Promising Practices for Preschool and Transitional Kindergarten

How California Districts Create Access and Coherent Systems

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Policy Analysis for California Education

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Executive Summary

California's ambitious investment in Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) reflects a commitment to providing access to UTK for all 4-year-olds in public schools by the 2025–26 academic year. However, the implementation of transitional kindergarten (TK) presents challenges for districts in aligning this new grade coherently with existing grade levels and prekindergarten (PK) options within the context of the mixed-delivery model. This model adds complexity to achieving coherence as students transition from PK or TK to the existing district system. This report from PACE identifies four promising practices observed during the 2022–23 school year to support access and coherence in early childhood education:

Coordinate across providers within the mixed-delivery model, aiming to ensure universal access and vertical alignment of PK and TK offerings. San Rafael City Schools and Santa Paula Unified School District have coordinated with local and regional early education stakeholders respectively to provide universal access to PK and TK programs that are aligned with community needs. These collaborative efforts have helped families navigate options for early care and education and have increased the available seats in PK and TK.

Establish clear and aligned expectations for PK–3 standards and instruction across providers and school sites. Arvin Union School District (AUSD) aligned math learning progressions in PK–3, ensuring a unified vision of effective instruction across district, county, and external support providers. AUSD's commitment to vertical alignment has created a systemic approach to improving math instruction across grade levels and sites.

Monitor PK–3 student learning and progress to guide decision-making. The Monterey Peninsula Unified School District has implemented robust data-use systems, administering various assessments to track student growth from TK through third grade. This proactive approach of using local data informs system improvements and identifies individual student and classroom needs.

Develop coherent professional learning that builds capacity for high-quality teaching and learning in the early grades. Dinuba Unified School District (DUSD) has developed a comprehensive professional learning system that includes TK classrooms in districtwide adult capacity building. The district emphasizes shared expectations for literacy instruction, employing monitoring systems to track student outcomes and instructional practices consistently. This allows DUSD to provide targeted professional development for all teachers, fostering a cohesive approach to teaching and learning from TK through sixth grade.

Introduction

California has made a remarkable investment in providing access to Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) for all 4-year-olds in state public schools by the 2025–26 school year. Districts across the state have faced significant challenges implementing transitional kindergarten (TK) as a new grade and coherently aligning it with their existing grade levels and prekindergarten (PK) options, and little guidance on how to approach this type of integration exists. California, like many states, has what is called a "mixed-delivery model"—that is, the state purposefully allows a mix of early childhood programs so that families have a choice of options for early care and education. This creates a challenge for districts trying to ensure that students experience coherence as they move from PK or TK into the K–3 system.

Ensuring alignment and coherence across providers and between the new TK grade level and the existing K–12 continuum is critical. Coherent systems enable districts to give students a consistent, high-quality PK–12 experience that maximizes the additional years of PK and TK, building on what students have learned. The alternative is an unaligned system that repeats instruction, thereby failing to sustain the learning acceleration generated in PK and TK (Burchinal et al., 2022; Cohen-Vogel et al., 2021; Engel et al., 2013; Justice et al., 2021; Regenstein, 2021; Stipek, 2022). In this report, PACE presents four promising practices across five districts from the 2022–23 school year that support access and coherence in early childhood education:

- coordinate across providers within the mixed-delivery model to provide universal access and vertically align PK and TK offerings;
- establish clear and aligned expectations for PK–3 standards and instruction across providers and school sites;
- monitor PK–3 student learning and progress to guide decision-making; and
- develop a coherent professional learning system that builds capacity for high-quality teaching and learning in the early grades.

California Universal PreKindergarten and Universal Transitional Kindergarten Expansion at a Glance

California's expansion of UTK guarantees that by the 2025–26 school year all students whose fourth birthday occurs by September 1, "regardless of background, race, zip code, immigration status, or income level, will have access to TK at a school district as a quality learning experience the year before Kindergarten" (California Department of Education, 2023b). These are some of the key facts to understand about the rollout of UTK thus far:

- **What is UTK and how does it relate to Universal PreKindergarten (UPK)?** UTK along with UPK are part of a mixed-delivery system serving 3- and 4-year-old children in California, which also includes the California State Preschool Program (CSPP) operated by the California Department of Education (CDE), the federal Head Start program, subsidized programs operated by community-based organizations—including family childcare—and private PK.
- **What was TK historically in California?** Prior to the rollout of UTK, districts were able to enroll students who missed the birthday cutoff (December 1) for kindergarten if seats were available. In statute, TK was treated as an additional year of kindergarten with no formal requirements for instruction beyond student–teacher ratios.
- **What is the UTK rollout?** The goal of California's UPK rollout is that all 4-year-olds have access to a TK program by the 2025–26 school year (Leung-Gagné & Melnick, 2023). In the 2023–24 school year, the second year of the rollout, students with birthdays between September 2 and April 2 are eligible for UTK. The birthday window will be expanded to June 2 in the 2024–25 school year, with coverage for all 4-year-olds to be provided in 2025–26.
- **What is the state's investment in UTK?** Nearly $3 billion annually for the expansion of UTK (Fensterwald, 2023).
- **What does this investment pay for?** As part of UTK expansion, the state has made available grants to support (a) facility upgrades, (b) workforce development and teacher credentialing, and (c) the Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELO-P[1]) to support TK–6 students' access to up to 9 hours of education per day.

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[1] ELO-P funding is provided by the state of California to districts that apply for additional funding for afterschool and summer school enrichment programs in grades TK–6.

- **What guidance is available for UTK implementation?** As part of the UTK expansion, the state began working on revising the California Preschool Learning Foundations and Progressions from PK through third grade.[2] The revised foundations will include updates on how to support dual language learners and inclusion classrooms for students with disabilities. These revised documents have not been released, and their release has been delayed again until early 2024.
- **How will we know the impact of UTK?** CSPP providers are required to administer the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP)[3] to inform instruction and monitor student development. No such formative assessment has been established for UTK. The state has contracted for revisions to the DRDP, but it is unclear if the updated assessment will be required in TK or when it will be released. Currently, there are no indicators on the California School Dashboard regarding TK implementation or for student achievement more broadly prior to third grade.

The promising practices described in this report are intended to serve as models for how to overcome common resource and implementation barriers to TK alignment as districts integrate TK and, in some instances, PK into their existing education systems.

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[2] The PK–3 Learning Foundations and Progressions are meant to build on the California Preschool Learning Foundations (2008) and provide guidance for early grades around the domains of social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language and literacy development, mathematics, and science. They provide an overview of young children's learning and development in key areas in each domain from PK through third grade, including examples of developmentally appropriate, playful, and inquiry-based instructional strategies to support children's learning across grades to complement existing standards (California Department of Education, 2023a).

[3] The DRDP is a formative assessment instrument developed by CDE for young children and their families to be used to inform instruction and program development (California Department of Education, 2015).

Research Methods

For the past 3 years, PACE has been working with a group of 17 districts in two ongoing communities of practice led by California Education Partners (CEP), which are focused on PK–3 coherence in math and literacy. PACE has observed three annual convenings and has conducted interviews each year with team members in each district to understand better how district offices can support creating a coherent PK/TK–3 system. The analysis included in this report is supported by data collected throughout the 2022–23 school year within these two communities of practice, including a total of 51 interviews (46 with district and school administrators and teachers and 5 with CEP staff) as well as 72 hours of observation. Of these interviews, 23 were conducted across the five districts highlighted in this report. This analysis also draws on publicly available data for enrollment and achievement in California schools. The learnings from these observations and interviews provided the basis for identifying the promising practices highlighted in this report.

Promising Practices

Coordinate Across Providers Within the Mixed-Delivery Model to Provide Universal Access and Vertically Align PK and TK Offerings

The most recently available data from the U.S. Census Bureau show that roughly half (52 percent) of California children aged 3–5 are enrolled in preschool or kindergarten (Population Reference Bureau, 2021). One important goal of the recent investment in UTK is to increase the overall availability of educational programs in early childhood in the state. Absent cooperation between school districts offering TK and other local providers, however, it could be challenging for families to navigate among providers to find the options that work best for their children (e.g., programs that are full or half day, with or without extended care, located conveniently with providers that speak the home language). The following are examples from two districts of the types of partnerships—the first with a single community partner and the second within a collaboration of multiple regional partners—that support a coordinated system of mixed-delivery options for PK and TK in their communities. Although these descriptions of collaboration offer promise, it is noteworthy that legislation and the state Education Code do not charge any specific organization with facilitating collaboration. In both cases, an organization outside the school district played an important role in funding or catalyzing cross-organizational collaboration.

San Rafael City Schools (SRCS) has a strong local partnership with Community Action Marin (CAM), building a coherent mixed-delivery model that has allowed the district to expand TK seats and has provided expanded full-day PK and TK opportunities for families.

With funding from the Marin Community Foundation, SRCS has had a long-term partnership with CAM, a local nonprofit social service agency focused on meeting the "whole family" needs of low-income residents in Marin County. The district offers Head Start and CSPPs in higher poverty neighborhoods of San Rafael. Prior to UTK, the district ran two CSPPs on site in two of its elementary schools, and CAM ran a PK located near the third; all three served high-poverty communities. The district also ran four full-day TK classes to serve students who missed the age cutoff for kindergarten by only a few months.

With the advent of UTK, SRCS decided to eliminate its CSPP program and focus instead on a major expansion of TK in the district. The district made this decision after analyzing the population of students who attended their CSPP and realizing that more than 90 percent of those students could be served through full-day TK. The district felt it would be better able to provide a quality early learning experience if it focused all its efforts on a single program for 4-year-olds. Additionally, SRCS was able to extend daily coverage to include afterschool care through California's ELO-P grant.

The district is proud of its rapid expansion of full-day TK with optional, subsidized aftercare (for students who meet ELO-P guidelines) because it makes the program more desirable for working families. One district administrator explained:

> *We are the only kindergarten [in the county] that has a full day where they go the same length as first through fifth, and our TK is the same thing. The state preschools we had were half days. So we were actually able to serve our kids longer in this TK model. And then through [state expanded learning grants], provide afterschool programs, which we couldn't do through our state preschool.*

In many communities across the state, the advent of TK has created tensions with existing PK providers who stand to lose a share of their customers. In San Rafael, this has been somewhat mitigated by the long-term partnership, which fostered a sense of shared commitment and responsibility for early childhood education across the organizations and created avenues for learning and information sharing. A district leader explained:

> *And so our partnership with CAM, where we got to was, "How can we continue to partner to serve our kids? … [T]he reality is state preschools and Head Starts have … waiting lists. So does every private preschool out there. So while there was this huge fear that TK was going to come in, and we're going to take all your business and your money, you still have a waiting list at all of your schools. What is happening is they're having to get a little bit younger [students] as we expand.*

Another benefit to the close partnership between San Rafael and CAM is that the CAM director and the SRCS director of elementary education work in collaboration on vertical articulation in PK–3, developing annual professional development and determining cross-system needs. For example, the organizations developed a formal process of "handing off" students from CAM's and the district's PK into the kindergarten, which includes sharing DRDP assessment results and information about the supports that students and families were receiving in PK. Additionally, in 2022–23 CAM teachers were invited to join district teachers in early education training.

Finally, as their ongoing collaboration helped SRCS understand CAM's concern about its TK expansion, the district promised not to "poach" (i.e., recruit) experienced early educators from CAM, even though it recognizes the value those educators could bring to the district. The partnership enables these organizations to serve more of the community's younger learners, provides continuity in students' educational experiences as they transition from PK to TK to kindergarten, and helps both organizations navigate a major transition with sensitivity for the other's strengths, needs, and concerns.

Santa Paula Unified School District (SPUSD) coordinates with regional early education stakeholders to provide universal access to PK and TK programs that are aligned with community needs and to develop shared practices for high-quality implementation of UPK and UTK.

SPUSD is part of an early education coalition endeavoring to provide access to universal PK educational opportunities across Ventura County in response to a census audit of the county that determined that between 300 and 400 eligible students were not accessing any form of PK service. The early education coalition consists of community partners, including The Isabella Project[4] (which conducted the initial audit), the Mexican American Opportunity Foundation (MAOF),[5] the education and child development services lead from the Ventura County Office of Education (COE), leadership representatives from Head Start and First Five, representatives from local community colleges,[6] and SPUSD leadership, including the superintendent and the director of early childhood and elementary schools.

In response to the county audit, the district received funding to create an additional state preschool to provide more PK seats and work in conjunction with the countywide coalition to coordinate services across providers. Each provider offers unique opportunities that meet the

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[4] The Isabella Project (vccf.org/initiatives/early-childhood-education) is an initiative funded by the Ventura County Community Foundation with the goal of providing high-quality education to all 3- and 4-year-olds in Santa Paula (Ventura County Community Foundation, 2021).

[5] MAOF (maof.org) uses a multigenerational approach to uplift the whole family, providing social services for infants through seniors across four pillars: early child education services, senior services, community development services, and community partnership services.

[6] Representatives include staff from the teaching colleges at Oxnard, Ventura, and Channel Islands community colleges who contribute professional development and classroom staffing support to teachers in the community across all grade levels, including PK–3.

variety of needs of students and families in Santa Paula (e.g., length of program, months the programs are active, income qualification, dual-language support, comprehensive family support including food and health). The only way to meet this wide range of needs is to coordinate across all providers. To this end, the coalition meets several times throughout the year to align services and help families identify the early learning opportunities that meet their specific needs. This coalition enables the agencies to cooperate on best serving the region's communities, as one district leader shared:

> We never want this to be seen as competition, that we're fighting over the same students or families or anything else, because we may provide something that others cannot and vice versa. … It's really about building those bridges to be, again, not in competition but in collaboration with each other to help each other out.

Working as a coalition to serve all students has enabled partners to leverage one another's strengths rather than waste limited resources on duplicated efforts. For example, 30 percent of SPUSD's elementary students are classified as English learners. The Isabella Project has strong ties with traditionally underrepresented communities and can advertise PK and TK options to families that historically have not accessed those early education services. Many students from these communities are multilingual learners and need English language development support in the early grades, so SPUSD identified a need to build teacher capacity to support these students better. In response, the district partnered with community colleges to provide additional training for teachers (across coalition partners) from PK through fifth grade, developing a pipeline of teachers and a pool of available student teachers with the skills to support such students, beginning in PK and TK.

PK and TK providers now conduct the DRDP, which is required in state-funded PK but not in TK or beyond, with their students in Santa Paula's CSPP, Head Start, and MAOF programs. These data are shared with kindergarten teachers so that the students' learning can be sustained and not repeated. Communication within the coalition has enabled teachers to build on students' learning and has facilitated the sharing of best practices that support integration of PK and TK with the existing K–12 system and across providers. Creating an aligned vertical continuum of expectations for students is the next goal that the early childhood coalition has for ensuring high-quality support for their youngest students. The next section describes another district's efforts to do precisely that.

Establish Clear and Aligned Expectations for PK–3 Standards and Instruction Across Providers and School Sites

A shared understanding of expectations, instruction, and curricula is critical to providing a high-quality experience for students, so students arrive in each grade level prepared, and teachers know how best to sustain their learning progress. Currently, students can experience a wide range of unaligned learning expectations across classrooms, impeding teachers' abilities to build on

the learning that occurred in PK and/or TK throughout the early grades. Given that students are entering the PK–3 continuum with a wide range of abilities, it is essential that districts help teachers develop and internalize these vertically aligned expectations so that teachers can build on the learning acceleration that students experience in PK and TK while also helping students who did not have the same experiences work towards proficiency. Absent a coherent learning progression wherein developmental expectations for students build off learning in prior grades, students receive redundant instruction, and the initial learning acceleration from preschool/TK can slow over time (Stein & Stipek, 2022). State-level resources and expectations are forthcoming but have yet to be released, and districts cannot afford to wait for those documents given that the systems for serving PK and TK are forming and solidifying now. In this section, we examine how one district has established aligned expectations in PK–3 around math instruction and has coordinated with its COE to ensure coherent professional learning for teachers around those expectations.

Arvin Union School District (AUSD) aligned expectations for math learning progressions in PK–3, including a vision of effective instruction, so that students and teachers receive coherent, aligned classroom support, whether through the district, the county, or outside support providers.

AUSD created a vertically aligned set of expectations for PK–3 math instruction and is coordinating supports across two technical assistance providers to develop systems for aligned professional development for teachers to achieve those expectations. The district identified the creation of aligned expectations for PK–3 math instruction as a priority in its Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) and named district support provider CEP as its partner in the work. This articulation in AUSD's LCAP explicitly aligned the support that Arvin was receiving from CEP and the COE—which oversees the LCAP process—with the support that district coaches were giving their teachers around PK–3 math instruction.

The district began developing a coherent system of math instruction with CEP for PK–3 two years ago. The process of integrating the instructional strategies identified through the work with CEP began with a small team that had representatives from multiple school sites and each grade level within the PK–3 continuum. As the district attempted to scale the work, though, it recognized inconsistencies and variation in implementation across grade levels and school sites as well as between the district and county coaches who both were supporting math instruction but were emphasizing different practices, pacing, and math targets. One principal described the identification of these inconsistencies "[as a] team made up of teachers, TOSAs [Teachers on Special Assignment], and coaches; we found that there was a gap in communication, and we found that there was also a gap in vertical alignment." This situation is common in many districts, where PK—if the district offered it—is housed in an early education department separated from the K–12 system, and TK is not integrated with K–12 support systems. In the case of AUSD, this lack of integration meant that district and county resources that were aimed at supporting teachers' early grade math instruction were not communicating with one another as frequently or as deeply as needed to be aligned and effective.

AUSD then incorporated the support provided by its COE coaches into the professional learning opportunities that are available to teachers in the district. AUSD leans heavily on teacher leaders to lead formal professional development, which is accompanied by in-class coaching to support teachers with implementing new practices. District and county coaches work together to provide follow-up support and reemphasize the district's vision for vertical alignment from PK through third grade, which has since expanded to include Grades 4–8 at sites serving those grade levels. This additional support includes coaches supporting weekly grade-level professional learning community meetings and monthly walkthroughs focused on specific instructional strategies at each school site. District and school administrators, county and/or district coaches, and teachers from across the district participate as observers, and host teachers are given a form prior to the observation that specifies the focus of each walkthrough. All coaching and walkthroughs are aligned to district goals and are responsive to instructional needs as identified through student formative assessment data. AUSD also established the district's Early Learning Center to foster developmentally appropriate learning opportunities across PK–3 (e.g., aligning the early learning foundations with Arvin's existing K–12 curricula) and to provide professional development around the district vision. The district has found this effort to be hugely beneficial as part of a systemic approach that aligns policies and processes to improve math instruction, strengthening coherence across grade levels as well as across the three elementary school sites in the district.

Monitor PK–3 Student Learning and Progress to Guide Decision-Making

There are three very important purposes for which we need data on student learning to ensure high-quality education: (a) creating transparency with the community and broader public about key aspects of student and district performance, (b) enabling districts to monitor students' progress, and (c) supporting high-quality instruction. Under current California policy, no data about district performance are reported for grades lower than third grade on the state Dashboard. An earlier PACE brief (Gallagher, 2023) focusing on state policy around UTK rollout made recommendations for how the state could improve transparency in the early grades (the first purpose). Here we illustrate how one district is developing a more robust data-use system that enables the district to monitor student progress and support high-quality instruction. This district system allows the district to see student progress on the way to proficiency by third grade as well as to examine whether current instruction is maintaining the acceleration experienced by students who attend TK.

Monterey Peninsula Unified School District (MPUSD) established systems to monitor student growth throughout all student grades (not simply those required for the state Dashboard) to determine whether students are realizing and sustaining the benefits of additional early years of instruction from TK and, in some cases, PK.

As part of its LCAP in 2019, MPUSD established TK in every elementary school in the district for all 4-year-olds born before March 1 (a younger age than state guidelines at the time) as a major strategy for supporting early learning. The Board of Education decided to spend LCAP on TK with the goal of improving student performance in elementary school and beyond. The district worked on vertically aligning expectations for instruction and student learning in its CSPP, TK, and kindergarten programs, and it supported collaboration between PK and TK around instructional strategies.

The Board and district leaders use a range of locally administered assessments to monitor student performance, starting in TK. MPUSD administered the DRDP in PK, in TK and—for selected domains—in the fall of kindergarten as well (with support from WestEd). These assessments helped the district learn that it was serving students who scored lower on self-regulation and kindergarten preparedness than any other district in the county, which reinforced its emphasis on expanding access to high-quality early learning. MPUSD also administered a kindergarten readiness assessment and the i-Ready[7] starting in kindergarten. These assessments in PK, TK, and the fall of kindergarten proved crucial because they gave the district a clear picture of students' baseline skills at the beginning of kindergarten, regardless of which part of the mixed-delivery system students had attended.

Monitoring these assessment data revealed that students who attended the district's TK entered kindergarten substantially more prepared than those who did not; i-Ready proficiency rates were more than 10 percent higher for students who had been in TK. Tracking student performance over the years showed that MPUSD was not sustaining the academic benefits that students gained from their participation in TK. By third grade, the performance of students who had been in TK was no longer different from those who did not participate in TK. A district leader reflected:

> *[A]lthough our work around providing a really high-quality early learning experience was the center of our work [under the LCAP] around access and support, and … we were putting them on a trajectory of potentially overcoming barriers in their life and in the system, baked within our own system, we were actually taking them off that accelerated track.*

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[7] i-Ready is an online assessment tool for monitoring student progress from Grades K to 8 in mathematics and reading.

These data gave district leaders a view into both the successes (stronger performance entering kindergarten for those who had done TK) and the limits (fade-out of the benefits of TK) of their current early childhood offerings. As a result of these insights, MPUSD joined two collaboratives (one focused on mathematics and the other on literacy) with CEP to improve the coherence of its programs from preschool through third grade. That work is ongoing.

MPUSD reports that changing mindsets around assessments to see them in an asset-based way (i.e., what does this assessment show students *can* do?) is an important part of this work with CEP. That work speaks directly to the third purpose of assessment: supporting high-quality instruction. District leaders believe that one possible cause of the slowed academic growth for students who had attended TK is that teachers were not building on the more advanced skills of students who had been in TK (or others who were similarly exceeding performance expectations). They are convening teachers for vertical conversations about what students know and can do and how to collect evidence of student learning from instruction. A district leader explained:

> *Teachers are collecting evidence of student learning, and they're having conversations about what they think that students know and why they think students might be making the decisions [about how to solve open-ended mathematical tasks] that they're making. ... Once you know what students can do, then how do you make adjustments to the way that you create conditions for learning in a way that does support them?*

Building capacity for talking about student learning across grades has meant that teachers can provide options for advancement of student learning based on what students actually know and can do instead of rigidly applying expectations of grade-based learning progression. As a district leader explained, this has prompted kindergarten teachers to offer more rigorous options for students instead of "just turning ... [to your] teacher's edition [and] saying, 'OK, well, we need to start from one through ten, because that's what we're supposed to do in kindergarten.'"

MPUSD is still working to improve its data use districtwide, including collaborating with CEP to build a district dashboard to make basic trend analyses easier. Nonetheless, this example illustrates important ways that districts can use data they are already collecting locally to monitor their systems (using whatever standardized assessments they administer) and to support improved learning opportunities for students (using a range of evidence of student learning from instructional artifacts, common formative assessments, and standardized tests).

Develop a Coherent Professional Learning System That Builds Capacity for High-Quality Teaching and Learning in the Early Grades

Integration of TK into the existing continuum of K–12 is difficult for many reasons, including misaligned pedagogy, a lack of shared expectations around student development and

learning, and the prior isolation (communicative, physical, and/or organizational) of TK and PK from other early grade teachers. To build a coherent system that ensures high-quality teaching and learning, PK and TK teachers must be included in the district's expectations around common instructional practices and supported in the same way as K–12 teachers (Koppich & Stipek, 2020). In this section, we highlight the work of a district office that has developed systems that include TK classrooms in districtwide adult capacity building to realize district expectations for teaching and learning.

Dinuba Unified School District (DUSD) reinforces shared expectations for literacy instruction using systems that consistently monitor student outcomes and instructional practices, which in turn enable the district to provide responsive professional development for all teachers beginning in TK.

DUSD has worked to establish a cohesive professional learning system aimed at enhancing the capacity of its educators to deliver high-quality teaching and learning experiences in English language arts (ELA). The district is committed to promoting vertical instructional alignment, which ensures that students' progress from grade to grade builds on their prior knowledge rather than revisiting what they have already mastered. One district coach explained:

We had seen some of our TK students that were already coming in ahead, and they end up in a kindergarten classroom, which starts them back at the beginning, instead of meeting them where they're at and taking them further. So that's been the other side of the conversation, too: How do we build our teacher capacity to understand [what] these kids need to continue?

As part of this process, the district aims to empower its teachers to meet students at their unique learning levels and propel them forward. This effectively eliminates unnecessary repetition of instruction from one grade level to another, optimizing educational outcomes beginning in TK while also increasing opportunities to identify student needs and intervene more rapidly.

At the heart of this initiative is the aligned expectation of what high-quality ELA teaching and learning looks like from TK through sixth grade, which is collectively known as the "Dinuba Way." Three interconnected systems provide support for realizing these shared expectations: (a) eight research-based, high-leverage instructional practices,[8] (b) regular instructional implementation and student learning outcome monitoring to identify needed areas of growth, and (c) targeted professional development around high-leverage instructional practices that are aligned to the district's shared expectations for ELA instruction (Figure 1).

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[8] DUSD identified eight practices that need to be in place to provide comprehensive literacy across all grades, including TK: read aloud, shared reading, guided and small-group instruction, independent reading, writing, word work, English language development, and language conventions.

Figure 1. District Systems That Reinforce Shared Expectations for High-Quality Teaching and Learning
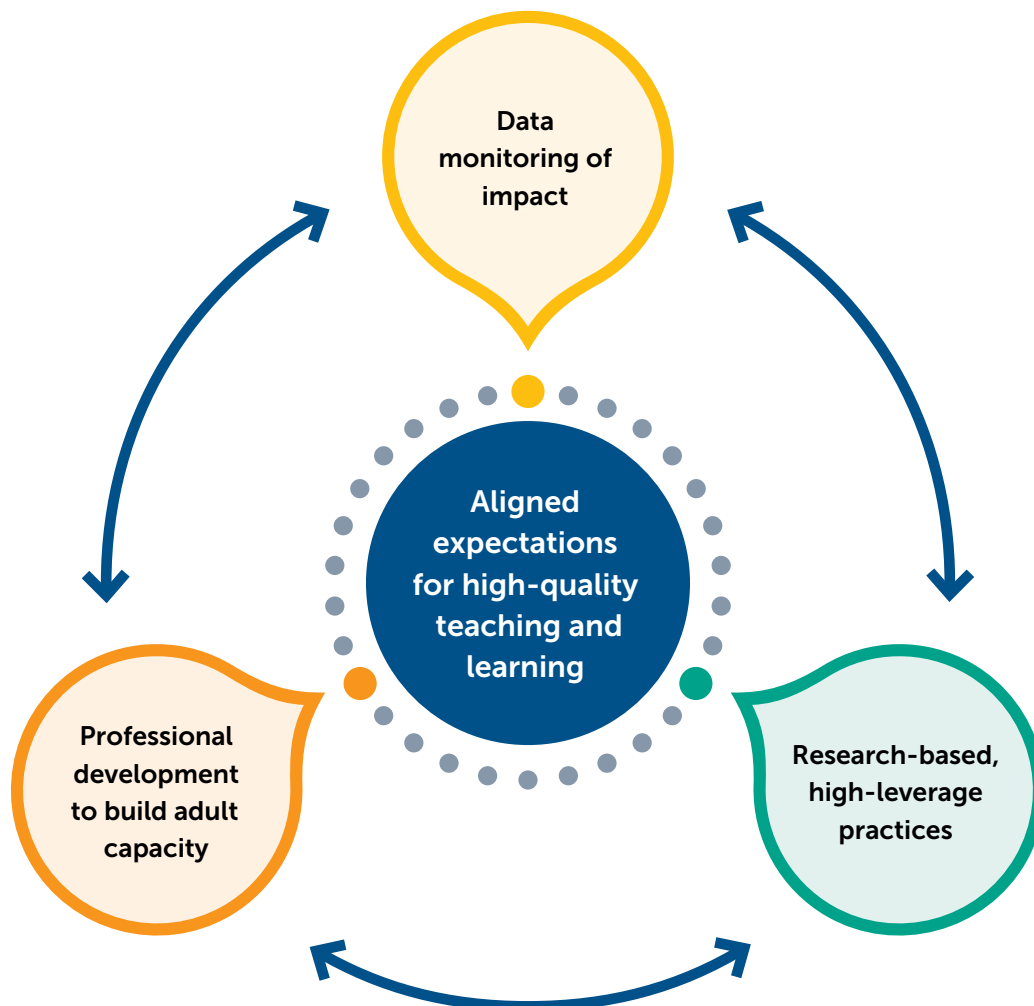
The district's monitoring structures inform DUSD's professional development systems, which are designed to provide targeted feedback and capacity-building opportunities for teachers, including those in TK. The district offers three primary types of capacity-building support: professional development sessions, learning walks, and coaching with in-class support (Table 1).

The district's monitoring system is designed to pinpoint the pedagogical practices in which teachers require additional capacity-building support. This system has been thoughtfully integrated into the district's regular communication structures, including district leadership meetings, site-level discussions, grade-level professional learning communities, and learning walks (see Table 1).

These regular data-analysis meetings enable stakeholders from the district office, school sites, and grade-level teams to align their efforts, identify areas of instructional improvement based on evidence, and orchestrate a coordinated response to the evolving needs of teachers and students.

Table 1. Reciprocal Relationship of Monitoring and Professional Development Systems in DUSD

Monitoring impact on teaching and learning	Professional development to build adult capacity
District leadership chats occur three to four times a year and involve district leadership, school administration, and district and school-based coaches/interventionists examining districtwide data trends, including student outcomes and professional development efficacy.	**Professional development sessions** introduce and demonstrate instructional practices intended to address gaps identified in monitoring conversations.
School-level data chats occur after assessment periods close and involve representatives from the district data chats as well as the principal, learning director, and coach for school-level analysis outlining next steps for professional development.	**In-class coaching from district, school, and/or external technical assistance providers** gives teachers further opportunities to practice and receive feedback on instructional strategies. Professional development sessions provided by school, district, or technical assistance providers are followed up with coaching and feedback with individual teachers or in grade-level professional learning community meetings.
Grade-level professional learning community meetings occur weekly (except for TK, which meets monthly). Teachers are expected to bring evidence of student learning. These can be attended by coaches and site administrators.	
Learning walks are used to position the principals as learners rather than evaluators. District leaders accompany site principals to build capacity with the desired instructional practices and help district leaders identify districtwide implementation trends to support continuous improvement and communication loops.	

The district's systems for monitoring and building adult capacity inform one another and allow district leaders to identify which high-leverage practices need to be supported as well as to determine the efficacy of professional development. This enables DUSD to adjust resources strategically and reinforce instructional expectations based on current data as opposed to one-off professional development opportunities that teachers typically experience. The district has extended its efforts to ensure that external support providers also align with the vision and needs, fostering a unified approach to capacity building. While DUSD acknowledges that this work is ongoing, district leaders are confident that their systematic approach will continue to drive improvement and coherence across their TK–6 classrooms.

District Practice Recommendations

Here we present recommendations, as evidenced by the district vignettes in this report, for other districts and the organizations that support them whose members are seeking to create a coherent system that enables high-quality UPK/UTK teaching and learning:

- **Coordinate with partners to ensure universal PK/TK access and build consistency in high-quality teaching and learning.** The district office is in a position to consider how multiple service providers can provide different PK/TK options for learning that fit a variety of community needs, including time of service (part day, all day, or extended day); specialization around particular grade levels, such as in SRCS; and/or nurturing of differences in program features (e.g., language and/or cultural supports, length of day) to meet varied family needs, such as in SPUSD. Districts can also coordinate with partners to establish common expectations around PK/TK, develop transition supports as students move into the district, and offer common professional development across organizations. Districts are positioned well to lead this coordination because they are the only providers that will ultimately support nearly all students once they enter kindergarten, but in some instances other community organizations may have already begun this work and their expertise can be leveraged (e.g., districts working with established community partners to improve communication with traditionally underserved communities to provide knowledge of and access to available seats). Districts can also consider the use of ELO-P funds to increase the number of available full-day TK and kindergarten seats.
- **Establish and align around common expectations throughout the district and across partners for what high-quality instruction looks like; communicate those expectations to support providers to ensure coherence for teachers and students.** This includes vertical alignment for PK/TK through third grade as well as horizontal alignment across grade levels, school sites, and other providers. Districts are again ideally positioned to convene all support providers (including COEs and technical assistance providers) that contract with them around teaching and learning to articulate and reinforce this shared vision so that teachers and schools receive aligned coaching and support. This work can also include coordination with local teacher colleges and credentialing agencies, as in SPUSD. These expectations should be conveyed to other organizations supporting district PK and TK implementation, including COEs and any other support providers, to ensure that all parties are working in the same direction. Districts can consider using their LCAPs to articulate this type of alignment across PK–3 supports and providers.

- **Develop a system to examine data regularly, beginning in PK and TK and going through third grade, which is tightly tied to the expectations around student learning trajectories and high-quality instruction.** These data should include both student outcome data and adult capacity to implement high-quality instructional practices. This information can be examined at the individual classroom, grade, school, and district levels to make decisions about how best to deploy resources that support instruction and build teacher capacity.

- **Create a system to build adult capacity within the district that provides multiple opportunities to develop and reinforce shared expectations of what high-quality teaching and learning look like from PK through third grade.** Capacity-building systems must align with an annual schedule of examining student data at the district and school levels to respond to students', teachers', and schools' needs. These regular periods of data analysis inform subsequent training, coaching, and resource deployment for professional development. Once areas of need are identified, districts must provide multiple opportunities for teachers to give and receive feedback on the practices they are integrating into their instruction alongside district and school administrators and instructional coaches. Such collaborative capacity-building systems reinforce a shared understanding of what high-quality teaching and learning looks like. Furthermore, these systems help districts strategically meet the needs of the adults and students rather than pursuing multiple—and potentially conflicting—capacity-building opportunities.

Conclusion

This report has identified promising practices within districts' control that can support increased alignment within their own systems and with other providers in the mixed-delivery model as they implement UPK and UTK. Developing coherent systems requires coordinating with external partners to increase access and align offerings across the mixed-delivery model; ensuring that teachers have a deep understanding of state standards not only in their grade level but also in adjacent grades; developing strong skills at implementing instructional practices that will help all students meet those standards; and implementing systems to monitor progress and create a professional development system that builds capacity for high-quality teaching and learning in these grades. The rollout of UTK positions the district office at the center of the existing mixed-delivery model, as the district will ultimately be receiving students a year earlier in TK. Therefore it is critical that districts proactively build coherence during the early years of the UTK rollout so that students capitalize on the benefits provided by additional years of school. These promising practices offer examples of systems that districts can leverage to realize the vision of UPK and UTK in California.

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