing a comprehensive early learning care and education system for all children from birth through kindergarten entry. At the time of this writing, schools and districts are in the first months of implementing program expansion. We have an opportunity to learn from TK teachers at this crucial moment about what's working in their classrooms and schools and what support, resources, and preparation they need to continue to provide a high-quality and developmentally appropriate experience for children.

A wide variety of educational backgrounds and experience teaching young children exists among the current TK workforce and among principals and district leaders. Ensuring that UTK classrooms are staffed with experienced and knowledgeable teachers and led by administrators and district leaders with understanding of early learning is key. The establishment of the PK-3 Early Childhood Education Specialist Credential and the development of training programs for school and district leaders in early childhood education and child development, such as the Center for District Innovation and Leadership in Early Education (DIAL EE) and the TK Leadership Initiative of 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA), are promising steps towards ensuring a prepared workforce and leadership structure.

Teachers expressed concern with the understanding of developmentally appropriate practice in terms of support from leadership, what is available to them in their work environments, and how the TK program is understood in the broader school and community. In addition to a lack of understanding developmentally appropriate practice, TK teachers identified a lack of valuing early learning and their opinions. Part of ensuring an age-appropriate program must include ensuring that TK teachers and teachers from other early learning settings are not just included, but have key roles in program expansion.

TK teachers also stressed the importance of smaller class size and a lower student-to-teacher ratio to effectively meet the needs of young children and implement effective teaching. Fortunately, UTK expansion involves decreasing the student-to-teacher ratio and requiring a second adult in the room for the full instructional time. As of yet, however, the role of "the other adult in the room" and what constitutes "instructional time" has not been adequately defined and communicated. In addition, the hiring of enough lead teachers and aides will likely pose a challenge at a time of staffing shortages in both TK-12 settings and early learning centers. It is important to ensure that classroom size limits are enforced and not only that each classroom has two adults, but that aides have the training needed to work with preschool-age children. At the same time, we must be careful to not create hierarchies and reproduce inequities we see throughout the early learning system, with teacher compensation and respect differing by program setting and the age of children they teach (Austin et al., 2019; McLean et al.; 2021; Montoya et al., 2022).

The children taught by TK teachers in our sample are more likely to be people of color and multilingual than their teachers. Meanwhile, California's early educators teaching in center- and home-based settings closely reflect the diversity of California's young children (Powell et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2021). With TK expansion, state leaders had an opportunity to create expedited pathways for early educators to teach TK and ensure a highly qualified, experienced and more diverse TK teacher workforce that better matches the diversity of the children in their classrooms. However, as of this writing, the state has done little to mitigate the barriers that experienced early educators from center- and home-based settings face in obtaining either the new PK-3 or the Multiple Subject Credential, despite expedited pathways being available for private school teachers.

Effective early learning programs must be developmentally appropriate and support teachers' ability to implement good teaching practices, and quality early education must extend beyond one year of prekindergarten. To ensure that California's universal transitional kindergarten program is successful, continued research and data collection about TK, including from teachers, will be essential for program evaluation and improvement as expansion rolls out. Evaluation should include not just assessing the TK program, but also implications for the rest of the early learning system for children from birth to age three, which will face challenges as community-based preschool programs adjust to the loss of four-year-old children and experienced teachers to TK.

Teacher's work environments and children's learning environments are one in the same. California leaders have the chance to learn from TK teachers at an opportune moment, to define expectations for a developmentally appropriate program, and put into place policies that ensure a diverse, prepared, and supported workforce.

Recommendations

The findings presented in this report point to several places local and state leadership can focus to inform planning and policies for UTK and a supported and prepared workforce.

Recommendation 1: Articulate and enact community-informed strategic plans for effective TK implementation.

- Establish throughways at the district level to systematically gather and incorporate expertise from early education experts who work in TK classrooms, child care centers, and home-based settings.
- Implement community-based learning strategies across schools in order to establish a shared understanding of TK and the value of early learning and early educators to the school and broader community.

Recommendation 2: Fund and provide equity-centered training for school site and district leaders in developmentally appropriate practices for young children to ensure their readiness to provide pedagogical leadership to TK programs and teachers.

- Fund and provide professional learning opportunities for school and district leaders, building on the work of the Center for District Innovation and Leadership in Early Education (DIAL EE) and the UTK Leadership Initiative of the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA).
- Identify and clearly articulate school and district governance structures that identify responsibilities for TK programming and pedagogical leadership.

Recommendation 3: Ensure a supportive working environment for TK teachers to implement developmentally appropriate practice.

- Fund and provide the materials, curriculum, and consumable supplies needed for teaching four-year-old children and ensure that teachers have a classroom setup and facilities conducive to their teaching.
- Ensure that teachers have the support and resources to effectively meet the individual needs of children and families, including communicating with families and supporting children experiencing trauma.
- Ensure that TK teachers have peer support by putting into place formal opportunities for TK teachers to plan, prepare, and learn with other TK teachers in their schools and districts.
- Ensure that districts are enforcing class size limits and the 12:1 student to ratio for the full instructional day and that classroom aides are trained in early learning, supported, and fairly compensated. Clearly define "instructional day" as any contact time with children.
- Limit the use of combination classrooms, which make it difficult for teachers to meet the needs of young students.

Recommendation 4: Ensure a well-prepared and diverse TK teacher workforce reflective of California's children, attending to both the current workforce and the future pipeline.

- Ensure equitable pathways to the PK-3 Early Childhood Education Specialist Credential for experienced early educators from center- and home-based settings who do not hold a teaching credential.
- Provide professional development to TK teachers specific to teaching preschool-age children.

- Identify and fund initiatives to support early educators to participate in the preparation requirements currently required to obtain a teaching credential.

Recommendation 5: Ensure that data collection and program evaluation are an integral part of TK expansion.

- Ensure that TK and kindergarten teacher data are collected and reported separately in California Department of Education data systems.
- Ensure that program evaluation includes data about and from TK teachers.
- Evaluate the impacts of TK on the mixed-delivery early learning system.

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Teaching Transitional Kindergarten

A Snapshot of the Teacher Experience Before UTK Expansion

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Suggested Citation

Montoya, E., Powell, A., Austin, L.J.E., Kim, Y., Muruvi, W., & Copeman Petig, A. (2022). *Teaching Transitional Kindergarten: A Snapshot of the Teacher Experience Before UTK Expansion*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/report/teaching-transitional-kindergarten/

Acknowledgements

The paper was generously supported through grants from the Heising-Simons Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the Silicon Valley Community Foundation.

The data for this paper come from the 2020 California Early Care and Education Workforce Study, a multiyear project generously supported by First 5 California, the California Department of Education, the Heising-Simons Foundation, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and implemented in partnership with the California Child Care Resource & Referral Network.

We are grateful to our colleague Hopeton Hess for his contributions and feedback. Many thanks to Claudia Alvarenga and Tomeko Wyrick for preparing the publication. Finally, we express our gratitude to the nearly 300 transitional kindergarten teachers who participated in the 2020 California Early Care and Education Workforce Study and generously gave their time and shared their experiences in the midst of a global pandemic.

The views presented herein are those of the authors and may not reflect the views of the report's funders or those acknowledged for lending their expertise or providing input.

Editor: Deborah Meacham

Artwork by Luisa Iborra

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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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