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Building the Plane While Flying It

California Transitional Kindergarten Teachers' Experiences of TK Expansion

By Wanzi Muruvi, Jeremy Simon, Anna Powell, Abby Copeman Petig, and Yoonjeon Kim

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Building the Plane While Flying It

California Transitional Kindergarten Teachers' Experiences of TK Expansion.

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About CSCCE

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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Introduction

Transitional kindergarten (TK)—California’s universal prekindergarten options that represent the first year of a two-year kindergarten program—began expansion during the 2022-2023 school year and is gradually increasing age eligibility. By the fall of 2025, all four-year-olds across the state will have access to TK in public schools (California Department of Education, n.d.). For the majority of school districts, expanding TK involves adding new TK classrooms, including in schools that previously did not offer the program (Antony et al., 2024). While the aim is to provide every enrolled child with a high-quality, developmentally appropriate experience in early care and education (ECE), TK expansion was rolled out without critical elements necessary for equitable implementation (Powell et al., 2024). School districts are navigating the process on their own, leading to inconsistent implementation, which raises concerns about equity. Additionally, in the absence of ongoing statewide monitoring and evaluation of TK expansion, school districts lack essential data to guide and support their implementation efforts.

TK expansion came with specific requirements, such as class-size limits, a lower child-to-adult ratio, and qualification requirements to teach TK, all of which created a significant demand for TK teachers (see **Demand for TK Teachers**, below). The fast pace of TK expansion has districts scrambling to secure facilities, adequately staff TK classrooms, and provide curriculum resources necessary for delivering a developmentally appropriate program for four-year-olds (Anthony et al., 2024; Banks et al., 2023; Gallagher, 2023; Wang et al., 2024). To ensure equity, school and district administrators as well as state legislators need data to help them assess and address the needs of TK programs and their workforce during this critical transition phase.

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) previously published findings on the demographics, education, teaching experience, and working conditions of TK teachers, drawing on pre-expansion data from the 2020 California ECE Workforce Study (Montoya et al., 2022). This report builds on that work and uses data from a follow-up California ECE Workforce Study survey conducted in the spring of 2023 to examine the demographics, teaching experience, and working conditions of the TK workforce during the first year of TK expansion. The findings will help guide decisions to support the equitable implementation of TK expansion.

Main Findings

- **Many TK teachers feel their district is not fully prepared for TK expansion.** Only one fifth (20 percent) of TK teachers reported an increase in school or district leadership's understanding and support of developmentally appropriate practice for four-year-olds. With no standardized curriculum, individual TK teachers were often figuring out curriculum approaches for their classroom with limited guidance.
- **Districts where teachers feel TK expansion is going well share certain characteristics.** They include having administrative leadership with knowledge of and experience in early care and education, being open to input from experienced TK teachers, engaging TK teachers in the implementation process, and having a supportive environment that provides teachers with adequate resources and autonomy over their classroom practice.
- **TK assistants/aides are more linguistically diverse than TK teachers.** While only 22 percent of TK teachers reported speaking Spanish fluently, nearly one half (45 percent) reported having an assistant/aide who speaks Spanish, which complements the linguistic diversity of the students. On average, 40 percent of children in a TK classroom speak English and another language or only another language.
- **TK classrooms in districts with the California State Preschool Program (CSPP)—the largest state-funded preschool program in the country—demonstrate important strengths, including racial and linguistic diversity.** Districts with the CSPP were more likely to have TK teachers of color and TK students of color than districts without this public preschool program. Additionally, districts with the CSPP were more likely than districts without the CSPP to have TK teachers and assistants/aides who speak other languages besides English.
- **Despite their diversity strength, TK classrooms in districts with the California State Preschool Program experience more classroom challenges.** TK teachers in districts with the CSPP reported all classroom challenges at higher rates than those in districts without the program.

Demand for TK Teachers

California has specific staffing and child-to-adult ratio requirements for TK classrooms. Transitional kindergarten classrooms are required to have a maximum class size of 24 students. Starting in the 2025-2026 school year, the child-to-adult ratio must drop from the current 12:1 to 10:1 (Petek, 2025). To meet ratio requirements, TK classrooms should be staffed with up to two adults: one must be a fully credentialed teacher; the other can be a credentialed teacher, classified staff, or paraprofessional (Gallagher, 2023). The cap in class size and lowering of the child-to-adult ratio, combined with an increase in enrollment as age of eligibility is expanded, exert a significant staffing demand. It is estimated that California would need 11,900 to 15,600 credentialed teachers and 16,000 to 19,700 assistants by full implementation in the fall of 2025 (Melnick et al., 2022).

About the Study

In this report, we analyze survey data gathered during the spring of 2023 by CSCCE as part of the California ECE Workforce Study. We used a convenience sample of about 400 TK teachers from across the state. In addition, CSCCE conducted two virtual focus group sessions with nine TK teachers selected from among the survey participants who agreed to be contacted for other research activities.

This report presents findings from an analysis of quantitative survey responses, supplemented by insights from open-ended survey questions and focus group transcripts, where relevant. Additionally, we disaggregated the survey respondents based on whether they were in a school district with or without the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), “the largest state-funded preschool program in the nation” (California Department of Education, 2024a). We used the presence of the CSPP as an indicator of a school district’s readiness to deliver TK based on their experience delivering a similar developmentally appropriate program for four-year-olds. The report presents data for the entire sample of teachers alongside comparisons between teachers in CSPP and non-CSPP districts to examine whether the presence of this public preschool program influences teacher experiences.

Results

Changes Experienced by TK Teachers

“Our program is really kind of, I don't know how else to describe it besides flying a plane while putting it together.”

—TK Teacher, Focus Group

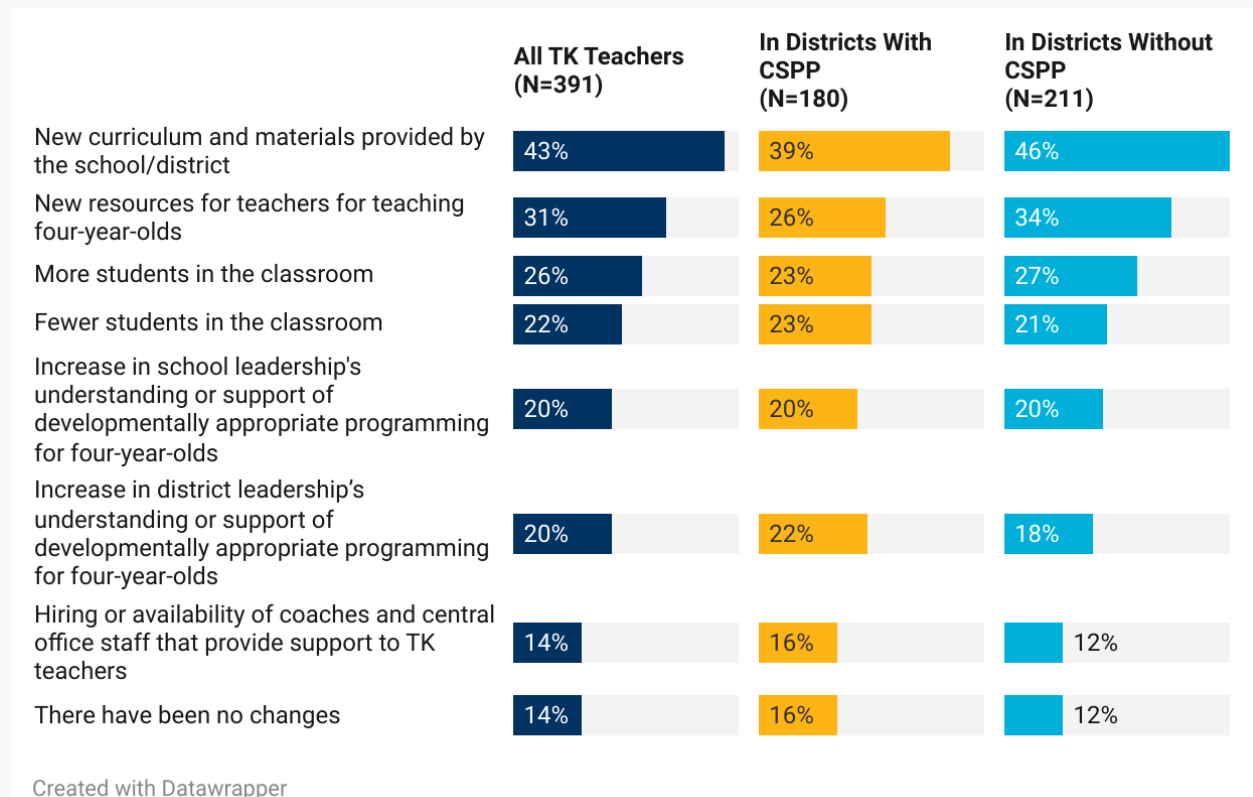
Curriculum Materials and Teaching Resources

The survey asked TK teachers to identify—from a list—changes that had happened to the TK program at their school or to their role as a TK teacher in 2022-2023 (i.e., since the previous school year). TK expansion ushered in significant changes to many districts, with only 14 percent of TK teachers reporting experiencing no change (**Figure 1**). The two most commonly reported changes during the first year of TK expansion were the introduction of new curriculum and materials (43 percent) and the availability of new resources for teachers (31 percent). When California launched TK expansion, no standardized curriculum was provided for this new grade level, leaving districts responsible for developing their own resources (Wang et al., 2024; Banks et al., 2023; Gallagher, 2023). At the time of the study, the updated [Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations](#) were still under development (California Department of Education, n.d.).

As shown in **Figure 1**, TK teachers in districts without the California State Preschool Program were somewhat more likely than teachers in districts with the CSPP to report receiving new curriculum materials (46 percent and 39 percent, respectively). Additionally, teachers in districts without the CSPP were more likely to indicate new teaching resources than districts with the CSPP (34 percent and 26 percent, respectively). It is likely that when selecting TK curricula, districts with the CSPP may have had the opportunity to continue using an existing CSPP curriculum.

FIGURE 1. CHANGES TO TK PROGRAMS EXPERIENCED BY TK TEACHERS IN 2022-2023

California ECE Workforce Study, 2023



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

Data collected from school districts by the California Department of Education in 2022 show that TK programs typically combine elements of many different curricula, and districts frequently use district- and teacher-developed TK material (Wang et al., 2024). Comments from focus group participants suggest that in some cases, individual TK teachers must figure out a curriculum approach for their classroom with limited guidance.

"We haven't really had a curriculum for TK. So I've just kind of been pulling from the DRDP [Desired Results Developmental Profile—Preschool] and then the DRDP-K [Desired Results Developmental

Profile–Kindergarten] and kind of like, well, we'll just tie a little knot around this, and we'll, okay, yeah, that looks good."

– TK Teacher, Focus Group

"At the beginning, most of us had combo classes, and I would say a majority of the teachers just treated the TK students as if they were kindergarten students and had the same expectations for them, which is not developmentally appropriate. So we did not have a curriculum. Teachers were left to create things on their own.... We just adopted a curriculum right now. For the fall, we will have something that will be consistent at all the sites, but up until now, that hasn't happened."

– TK Teacher, Focus Group

Enrollment Changes

A significant proportion of TK teachers also observed other changes related to TK expansion, particularly in enrollment (see **Figure 1**). Approximately one quarter (26 percent) of TK teachers reported having more students in the classroom, while one fifth (22 percent) noticed a decrease. This variation likely reflects the uneven rollout of TK expansion, with some districts—or even schools within the same district—experiencing under-enrollment while others face high demand, and some have waitlists (Rix, 2024; Stavelly & Thornton, 2024).

An increase in classroom size may be a natural consequence of expanded eligibility but could also indicate facility constraints or staff shortages (Wang et al., 2024). A recent report highlights that budget cuts to TK facility funding have left school districts struggling to add classrooms to meet growing demand (Stavelly et al., 2024). These pressures may be particularly pronounced in districts without the CSPP, as TK teachers in such districts were somewhat more likely to report an increase in students than teachers in districts with the CSPP (27 percent and 23 percent, respectively).

TK teachers in focus group sessions commented on districts' lack of preparedness and inability to keep up with the pace of TK expansion. One TK teacher shared this about large class sizes:

"I ended up with 28 students at the end of the school year because we ran out of space. And since we had to be 12 to 1 [child-to-adult ratio], they were like, well, we'd rather throw kids into one class and hire one extra aide instead of...trying to open up a new class so far into the

school year. They just weren't prepared for the number of students coming in. And we just went to February 2nd last year, we didn't even open it up for the whole year."

– TK Teacher, Focus Group

Leadership's Understanding of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Only one fifth (20 percent) of TK teachers reported an increase in school or district leadership's understanding of developmentally appropriate practice for four-year-olds, and there was little difference between districts with and without the California State Preschool Program (see **Figure 1**). In focus group sessions, TK teachers expressed frustration over the lack of understanding of developmentally appropriate practice among school and district leadership, which they felt led to insufficient support.

"I think the pinnacle for me was this year. They have the local newspaper come out, do this big story on how TK at our district is so amazing. And the reporter was asking me a question, and I was talking about how it's mostly play-based. And a director from the district said, 'Well, we don't want to get it across that they're not doing academics. It's really more academic-based.' And I realized they have no idea really what we're doing every day."

– TK Teacher, Focus Group

"For the longest time, I've been pushing to be able to go into a larger, kinder room, you know, that actually has a bathroom and has more space.... And one of the teachers was leaving at one point, and I was going to get it, but then my principal came and took it away.... And so that's just been really frustrating. At times, it's caused me to want to leave the school even though I love my school so much. That piece [...] not recognizing the need for TK to even have a bathroom in the classroom and not across the hallway, sharing with third graders [...] we really need that. That would be our ideal space. That became very frustrating. And just constantly being told, 'No, I can't move you....' But our needs aren't being met."

– TK Teacher, Focus Group

Classroom Challenges

In the open-ended survey responses and focus group discussions, TK teachers expressed excitement about TK expansion and were happy that more students had the opportunity to access early care and education. TK teachers recognized the potential of TK expansion to promote equity, particularly for those children who fall in the middle, whose parents cannot afford preschool, but do not qualify for subsidized preschool for low-income families.

"I'm excited that all students will have the opportunity to attend TK. It truly benefits all students to learn social-emotional skills and work on fine and gross motor skills."

– TK Teacher, Survey

"I am very excited about TK expansion. I work at a Title I school. So a lot of our students can't afford preschool.... They don't qualify for Head Start or for state preschool, or there's not enough spaces. So they come in without [the] advantage of having some kind of school before kindergarten.... I always thought that [TK] is a great program for all of our students."

– TK Teacher, Focus Group

However, TK teachers also faced significant classroom challenges, as highlighted in our previous report (Muruvi et al., 2024). In our current sample, the majority of TK teachers identified the challenges of managing children with challenging behaviors (70 percent) and finding time for planning (51 percent; **Figure 2**). Notably, our 2020 (before TK expansion) and 2023 survey data indicate that TK teachers are more likely than all other early educators to report working with children with challenging behaviors as a classroom challenge (Muruvi et al., 2024; Powell et al., 2023). This finding suggests that while TK expansion may have intensified certain difficulties, managing challenging behaviors has been a longstanding issue for California's TK teachers.

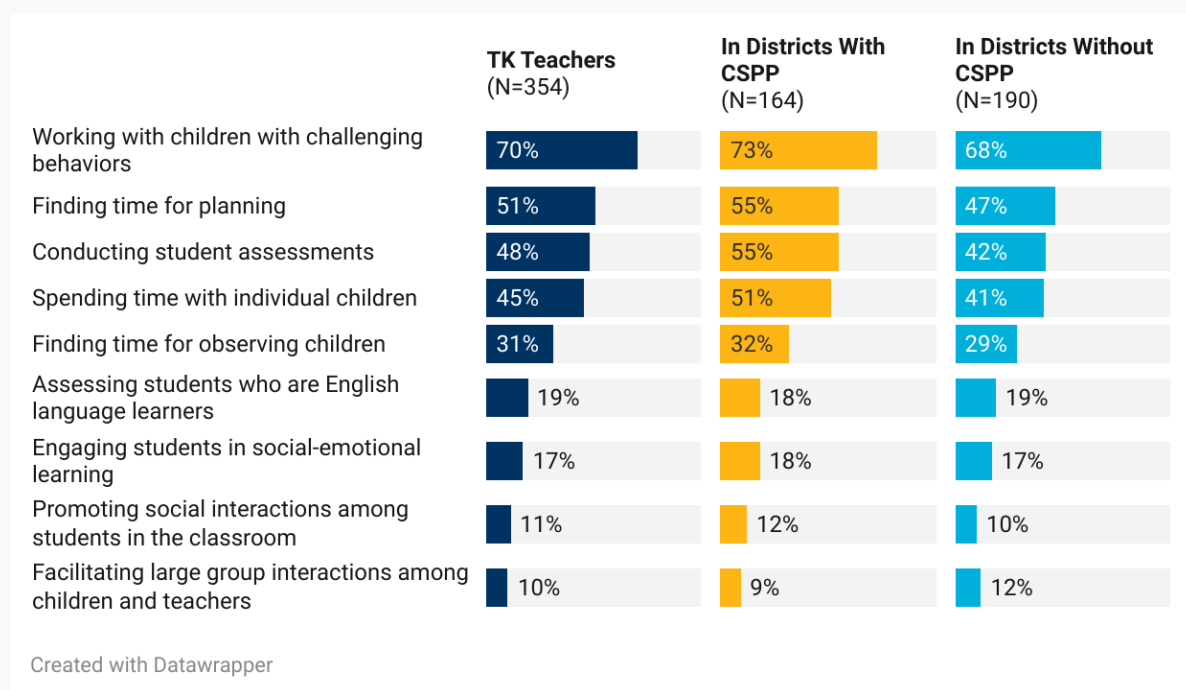
Conducting student assessments, spending time with individual students, and finding time for observing children were challenges for 48 percent, 45 percent, and 31 percent of TK teachers, respectively. Notably, these challenges were somewhat more likely to be reported by TK teachers from districts with the California State Preschool Program than TK teachers from districts without the CSPP.

While TK teachers in districts with the CSPP reported classroom challenges at a higher rate than teachers in districts without the CSPP, they had important strengths: they were more likely than

districts without the CSPP to have diverse TK students and TK staff in terms of race, ethnicity, and languages spoken (as shown elsewhere in this report). Given the equity implications of these findings, further investigation is needed regarding the relationship between local contextual factors such as race, ethnicity, and/or linguistic diversity of the community and TK implementation process outcomes.

FIGURE 2. TK TEACHING CHALLENGES

California ECE Workforce Study, 2023



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

In the open-ended survey responses and focus group discussions, TK teachers linked classroom challenges to their working conditions. Key concerns included large class sizes and high child-to-adult ratios, limited support for children with additional needs, and working with younger children without adequate classroom resources to meet their developmental needs.

"I am very anxious about the children being so young but our class size being 24. I don't get coverage when my TA [teaching assistant] is

on her break and lunch, and 24:1 is just too big a ratio. I'm also concerned about getting appropriate assistance for students with challenging behaviors."

– TK Teacher, Survey

"The adult-to-student ratio increased from 1:8 to 1:12, eliminating an aide position. Instead of three adults for 24 children, there are now two adults for up to 24 children."

– TK Teacher, Survey

"The hardest part for me is having those kids that need extra support. And it sometimes could take months to get that extra support, and you're telling your admin or telling anybody, 'I need help with this kid. I need help and I'm not getting it.' "

– TK Teacher, Focus group

"I am looking forward to more age-appropriate curriculum, and I am anxious about having younger students in the class with not enough adults."

– TK Teacher, Survey

"Things like potty training, [the children] not being potty trained before they come. I want TK expansion to continue, but I want us to be ready for them and be able to serve them to the best of our ability. I think moving too quickly is dangerous."

– TK Teacher, Focus Group

Lessons From a Success Story

Our analysis showed that TK teachers' experiences of TK expansion varied across districts. While many TK teachers experienced challenges, there were some bright spots. So we asked ourselves, **in districts where TK expansion is going well, what are the characteristics of TK implementation?**

A case from one of our focus groups perfectly illustrates the answer. “Tess” has been a TK teacher at the same school for the past five years. She works in a small district with eight elementary schools. Prior to TK expansion, six of the schools had TK programs with one class each. When expansion started, the district added three new classrooms, one each at the two sites that previously had no TK and an additional classroom at Tess’s school. Four themes emerge based on the experiences of Tess, as documented in the text box below.

Characteristics of Successful TK Expansion

1) For the teacher whom we’re calling “Tess” (see above), **having administrative leadership that is knowledgeable about and experienced in early care and education** is instrumental to creating supportive environments for TK teachers. Tess’s district and school administrators had previously taught early elementary.

I feel supported, and I think that makes a really big difference.... I do think that I would attribute a lot of the support that we have to our assistant superintendent who actually was a kindergarten teacher in my school.... Having that support, at that level, I feel she was really the one who was like, okay, we need to listen to what the teachers are saying and not just what we think they need. My principal, the direct leadership within my site, as well, she was also a kindergarten teacher.

2) Tess explained that **the school district is open to input from TK teachers** on key aspects of TK implementation. Leveraging the knowledge of experienced TK teachers helps create processes that ensure equitable access to materials, resources, and training for all schools throughout the district, while also keeping TK a developmentally appropriate educational program for four-year-olds.

Those of us who have been teaching TK, we got together and went to the district. We said we wanted it to be Reggio Emilia-inspired, play-based, child-centered and -driven. And basically, we sent it to the district, and they were like, great, send us a spreadsheet. We put it together, and they bought everything on that list for every classroom. And now the new classrooms that start up, they're gonna get the same materials, the same furniture, everything.

3) Additionally, **TK teachers are actively engaged in the implementation process**. For example, in the absence of a set curriculum, the district has invited TK teachers to co-create and pilot curricula for district-wide implementation.

Then we have a social studies curriculum that has been custom made from our district. I was a part of the committee that's actually writing it.... We are considering piloting Creative Curriculum this coming year. I'm trying it out during summer school.... We don't have a boxed, prescriptive curriculum right now. It's really up to the teachers to design the hands-on experiences, the play centers, things like that.... There's so much flexibility once you're just in your classroom that I feel that kind of balances out having to defend it and explain it to people.

4) A supportive environment that provides teachers with resources they need and autonomy over their classroom practice is an important success factor. Tess described feeling supported, trusted, and empowered to develop and tailor her classroom practice to meet the needs of all children, especially as eligibility has expanded to take in even younger learners.

I do feel that having that support does contribute to my well-being. When [my principal] comes into my room, and she sees them just playing, you know, I feel supported [by] her and that makes a big difference, as well. Whereas I think principals who aren't quite aware of what early childhood education looks like are a little bit more critical of what TK really should be, which is a lot of play. I have been really intentional about the amount of direct instruction that I do [...] as the kids get younger and even more so next year when they're even younger.

In addition to collecting information on TK teachers' classroom experiences, the survey also gathered data on TK program characteristics and TK teachers' demographics. Additionally, the survey asked TK teachers about the children and the second adult in the classroom.

TK Program Characteristics

In the first year of TK expansion, enrollment surged to 116,898 students, an increase of 55 percent from the previous school year (Melnick & García, 2024). More than three quarters (76 percent) of TK teachers in our study indicated that their program was full day (at least four hours). TK teachers in districts with the California State Preschool Program were somewhat more likely to have a full-day TK program than teachers in districts without the CSPP (82 percent and 71 percent, respectively). In our 2020 study, two thirds (66 percent) of teachers worked in full-day programs (Montoya et al., 2022). The difference in findings between this study and our 2020 study may reflect an increase in full-day offerings with TK expansion.

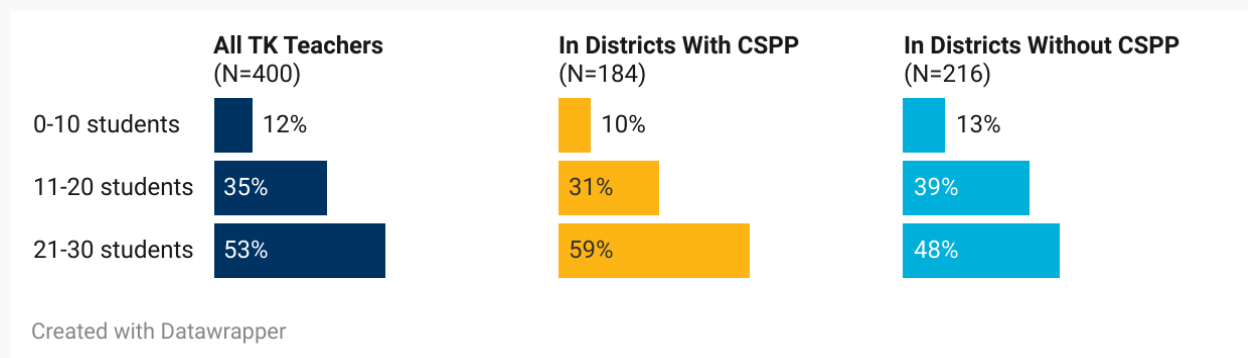
The vast majority (90 percent) of TK teachers in the current study reported having a paid instructional assistant/aide or paraprofessional; of these, three quarters (75 percent) had an

assistant/aide for the full duration of their session. TK teachers in districts with the CSPP were somewhat more likely than teachers in districts without the CSPP to have a TK assistant/aide for the full duration of the session (79 percent and 73 percent, respectively). In contrast, only 44 percent of TK teachers in our 2020 study reported having an assistant or aide, and the majority of the teachers (62 percent) had an assistant/aide for only part of the instructional time (Montoya et al., 2022). The increase in availability of TK assistants/aides likely reflects efforts to recruit more assistants and aides to meet the new child-to-adult ratio requirements (Gallagher, 2023).

Class sizes in our study often approached the upper limit allowed by the state (**Figure 3**). During the 2022-2023 school year, TK class sizes were expected to be capped at 24 students, with a child-to-adult ratio of 12:1 (TK California, n.d.). More than one half (53 percent) of TK teachers reported class sizes of 21 to 30 students, more than one third had 11 to 20 students, and only 12 percent had class sizes of 10 or fewer students. TK teachers in districts with the CSPP were more likely than TK teachers in districts without the CSPP to have class sizes of 21 to 30 students (59 percent and 48 percent, respectively).

FIGURE 3. TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN CLASS SIZE

California ECE Workforce Study, 2023



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

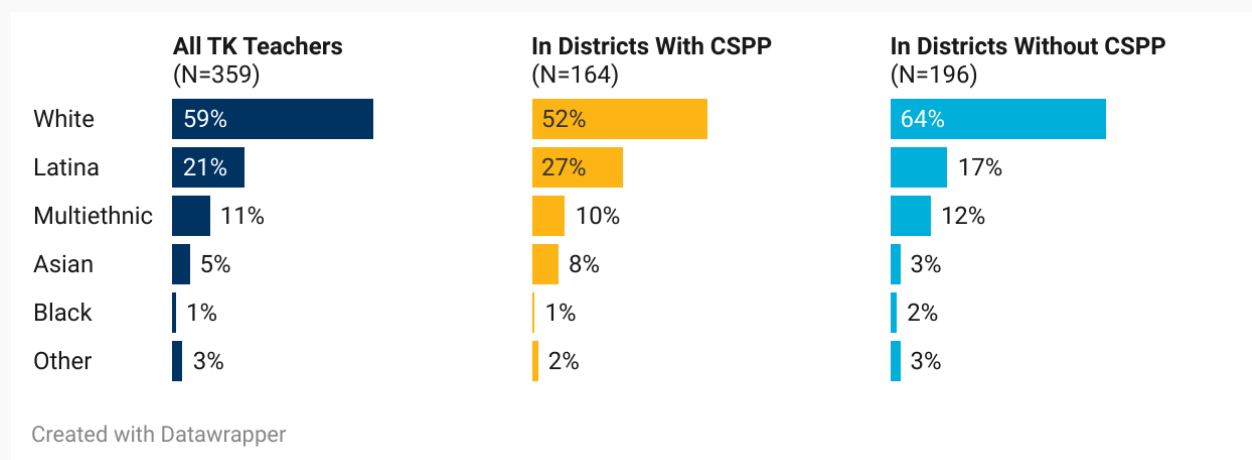
The TK Workforce and Children in the TK Classroom

Racial and Ethnic Makeup of TK Teachers and Children

The racial and ethnic backgrounds of TK teachers in our study closely match those of California’s K-12 teachers but are less diverse than those of center-based early educators or the students in their classrooms. The majority (59 percent) of TK teachers identify as White, 21 percent as Latina,¹ 5 percent as Asian, and 1 percent as Black (**Figure 4**). Districts with the California State Preschool Program were more likely than districts without the CSPP to have TK teachers of color (48 percent and 36 percent, respectively). Statewide data from the 2018-2019 school year show that 61 percent of California’s K-12 teachers identify as White, 21 percent as Latine, 6 percent as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4 percent as Black (EdTrust, 2022). In contrast, CSCCE’s 2020 workforce study data show that among center teaching staff, 34 percent identify as White, 39 percent as Latina, 10 percent as Asian, and 5 percent as Black (Powell et al., 2021).

FIGURE 4. RACIAL AND ETHNIC MAKEUP OF TK TEACHERS

California ECE Workforce Study, 2023



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

The survey also asked TK teachers about the racial and ethnic makeup of children in their classroom. TK classrooms had children with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (**Figure 5**). Nearly all (92 percent) TK teachers indicated that they had at least one student who identifies as

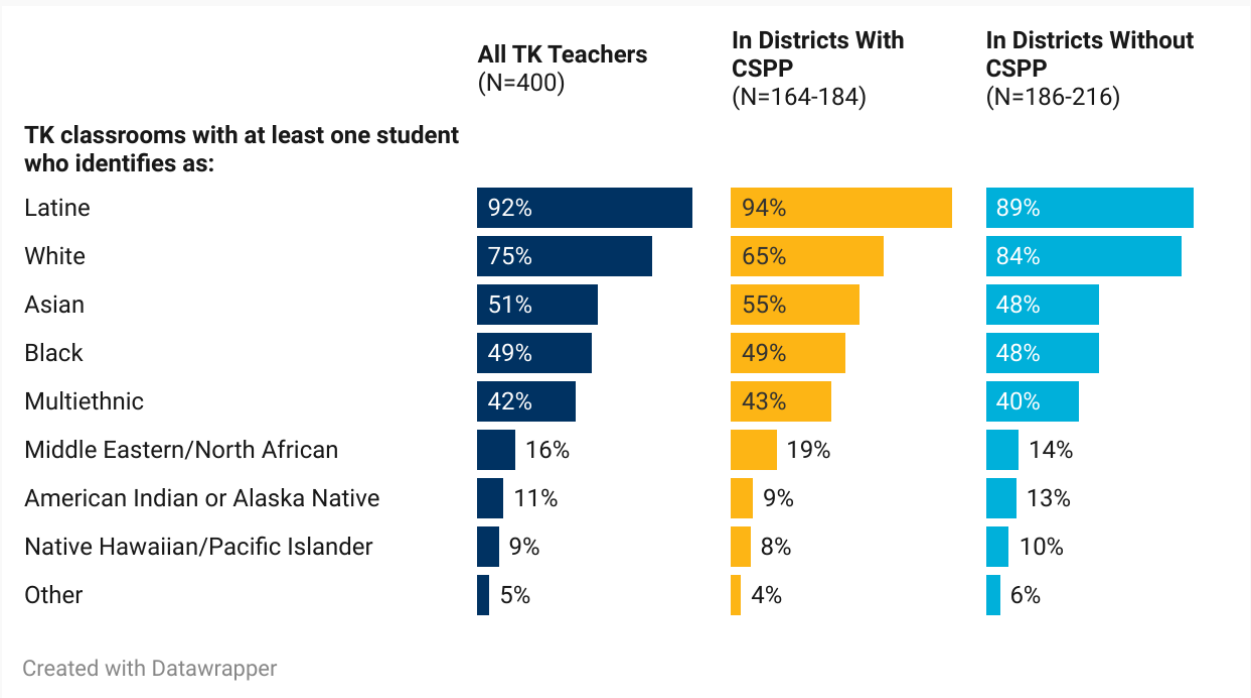
¹ Because the early care and education workforce is overwhelmingly composed of individuals who identify as women, we use the gender-specific term “Latina” to describe members of the ECE workforce who identify as part of the Latin American diaspora. However, we know that data collection has not always accounted for gender diversity beyond a male/female binary. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of early educators who identify as men, nonbinary, or another gender identity and recognize that the gendered oppression of women in the ECE workforce is related to the gender-based oppression of nonbinary, trans, and genderqueer educators.

Latine in their classroom, three quarters (75 percent) had at least one student who identifies as White, 51 percent had at least one student who identifies as Asian, and 49 percent had at least one student who identifies as Black. TK teachers in districts with the CSPP were somewhat more likely than those in districts without the CSPP to have students of color.

The highly diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds of TK students reported by TK teachers in our sample is consistent with state data. Data from the 2022-2023 school year shows that 80 percent of TK students were children of color (California Department of Education, 2024b).

FIGURE 5. RACIAL AND ETHNIC MAKEUP OF STUDENTS IN TK CLASSROOMS

California ECE Workforce Study, 2023



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

Languages Spoken by TK Staff and Children

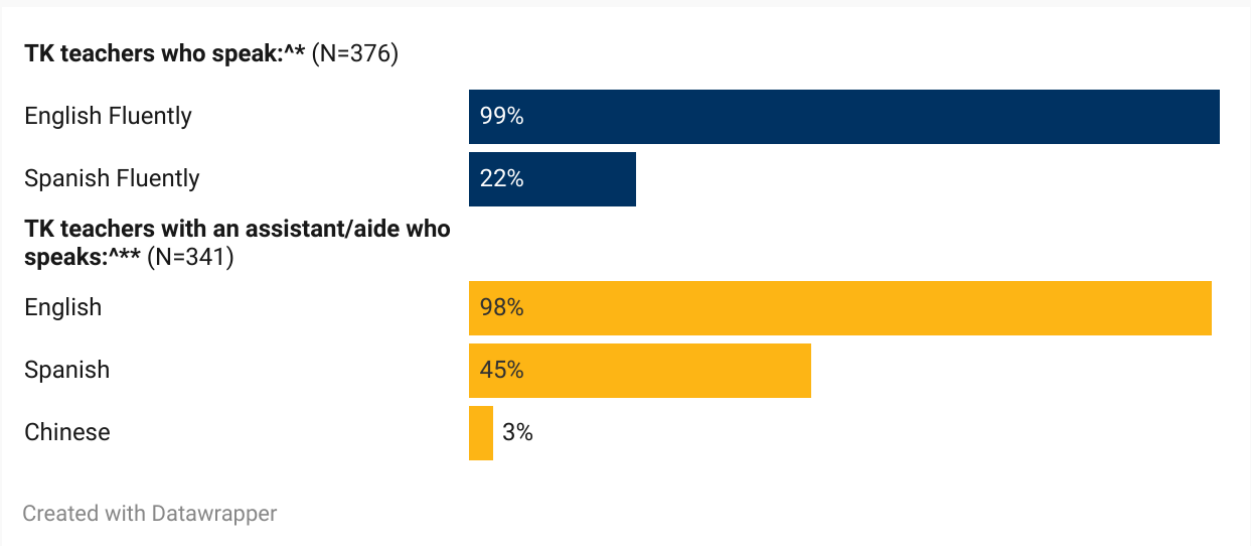
TK assistants/aides are more linguistically diverse than TK teachers. As shown in **Figure 6**, nearly one half (45 percent) of TK teachers have an assistant/aide who speaks Spanish, 3 percent have an assistant/aide who speaks Chinese, and a few TK teachers have an assistant/aide who speaks one the following languages: American Sign Language, Arabic, Farsi, Hindi, Tagalog, or Vietnamese (1 percent for each). However, only 22 percent of TK teachers themselves speak Spanish, 1 percent speak American Sign Language, 1 percent Arabic, and 1 percent Chinese. The

small percentage of classrooms with TK teachers who speak other languages besides English is consistent with reports of a severe shortage of bilingual TK teachers in California (Nguyen, 2024).

TK teachers in districts with the California State Preschool Program were more likely than teachers in districts without the CSPP to have an assistant/aide who speaks another language besides English. For instance, more than one half (54 percent) of TK teachers in districts with the CSPP have an assistant/aide who speaks Spanish, compared to 36 percent of TK teachers in districts without the CSPP. Additionally, 4 percent of teachers in districts with the CSPP have an assistant who speaks Chinese, compared to 1 percent in districts without the CSPP. Districts with the CSPP were also more likely to have TK teachers who speak Spanish than districts without the CSPP (26 percent and 19 percent, respectively).

FIGURE 6. LANGUAGES SPOKEN BY TK TEACHERS AND ASSISTANTS/AIDES

California ECE Workforce Study, 2023



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

^Survey respondents could choose more than one language.

*1 percent of TK teachers speak American Sign Language, 1 percent speak Arabic, and 1 percent speak Chinese.

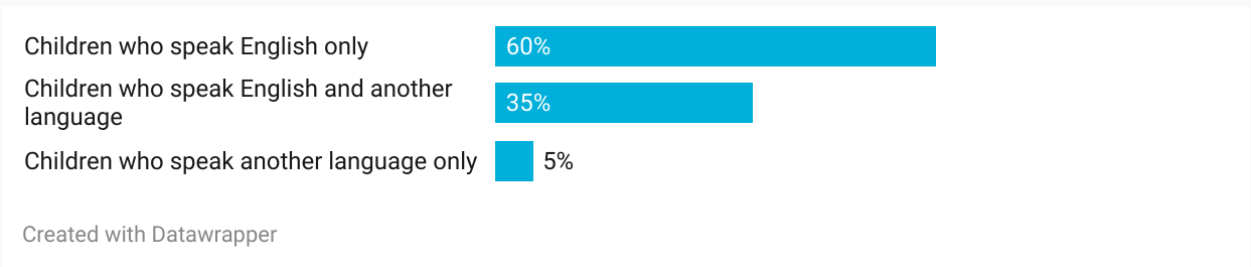
^^TK teachers also reported having a TK assistant/aide who speaks one of the following languages: American Sign Language, Arabic, Farsi, Hindi, Tagalog, and Vietnamese (1 percent for each).

Linguistic diversity among TK assistants/aides is especially important given the high proportion of multilingual learners in TK classrooms. On average, 60 percent of TK students in each

classroom speak only English, while a significant portion speak English and another language (35 percent) or only another language (5 percent; **Figure 7**). The greater racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of TK students compared to TK teachers in our current sample aligns with our previous findings (Montoya et al., 2022). These findings confirm reports that a significant proportion of California's TK student population consists of dual language learners (Giang, 2022).

FIGURE 7. LANGUAGES SPOKEN BY CHILDREN IN TK CLASSROOMS

California ECE Workforce Study, 2023



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley
^Survey respondents could choose more than one language.
Note: Percentages represent the average proportion of children in each TK classroom (N=400).

TK Teachers’ Previous Roles and Tenure in Early Care and Education

TK teachers were more likely to have prior experience teaching older children than teaching in ECE programs. A great majority (84 percent) of TK teachers had previously taught K-5, compared to slightly more than one half (53 percent) of TK teachers who had prior experience in early care and education. This finding is consistent with findings from our 2020 sample, which showed that 90 percent of TK teachers had previously taught kindergarten through third grade (Montoya et al., 2022). Our findings also confirm reports showing that districts rely on credentialed teachers of older children to staff TK classrooms, a situation likely keeping TK teachers less diverse compared to their students (Anthony et al., 2024).

TK teachers in our sample had an average of five years of experience teaching TK, though a significant proportion were relatively new to the field. Approximately one third (34 percent) had taught TK for one to two years, and the remaining 66 percent had taught TK for three to eleven years.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our findings show that TK teachers are excited about TK expansion and the opportunity it provides for all four-year-olds to access early care and education that meets their developmental needs. However, implementation has been uneven, and TK teachers face challenges that must be addressed to ensure equitable educational environments for teachers and the students in their care.

In their own voices, TK teachers linked their teaching challenges to inadequate working conditions—such as large class sizes and high child-to-adult ratios—and inadequate classroom support, including lack of support for children with additional needs. Only about one fifth of TK teachers noticed an increase in district and school leadership’s knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice, with little variation by CSPP participation. TK teachers were frustrated by school and district leadership’s lack of understanding of developmentally appropriate practice, which they linked to a lack of adequate classroom resources and support.

Our data show that the student body in TK classrooms is more diverse than the teaching staff, though assistants/aides contribute greater linguistic diversity than TK teachers. For instance, while only 22 percent of TK teachers speak Spanish, 45 percent reported having an assistant/aide who speaks Spanish, which closely matched the linguistic diversity of students: on average 40 percent of children in a TK classroom speak English and another language or only another language. The lack of diversity among TK teachers is hindering California’s efforts to adequately support its large population of dual language TK learners (Nguyen, 2024; Giang, 2022).

A lack of racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity among TK teachers is likely due to the reliance on K-12 teachers to teach TK classrooms—the majority of TK teachers in our study had prior experience teaching older children (K-5). In contrast to center- and home-based early educators, whose racial and ethnic diversity closely reflects that of the children in their programs, the diversity of K-12 teachers does not align with that of children under the age of five in California (Williams et al., 2021).

Notably, our data show higher rates of racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity among TK teachers and TK students in districts with the California State Preschool Program, compared to teachers in districts without the CSPP. Additionally, TK teachers in districts with this state-funded preschool program were more likely than their counterparts in districts without the CSPP to report classroom challenges, particularly working with children with challenging behaviors and finding time for planning. We also found that teachers in districts with the CSPP were more likely to report large class sizes than teachers in districts without the CSPP.

These findings seem to suggest unique resource challenges for TK programs in districts with the CSPP. The exact influence of the California State Preschool Program on TK implementation remains unclear, but it is likely that districts with CSPP programs are in communities with a high share of children of color. The CSPP primarily serves income-eligible children, and children of color are more likely to qualify for programs with income eligibility (Schumacher, 2019). Districts in less-affluent communities may need additional funding to meet TK facility and other resource needs (Stavely & Thornton, 2024). However, the relationship between local contextual factors, such as the racial, ethnic and/or linguistic makeup of the community and TK implementation process outcomes, require further examination to ensure equitable access for children and equitable support for early educators.

Our closer look at a successful case of TK expansion offers ideas for decision makers and reveals four key success factors for TK expansion:

- Administrative leadership is knowledgeable about and experienced in early care and education;
- Input from experienced TK teachers is used to identify and address TK program needs;
- TK teachers are engaged in the implementation process; and
- A supportive environment provides teachers with adequate resources for and autonomy over their classroom practice.

Recommendations

TK implementation will continue past the current expansion phase, and the following recommendations will help the state of California to create an equitable TK program that supports both children and the TK workforce:

- Provide adequate funding for facilities, staffing, and other resources to meet increasing demand and accommodate reduced classroom size and child-to-adult ratio.
- Offer professional development and training to school and district administrators on developmentally appropriate practice for four-year-olds and how to best support TK teachers.
- Give school districts clear curriculum guidance, resources, and adequate training support for TK teachers on implementing developmentally appropriate practice for four-year-olds.

- Ensure affordable and time-efficient pathways for center- and home-based educators to become credentialed TK teachers in order to create a workforce that closely matches the demographics of students it serves and can better support dual language learners.
- Allocate funding for ongoing statewide monitoring and evaluation of TK implementation.

Future Research

Findings from our study also show that some aspects of TK implementation require further investigation to ensure all children have equitable access to prekindergarten education that meets their developmental needs. In this regard, the following research questions need to be answered:

- How is TK expansion influenced by and influencing existing publicly funded preschool programs (CSPP, Head Start, and locally funded preschool programs) as well as the rest of the ECE landscape?
- How does TK implementation vary across communities? How do local community factors, such as race and ethnic makeup, influence TK implementation outcomes?
- How are dual language learners supported by TK expansion, and how are TK teacher pipelines contributing to a diverse TK workforce?

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