

Press Release: New PACE Brief—California Needs to focus on High Quality Instruction to Meet Goals for Universal Transitional Kindergarten

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California is moving forward in the expansion of Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) with schools and districts focusing on the development of facilities and appropriate staffing. But the state needs to boost its focus on high-quality teaching and learning if it is to help all students meet learning goals and ensure an effective return on the state's investment, according to a new research analysis released today by Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE).

"High-quality pre-school instruction can make a difference for students," says [Alix Gallagher](#), the lead researcher of the PACE brief. "But only high-quality preschool instruction results in persistent positive gains. California has taken important steps to address facilities and staffing but needs to shift its focus to ensure high quality, developmentally appropriate instruction for its youngest learners if it is to meet its goals for improving student learning and achievement.

Based on 25 interviews with district leaders and national experts on early childhood education, along with a review of research and analysis of policy documents, the research brief, "[California's Major Investment in Universal Transitional Kindergarten: What Districts Need to Fulfill Its Promise](#)," finds that districts have focused their energy in the initial rollout of UTK on the things the state has mandated—finding classrooms that meet facilities guidelines and hiring enough appropriately credentialed teachers and paraprofessionals to meet the required staffing ratio.

The state is also working to revise the Preschool Learning Foundations and Desired Results Development Profile (DRDP)—the standards and aligned assessment used by state-funded preschools, to specify learning goals and ways of assessing students in Transitional Kindergarten. The state has also provided a wide array of resources to educators and schools through the California Department of Education website and regular webinars.

The research brief acknowledges that those steps are important, but they are insufficient for ensuring the quality of teaching and learning necessary to get a good return on the state's investment. Given the status of student achievement in California, especially in underserved communities where many students enter kindergarten already behind other peers, the researchers contend the state needs to shift toward incentivizing and supporting high levels of enrollment in Universal Transitional Kindergarten with developmentally appropriate play-based instruction aligned with K-3 learning goals. The researchers also say there is a need for improved communication with parents about program implementation and student outcomes.

"The May Revision of the state budget provides clear evidence that the expansion of Transitional Kindergarten to all 4-year-old children by 2025-26 is serving fewer students than desired," adds Gallagher. "Additionally, while our interviews show that the state

has been working on multiple fronts to roll out TK, many school districts face limits to their capacity to serve all eligible students. Equally important, families have minimal visibility into whether their local TK will provide the type of high-quality learning experiences they want for their 4-year old's. Better public communications about the programs are needed."

To incentivize and support school districts to engage students in *high-quality* Transitional Kindergarten as part of a broader Universal Pre-Kindergarten model, the research brief suggest California needs to:

- Set a vision and establish goals that incentivize high-quality Transitional Kindergarten
- Measure progress towards those goals in terms of student enrollment, implementation of key features, and assessment of student outcomes for pre-school through grade 3.
- Align resources and support to advance high-quality implementation of UTK at scale
- Publicly communicate key aspects of implementation and outcomes, enabling communities to monitor whether their districts are serving them well.

The research brief, "[California's Major Investment in Universal Transitional Kindergarten: What Districts Need to Fulfill Its Promise](https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/californias-major-investment-universal-transitional-kindergarten)" focuses on what California state leaders need to do to ensure that UTK achieves its goal of providing a high-quality option for all 4-year-olds. The brief includes analysis of the current state of Universal Transitional Kindergarten expansion, summarizes California's Universal Prekindergarten Policies, and provides detailed reporting of approaches to facilities, staffing and the development of standards and assessments, and profiles the need for improved communications with key audiences. The brief also highlights a path forward for the state and its schools, offering detailed suggestions for the next steps in implementation of the states' Universal Transitional Kindergarten effort. The full research brief is available online on the PACE website at:

<https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/californias-major-investment-universal-transitional-kindergarten>



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