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The Impact of Teacher Shortage on Universal Transitional Kindergarten: Implications for Progress

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Introduction

Recent news highlights the implications of a nationwide teacher shortage in public schools. Yet the teacher shortage and high turnover in K–12 have been long-standing challenges. Additionally, public education was highly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, causing widespread staff, teacher, and administrator attrition.¹ This particular pandemic-related challenge is layered on top of low pay and high stress, which are two primary reasons for teacher and staff shortages overall.^{2,3} In response, some states have implemented strategies to help with teacher and staff shortages while attempting to retain quality standards for teachers. Some of these strategies have centered on increasing pay and offering more training for individuals who wish to become teachers. For example, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing is spearheading a new program to expand credential opportunities and staffing for Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK). Set to launch in fall 2023, the PK–3 Early Childhood Education (ECE) Specialist Instruction Credential program will allow childhood educators to use their degrees and experiences toward their credentialing.⁴

In California, children who turn five years old by September 1 are eligible to attend kindergarten. Children younger than the kindergarten age attend pre-kindergarten (preschool) in a variety of settings. Transitional kindergarten (TK) is a program started in California in 2012 for children turning five years old between September 2 and December 2. UTK is a program to offer the TK program to all four-year-olds starting in 2023. For this brief, we reviewed research on teacher and staff shortages at the national level and in California. While most of the research reviewed focuses on general implications of teacher and staff shortages in public schools, we paid particular attention to the impacts of implementation of UTK in California that are likely to pose challenges to pursuing equity in the educator pipeline. Furthermore, TK student enrollment is projected to increase by more than 300,000 by 2025, requiring an additional 15,000 teachers and 20,000 assistant teachers.⁵ The following key findings stem from our literature review and may inform educational leaders' practices as they implement TK programs.

We review and draw from research carried out in multiple parts of the United States, where the terminologies and programs differ. Because TK (and UTK) are unique to California, when summarizing studies, we use the umbrella term “early childhood education (ECE)” to refer to educational programs for children younger than five years old. If a study is specifically about TK in California, however, we use the term “TK.”

Finding #1

Critical factors shaping teacher and staff shortages and the quest for equity

As inflation and cost of living rise nationwide, wages for teachers have not kept pace.⁶ In the case of California, low pay creates challenges for less-resourced districts in retaining TK teachers.³ Beyond TK, there are still challenges, and these challenges of low pay have a direct impact on the quality of schooling for students. For instance, satisfaction with salary in kindergarten is a factor in whether teachers leave their schools and the profession altogether.⁷ When teachers leave, kindergarten students must experience larger student-to-teacher ratios and inconsistent teaching practices. Even more, as more well-trained and experienced teachers move to better-resourced schools for better pay and opportunities,⁷ kindergarten students and classrooms are left without highly qualified teachers, and low-resourced districts with hiring challenges.

Although low pay affects teacher retention, public ECE teachers (for students ages 3 and 4) receive more pay compared to teachers who work in private childcare centers.^{1,3} To help with teacher turnover, some states offer teachers in non-public schools comparable pay to that of public school teachers, and through policy efforts, some states have sought to raise salaries for ECE teachers.^{1,8} For example, the State of New Hampshire offers more training to ECE teachers so districts can increase their pay and improve teacher retention; the goal is to combine teachers' experience, academic training, and in-service training so they can more quickly and easily become credentialed to teach.⁹ Furthermore, states like Georgia and New Jersey have taken measures to increase the pay for their ECE teachers.⁹

These initiatives, however, are on a per-state basis; there is no national initiative to help with teacher recruitment and retention, especially as it pertains to TK. In California, this teacher shortage presents a real challenge to TK overall, as officials work to expand the program to all four-year-olds. If it is within the capacity of school districts, however, increasing pay might be one way to help alleviate the teacher shortage in TK.

The challenge to ensuring equity is even more amplified in the absence of teachers who reflect students' demographics. In California, close to 75% of TK students are Children of Color, the majority Latino*, and 33% are multilingual, with Spanish being the most common language spoken,^{10,11} whereas TK teachers are predominantly White. More specific data across the ECE spectrum is presented below.

These percentages have real implications for TK. In a **previous research brief**, we highlighted the positive academic outcomes for students when taught by teachers of their same race or ethnicity.¹⁵ TK students are no exception, especially when considering the foundation TK sets for them in their academic preparation. With these challenges, equity as well as appropriate teacher-student racial and ethnic representation should remain priorities in practice when hiring and retaining TK teachers.

TK	Family Child Care**	Center Programs***
29% Teachers of Color	71% Teachers of Color	66% Teachers of Color
70% White	29% White	34% White

Note: Data taken from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment.^{12,13,14}

*We acknowledge the multiple labels used to refer to this population as well as the researchers' use of different terms for racial/ethnic identification.

**Family Child Care comprises licensed child care establishments that operate out of private homes.

***Center Programs include Head Start, California State Preschool Programs, and unsubsidized centers.

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Finding #2

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early childhood education and TK teachers

Starting in 2020, the stress and challenges of COVID-19 extended to classrooms and teachers, directly affecting ECE. Similar to other entities, daycares and childcare establishments closed immediately at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.^{16,17} The pandemic caused high job demands and low job satisfaction in ECE,¹⁷ resulting in an increase in ECE¹⁷ teacher and staff turnover.^{17, 18}

The weight of the pandemic coupled with the high job demands greatly impacted the mental health of teachers in ECE.^{16,19,20,21} Teaching young children remotely,¹¹ working during a crisis, and then being expected to return to the classroom during the pandemic are examples of the demands impacting mental health.²⁰ TK teachers also felt these repercussions. In 2020, close to 75% of TK teachers reported feeling depressed and anxious and having difficulty concentrating and sleeping, and approximately 80% of teachers reported feeling worried about becoming sick with COVID-19.¹¹ Taking into consideration these findings, researchers provided the following recommendations to

education and state leaders to improve the mental health of ECE teachers moving forward: (1) offer and support social-emotional well-being;²¹ (2) provide appropriate mental health support to teachers through systematically gathering data on specific needs;¹⁹ (3) create partnerships with nonprofit and government agencies to offer mental health services to teachers, students, and families;¹⁹ and (4) offer childcare to teachers with children.¹⁹ These recommendations may be helpful as districts seek ways to support TK teachers specifically.

Lastly, although TK teachers expressed that school leadership lacked a real understanding of TK primarily during the pandemic,¹¹ they remained in their jobs. Similarly, ECE teachers in New York City shared that school leadership also lacked an understanding of their program. Nonetheless, this point suggests that as California works toward expanding TK, placing supportive school leadership in TK programs will be critical for long-term success and teacher retention.

Finding #3

Moving forward for TK success

In light of the severe teacher shortages in K–12, California districts have responded in multiple ways to alleviate this challenge. While not ideal, districts have relied heavily on the labor of substitute teachers and have also hired teachers with less experience and fewer credentials to teach in the classrooms.¹⁶ To step away from these practices, which are not conducive to long-term student success, California districts have implemented strategies to recruit and retain teachers through increasing pay, developing Grow Your Own programs that prepare classified staff to become teachers, improving recruitment and hiring practices, and hiring additional support staff.¹⁶ These strategies point to the districts' commitment to ensuring quality education for their students.

For TK classrooms, researchers have suggested that schools can draw from the thousands of people who work in childcare centers and facilitate them using their experience or credentials to transition into teaching TK.²³ Pulling from this labor force can certainly add teachers into the TK classrooms during this critical time. Furthermore, researchers suggest creating alternative pathways to help childhood care teachers become credentialed to teach in TK classrooms.²⁵ One pathway set to start soon is the PK–3 ECE Specialist Instruction Credential program. All these initiatives would significantly help meet the teacher demand

when TK becomes universal in California by 2025. The State of California invested billions of dollars to support the education force during the 2021–2022 school year through “teacher preparation pathways,” hiring more staff in high-need schools, and providing resources for overall positive student educational experiences.¹⁶ If extended to the current TK landscape, these proactive approaches have the potential to increase the hiring of teachers and put more teachers in TK classrooms.

Another approach to complement TK teacher credentialing lies in collaboration with higher-education institutions. Having qualified teachers in TK will be necessary if California decides to rely on the labor force of childcare centers to offer preschool services (ages under 5),²³ and, because teacher preparation and credentialing mostly occurs in teacher preparation programs housed at universities,⁶ the collaboration between school districts and four-year universities is critical. Additionally, more education and access to obtaining the necessary training and professional development in the college curriculum is crucial.² Needless to say, the success of hiring and retaining qualified teachers can stem from effective collaborations between districts and higher-education institutions, and ultimately lead to a more effective and equitable implementation and expansion of TK.

A successful case worth exploring is New York City’s universal pre-kindergarten program (UPK). Implementation of UPK was rooted in city-wide and multi-agency efforts. For starters, city leadership—including the persistence and proactive collaboration of New York’s mayor—was essential. Government employees worked alongside city leaders and parents to implement UPK.²⁴ Data systems and technology already in place were used for data collection of family and student demographics and for the recruitment and hiring of teachers.²⁴ For the recruitment of UPK teachers, the Department of Education posted radio advertisements and used their own human resources department to recruit certified teachers.²⁴ The media also played a significant role in the public’s buy-in to UPK implementation, as different media outlets highlighted UPK as a social-justice approach toward alleviating poverty and ensuring educational equity in NYC, which united a collective of progressive and multi-class constituencies.²⁵ When reporting on the logistics of funding, the media coverage of UPK seems to have worked in favor of UPK. The city added \$15 million to their budget for salaries.²³ In this NYC case, the collaboration with higher education also played a significant role in the implementation of UPK. The city’s and

the DOE’s relationship with City University of New York (CUNY) served as another resource for teacher recruitment, as CUNY helped with recruiting new teachers as well as recruiting current teachers for UPK specifically.²⁴ Beyond the program’s goal to serve NYC four-year-olds, the program also sought to expand. As a result, efforts to expand UPK to a full-day program were successful during the 2014–2015 school year.²²

Conclusion

These findings demonstrate that many elements contribute to the challenge of having a teacher shortage in TK. Simultaneously, however, opportunities exist in terms of collaborating to implement proactive solutions, as we notice in the cases of California and New York City and their initiatives to expand opportunities for students and teachers alike.

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

Reflection Questions

Teacher Leaders:

- ▶ How might you support a new TK teacher who came from outside the public school system?
- ▶ How might you support TK teachers’ well-being to prevent stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue?
- ▶ What particular resources are available to you within the district and community to support new TK teachers’ transition and all TK teachers’ well-being?

School Leaders:

- ▶ What are some existing networks that you might draw on to recruit new TK teachers?
- ▶ How might you create a supportive school climate to increase TK teacher retention rate?
- ▶ Where might you have the opportunity to partner with other school leaders on building networking and increasing retention?

District Leaders:

- ▶ How might you partner with teacher preparation programs at institutions of higher education near you to train and prepare TK teachers?
- ▶ What opportunities exist to foster partnerships with city leadership for a multi-agency effort to support TK?
- ▶ What mental health resources can be offered in your district to TK teachers?

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About 21CSLA

The original California School Leadership Academy was established by Senate Bill 813 in 1983 and administered by the California Department of Education until 2003. Senate Bill 75 re-authorized the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) in 2019. The grant is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders — teacher, site, and district — to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. Headquartered at UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education, 21CSLA is led in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, the California Subject Matter Project, and seven Regional Academies across the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California that receive Title II funds. Programs are free to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve instruction and achievement outcomes for multilingual learners, students with disabilities, low-income students, and other historically marginalized students.

21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education, especially for educational leaders. These research briefs compile and present current research in a concise format. They also include reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. Companion practice briefs gather and lift the voices and the experiences of educational leaders for dissemination among researchers.

21CSLA also regularly produces Research-Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. For more information, visit <https://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research/webinars>

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