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POLICY BRIEF

Preparing California's principals for Universal Transitional Kindergarten: Lessons from other states

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“With the expansion of state-funded pre-K, principals are increasingly charged with leading the delivery of effective pre-K in public school settings. This task requires a shift from the traditional notion that public education begins at kindergarten and an understanding that children prior to kindergarten have unique developmental and learning needs. Such a reconceptualization presents both opportunities and challenges for programs charged with preparing effective school leaders and for policymakers and stakeholders designing and implementing principal certification standards and professional development and support for current school leaders.” —*Early Childhood Preparation for School Leaders: Early Lessons from New Jersey. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, UC Berkeley*

POLICY CONTEXT

Universal transitional kindergarten (UTK) in California is on track to complete its multi-billion dollar rollout where every 4-year-old will have access to transitional kindergarten (TK) by the 2025–2026 school year (California Department of Education 2023). Research indicates that early childhood education is most effective when it is high quality education, which includes well-prepared and supported teachers, a “whole child” framework, family engagement, and more (Learning Policy Institute, 2016). Moreover, the long-term value of high quality preschool programs depends on alignment with and transitions to upper grades (PACE 2020).

California’s Department of Education describes Universal Preschool (UPK) as an “umbrella term that includes the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), Transitional Kindergarten (TK) at the California Department of Education, as well as Head Start, district and local community-based preschool programs, early learning services for students with disabilities, private pay preschool, and expanded learning options to support access to a full day of services (California Department of Education 2023).” TK specifically is “the only option within the broader UPK frame that will be universally available, and free of cost, for all 4-year-old children as part of California’s public education system (California Department of Education 2023).

Multiple studies show that a high-quality preschool experience pays dividends for children later in life; these preschools can provide children with an enriching, supportive foundation to develop and nurture the brain, fostering all facets of healthy development (Phillips 2017). From an equity lens, the research suggests that children with less economic certainty gain more from high-quality preschool programs than their more advantaged peers. In addition to the foundational benefit for children, UTK provides more choices for parents and caregivers with this extra year of taxpayer-funded childcare. Seven in ten Californians support state-funded preschool (Thomas 2021). More economically advantaged parents and caregivers who may have sent

their 4-year-olds to an extra year of private preschool save money, and parents and caregivers who may have stayed home with their 4-year-olds can re-enter the workforce. Also, parents and caregivers who choose subsidized preschool or voucher programs are still eligible for TK, which can afford them additional valuable time or cost savings. Regardless of where one falls on the political and ideological spectrum, it is difficult to argue with the promise of TK to children and families.

THE ROLE OF PRINCIPALS

After teachers, research shows that school leaders are the most significant in-school factor impacting student achievement: K–12 principal and teacher quality account for nearly 60 percent of a school’s total impact on student achievement, and principals alone account for a full 25 percent (Marzano 2005). Across the United States, 50 percent of all principals report having preschool in their building (Fuller 2018). Principals also play a pivotal role in PK–3 alignment; according to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), PK–3 represents “both an age range and a frame for thinking about school improvement that recognizes the importance of the early years and embeds knowledge of developmental science across the early grades (Kauerz 2021).”

Yet, most California elementary school principals do not have an early childhood education background, and many feel ill-equipped to support instruction. Research indicates the value of making sure that school leaders are knowledgeable about effective and developmentally appropriate education for young children. With this professional development, they will be more effective instructional leaders and positioned to support teachers to create coherence and continuity from preschool through kindergarten (Stipek 2021).

California’s administrative (principal) credential has a “grade 12 and below, including preschool” scope, meaning that a high school principal satisfying a five-year school requirement in a high school classroom or middle school librarian could end up as an elementary school principal.

The state-level flexibility is intentional and necessary to meet the broad range of administrative leadership needs. However, in either example provided, the principal would not have any K–5 experience, much less any experience in early childhood education (California Department of Education 2023). In a survey of 300 California teachers completed in 2020 (Montoya 2020), only 40 percent of TK teachers said that their school communities understood developmentally appropriate practices for working with 4-year-olds, and 54 percent of teachers said the same of their districts (California Department of Education 2023). Many teachers cited needing appropriately sized bathrooms for young children (39 percent) or a sufficient supply budget (31 percent), and 22 percent said they did not feel part of the larger school community (California Department of Education 2023).

LESSONS FROM OTHER STATES

While California is not the only state with an ambitious universal preschool policy, its UTK policy is the most recent effort and has the opportunity to benefit from the early work in other states such as Illinois, Georgia, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. How have other state level leaders prepared principals to implement universal preschool? What can California learn from these experiences as UTK is implemented by 2026? What kinds of partnerships have contributed to success?

Lesson 1: With the help of P–3 experts, states have delivered professional learning through centralized systems.

Massachusetts brought together two state organizations and one outside organization to deliver professional development focused on early learning for school leaders. For example, during the 2021–22 school year, the Center for Leadership and Educational Equity partnered with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and Principal Readiness Advisory Council to create a network of principals supporting early childhood educators, as well as faculty and leaders from administrative leadership programs across the

state (Schachner 2023). This newly created network met for six virtual sessions that focused on principal and associate principal preparation. They focused on revised indicators, performance assessments, and support for feedback and evaluation of leaders (Schachner 2023).

New Jersey delivers professional development through an exclusive partnership with an outside organization for principal education called the National Association for Elementary School Principals (NAESP). The New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA) is the state’s NAESP affiliate and exclusively responsible for statewide professional learning efforts, though they do consistently connect with the state to ensure alignment.¹

Lesson 2: A state agency dedicated to early learning can structurally mandate consistency in professional development for school leaders surrounding early childhood education, which can be a substitute for centralized training.

Georgia has a state agency, DECAL (Department of Early Care and Learning), that operates independently from its K–12 Department of Education. The two work together, but DECAL’s independence enables an organizational structure that serves the state’s focus on early childhood well.

Georgia created its DECAL agency in 1993, the earliest of any other state. The agency, also known to Georgia families as “Bright from the Start,” is responsible for “meeting the child care and early education needs of Georgia’s children and their families. It administers the nationally recognized Georgia’s Pre–K program, licenses child care centers and home-based child care, administers Georgia’s Childcare and Parent Services program and federal nutrition programs, and manages Quality Rated, Georgia’s child care rating system. The department also houses the Head Start Collaboration Office, distributes federal funding to enhance the quality and availability of child care, and works collaboratively with Georgia child care resource and referral agencies and organizations throughout the state to enhance early care and education (Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning 2023).”

¹ Note: the state education department has not implemented the Center for the Study of Child Care Education’s recommendations from their 2017 report “Early Childhood Preparation for School Leaders.”

Lesson 3: Only one state embeds early childhood education into its principal licensure (Schachner 2023).

At the time of publication, Illinois was the only state with early childhood embedded into its licensure (Schachner 2023). In the early 2000s, several notable pieces of research showed that principal preparation was not adequately supporting principals to lead schools to high student achievement rates; principals were often managing the administrative side of schools rather than focusing both there and on curriculum (Klostermann et al. 2015). Illinois took note: They overhauled their entire principal education standards, representing a paradigm shift from “candidate as consumer” to “district as consumer,” and, among other changes, became the first state to include early learning as part of their licensure (Klostermann et al. 2015). Many education policy and practitioner organizations came together to create the foundation needed for this redesign, led primarily by the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the Illinois State Board of Education, and the Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois State University (Klostermann et al. 2015). The licensure shift in name, from a “Type 75” license to a “PK–12 Principal Endorsement,” was officially enacted through state legislation in 2010 (Lieberman 2019).

WHAT WILL CALIFORNIA’S POLICY

MAKERS DO TO PREPARE PRINCIPALS TO

IMPLEMENT THE EQUITY PROMISE OF UTK?

21st Century California School Leadership Academy — 21CSLA

21CSLA 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 underserved students. Headquartered at UC Berkeley School of Education, 21CSLA is led in partnership with UCLA School of Education and

Information Studies, the California Subject Matter Projects and seven Regional Academies across the state. Through 21CSLA, the California Department of Education has funded two specific initiatives in response to the needs of leaders implementing UTK.

The first 21CSLA UTK initiative is the implementation of eight professional learning modules focused on instructional leadership, equity leadership, and continuous improvement. Each module provides eight hours of content that is aligned to current research and policy. In the 2023–2024 school year, each Regional Academy will offer multiple professional learning modules to build up a cadre of local trainers. The regional trainers will collaborate with the state center trainers to continue to improve, expand, and support local training. What investments are needed to ensure that all leaders have access to the content in a timely manner? How can the local trainers optimize the modules to support the implementation of UTK in their contexts? How will learning in mixed role groups (teacher, site, and district) have an impact on principal learning?

The second 21CSLA initiative focusing on early childhood is the UTK Leadership Certificate. Offered in conjunction with UC Berkeley Extension, the certificate is composed of four semester units of graduate coursework focused on P–3 leadership. Candidates currently enrolled in licensure programs as well as those who hold the Certificate of Eligibility are supported by 21CSLA. Currently funded through June 2026, 21CSLA’s UTK initiatives will provide critical fundamental support at no cost to leaders across the state. What knowledge will be gained through certificate completion? How will the demand for additional coursework be incentivized?

Beyond 21CSLA

It is important to note that more than \$3 billion has been allocated to California state agencies and projects to build capacity for workforce development, expanded learning services, facilities needs, and other topical areas related to the implementation of UTK — with only a

small portion funding the work of 21CSLA. How can the state orchestrate across different layers of California's education system (state, county, district, school, classroom) to support implementers? How do leaders receive, interpret, and understand the multiple inputs?

Given that there are multiple pathways to earning the license — attending an accredited program at an institute of higher education, county office of education, nonprofit, or district as well as the examination route — as well as a lack of principal specific licensure in California, lessons from other states will not easily translate. However, a recent report commissioned by the California Department of Education and conducted by the National P-3 Center entitled *Great Start California: Advancing the P-3 Vision*, comprehensive state-level policy reform strategies provided recommendations related to principal

licensure (Kauerz, K. 2023). Specifically, the National P-3 Center recommends establishing a plan to revise Administrative Services Credential Program Standards and Performance Expectations to incorporate P-3 principles, content, and strategies as well as creating model programs within institutes of higher education that incorporate P-3 principles, content, and strategies (Kauerz, K. page 34). It is likely that preparing the future and early career workforce for the implementation of UTK will necessitate closer partnerships with P-3 professional organizations or experts. For example, how can participation in 21CSLA UTK professional learning or the UTK Leadership Certificate be leveraged? How can the state agencies provide joint guidance and/or support to cultivate beneficial partnerships?

CONCLUSION

Early implementation of universal preschool in other states indicates the need to form deeper partnerships with early childhood experts, greater coordination and integration across different levels of the educational system including licensure programs. It also indicates the need for more attention towards cooperation and coordination, especially in light of the reorganization of early childhood education departments to units outside of the California Department of Education. The work of 21CSLA suggests the need to adopt expanded notions of leadership that include principals, classroom, and system-level leaders. This begs the question: How will California's principals get the support they need?

The time is now for principal early learning education to take a front seat in California's UTK rollout. Yet, the principal workforce is experiencing high rates of attrition and burnout. A recent 21CSLA study of principal resilience indicates the lack of a strategic and systemic support structure. For example, results from open-ended responses indicated that 44.8% of principals navigate resilience at the individual level of the ecological

system of wellbeing. Many principals also reported using various microsystem level factors of support and connectedness (~34%). Only one response mentioned the exosystem as a factor that helps contribute to their resilience. Furthermore, the study indicates an increased need to support newer principals and female principals (Stomski 2023). Thus, efforts to provide professional learning and improve principal preparation are not sufficient, rather pieces of the puzzle.

California has put a stake in the ground in being the only state to deliver public education to 4-year-olds in elementary schools primarily, risking adverse outcomes for California's youngest children if not addressed. Creating high quality and free professional learning opportunities will only go so far in a high turnover environment. Delivering the equity promise of the UTK policy will require learning from other states while charting a path that comprehensively addresses the needs of California principals.

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