

RESEARCH BRIEF

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A Research Brief
from the *Study of
California's Transitional
Kindergarten Program*

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Transitional Kindergarten in California

Initial Findings from the First Year of Implementation

Introduction

Research suggests that providing high-quality early education experiences for young learners can support positive outcomes for these children, including higher achievement test scores¹ and even higher graduation rates.² Transitional kindergarten (TK) aims to provide an additional year of early education to California's youngest students to ensure that they obtain the necessary preparation to succeed in school. In the fall of 2012, districts began the rollout of TK by moving back the kindergarten entry age by one month and offering TK to children who would turn five between November 2 and December 2, 2012.

With support from the Heising-Simons Foundation and The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) is conducting a statewide *Study of California's Transitional Kindergarten Program* to describe the program as it is being implemented in school districts across California in the 2012–13 school year. This research brief—the first in a series highlighting findings from the study—focuses on describing the landscape of California's TK program in its first year of implementation.

Specifically, we address the following questions:

1. How many districts provided TK in 2012–13?
2. How many students were served?
3. What birthday cutoff did districts use?
4. When did districts begin offering TK?
5. How were TK classrooms structured?

In 2010, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the Kindergarten Readiness Act (SB 1381) into law. The law changed the kindergarten entry cutoff so that children must turn five by September 1 (instead of December 2) to enter kindergarten. It phases in the new age requirement by moving the cutoff date back one month each year for three years beginning in the 2012–13 school year. SB 1381 also established a new grade level—transitional kindergarten (TK)—which is the first year of a two-year kindergarten experience for students who turn five between September 2 and December 2. The new grade level is to be taught by credentialed teachers using a modified kindergarten curriculum that is developmentally appropriate. When fully implemented, TK is intended to provide an additional year of early education for these children, with the goal of promoting their success in school.

¹ Campbell, F. A., & Ramey, C. T. (1994). Effects of early intervention on intellectual and academic achievement: A follow-up study of children from low-income families. *Child Development*, 65(2), 684–698

² Schweinhart, L. J., Montie, J., Xiang, Z., Barnett, W. S., Belfield, C. R., & Nores, M. (2005). *Lifetime effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 40*. Ypsilanti: High/Scope Press.

Methodology

As a first step in documenting the implementation of TK in the state, AIR surveyed administrators in all California districts with kindergarten enrollment (n=868). The aims of this short survey were to determine how many districts were implementing TK and how many students were being served, and to gather some basic information about how districts were implementing this new program. Surveys were administered electronically.

After the survey was closed, the research team conducted intensive follow-up to obtain responses from a random subsample of non-respondents. These responses were used to create survey weights that correct for non-response bias. Therefore, the weighted analyses presented in this research brief are representative of the state. The survey had a final response rate of 72 percent (n=629).

Transitional Kindergarten in California Districts

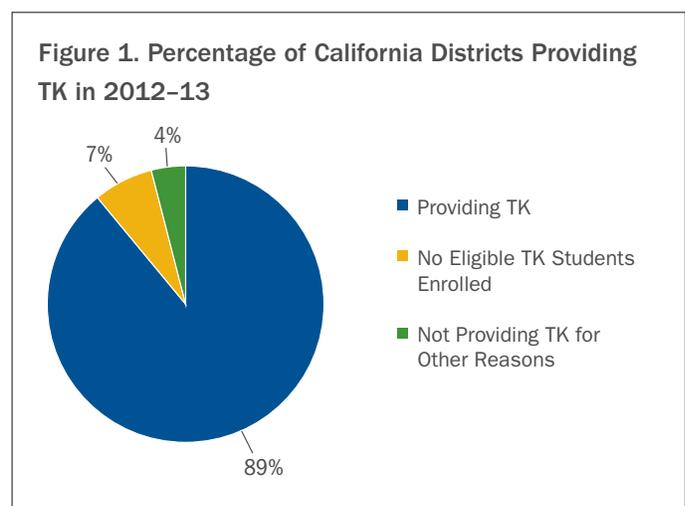
How many districts provided transitional kindergarten in 2012–13?

Most of the districts that serve kindergarten students across the state reported providing transitional kindergarten to students in 2012–13. Overall, 89 percent of districts reported that they offered TK this year. An additional 7 percent of districts indicated there were no students eligible for TK or no families interested in enrolling their eligible child in TK and therefore did not offer the program. Data from the California Department of Education (CDE) on kindergarten enrollment from previous years for these districts revealed very small enrollment numbers overall, confirming that it is very plausible for these districts to have had no TK-eligible students enroll in 2012–13.³

The remaining 4 percent of districts cited a variety of reasons for not implementing TK this year. Some of these respondents indicated that their district was too small or had too few (e.g., one or two) TK-eligible students to warrant establishing a TK program; eligible students were enrolled in kindergarten instead. For example, one district offered this explanation: “We only have one student who qualifies for TK, and he was determined to be fully ready for kindergarten.” Another cited the small size of the district and said, “We will enroll students in the traditional [kindergarten] classroom and provide additional service when needed.”

Other non-implementing districts cited a lack of funding or resources or the uncertainty around funding for the program. For example, when asked why the district was not providing TK, one respondent cited “funding and lack of specific and appropriate instructional materials” as the chief concerns. A basic aid district (whose base funding comes entirely from local property taxes and which does not receive per-pupil funding from the state) indicated that the district had “no space, no additional funding coming to the district” to support implementation.

Finally, a few districts also expressed some confusion about the requirements for the program. For example, an administrator from one small district that did not implement TK commented, “We only have one student that is eligible, and at the time, our understanding was that we had to provide a TK class. We have come to understand that we can enroll TK students in an existing kindergarten class, which is our intention in the 2013–2014 school year.”

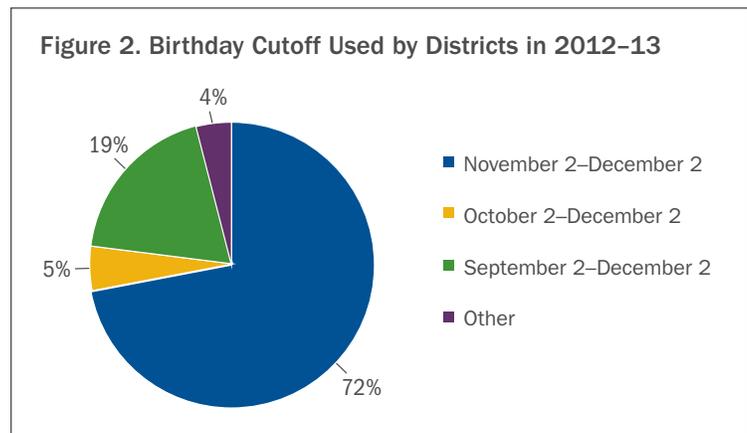


³ Based on CDE enrollment data for the 2011–12 school year, we estimate that these districts would have had an average of 1.5 TK-eligible students in 2012–13 had enrollment been stable from year to year; however, analyses of kindergarten enrollment trend data indicate that enrollment can vary significantly year to year in small, rural counties. Thus it is possible that there were no TK-eligible students in these districts, or the families of the few students who were eligible chose not to enroll their child in TK in 2012–2013.

Overall, most of the districts reporting not serving students in TK were small (84 percent) and/or rural (91 percent). In fact, the 89 percent of districts offering TK serve 96 percent of the state’s kindergarten population, so only a very small percentage of students eligible for TK are located in districts that were not yet implementing the program.

What birthday cutoff did districts use?

One strategy allowed under the law for addressing the issue of having a small number of students with November birthdays is to expand the eligibility window to include October and even September birthdays as well (thereby accelerating implementation of the program). While the majority (72 percent) of districts providing TK in 2012–13 reported serving only students who would turn five between November 2 and December 2 in TK, 5 percent reported also serving students who turned five in October, and 19 percent said they included students with September birthdays too. The remaining districts reported that they used a different date



range or eligibility rules altogether, such as admitting students into TK with birthdays ranging from July 1 to December 31. Small districts were no more likely than larger districts to expand the age-eligibility window for TK, however.

How many students were served?

Because districts were not yet required to report separate TK and kindergarten enrollment numbers when reporting to the state in 2012–13, it is not possible to accurately report the total number of students being served in TK this year. However, based on enrollment figures reported by districts responding to our survey, we estimate that approximately 39,000 students were enrolled in transitional kindergarten in 2012–13.⁴

As a point of reference, using kindergarten enrollment data from 2011–12 and taking the proportion of students expected to have birthdays between November 2 and December 2 (approximately 1/12th of the kindergarten population), we estimate that approximately 41,500 children were eligible for TK during this first year of statewide implementation (2012–13) using the law’s birthday cutoff.⁵ However, because some districts offered TK to students outside the November 2 – December 2 birthday range, it is not possible to determine the proportion of eligible students being served using this as the total number eligible.

Instead, we estimated the number of eligible students *in each district*, based on individual districts’ enrollment policies, by applying the birthday cutoff dates reported by districts to the prior year’s kindergarten enrollment numbers.⁶ For example, if a district reported serving children with birthdays between October 2 and December 2 (approximately 2 out of 12 months of birthdays), we estimated the number of children eligible to be approximately 2/12th of the prior year’s kindergarten enrollment in that district (assuming the number of children eligible for kindergarten this year would be similar). We totaled these district estimates of eligible students and divided the total enrolled (reported by districts) by this number. Using this method, we estimate that approximately 70 percent of students who were age-eligible for TK according to local criteria were enrolled in TK in 2012–13.⁷

⁴ Some districts implementing TK did not provide information on the number of students enrolled, therefore we imputed the mean enrollment rates within survey strata for districts with missing information. The number of children enrolled was then estimated by multiplying the imputed enrollment rate by the number of children eligible according to district policy, as described in endnote 6.

⁵ We calculated this figure using 2011–12 enrollment data from CDE’s Dataquest (<http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>), adjusted to account for a small number of districts that did not respond to the Dataquest survey. This number excludes the small proportion (5–10 percent) of students whose families opt out of kindergarten, as it is not a compulsory grade in California. We assume these families would also opt out of TK, and thus the number eligible is limited to likely enrollees.

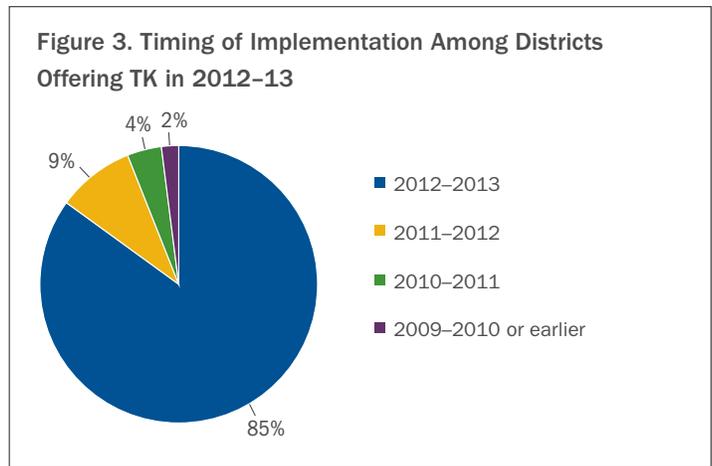
⁶ We estimated the number of children eligible for TK by taking a proportion of the previous year’s kindergarten enrollment in accordance with local policy: 1/12th for districts with a November 1 cutoff, 2/12th for districts with an October 1 cutoff, and 3/12th for districts with a September 1 cutoff. If districts did not report their birthdate cutoff, we assumed a November 1 cutoff in accordance with SB1381.

⁷ The numerator and denominator used to calculate the statewide enrollment rate are both estimates. See endnotes 4 and 6 for details.

Thus it appears that although the vast majority of eligible students reside in districts that are offering TK, not all TK-eligible students are being enrolled in the program. Some of these TK-eligible students may be enrolled in kindergarten instead of TK. This may be especially true in districts that offered TK to students with September and October birthdays – those still technically eligible by state law to enroll in kindergarten.⁸ However, some parents may be opting out of TK or may not yet be aware of the program. For example, one district reported, “There was only one parent who wanted to enroll [her child in TK], and she ended up [taking her child] back to preschool.”

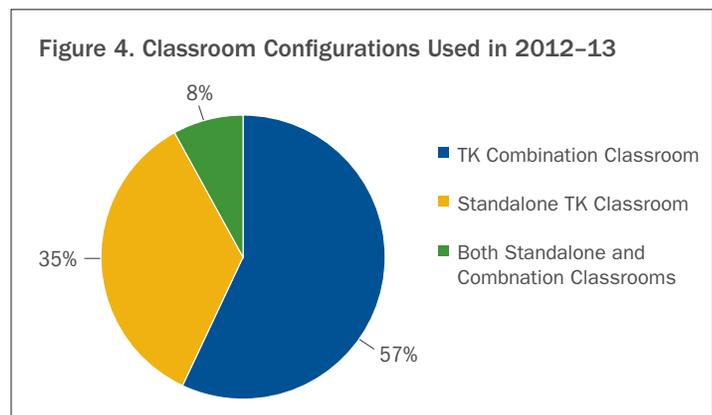
When did districts begin offering transitional kindergarten?

The majority of districts in California (85 percent) reported first offering TK in the 2012–13 school year. The remaining 15 percent implemented the program early—some in anticipation of the new law, but others had offered transitional kindergarten or “young fives” programs for students eligible, but not quite ready, for kindergarten for years. About 6 percent of districts are in this category, first offering TK in 2010–11 (4 percent) or earlier (2 percent). An additional 9 percent began implementation in 2011–12 – one year earlier than required by law.

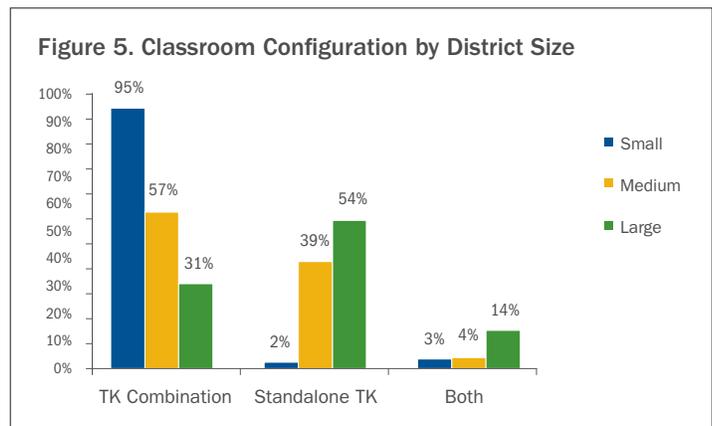


How were the classrooms structured?

Among districts providing TK in the 2012–13 school year, just over half (57 percent) reported serving TK students solely in combination classrooms, where TK students were combined with students from another grade (such as kindergarten). A total of 43 percent reported having standalone TK classrooms at one or more of their schools—35 percent reported having only standalone TK classrooms and 8 percent reported having both standalone and combination classrooms among their schools.



District size is associated with TK classroom configuration.⁹ The vast majority (95 percent) of small districts (those with 50 or fewer kindergartners) reported offering TK only in combination classrooms. In contrast, 54 percent of large school districts (those with more than 350 kindergartners) offered TK only in standalone classrooms, as shown in Figure 5.



⁸ Kindergarten enrollment counts from the CDE (which in 2012-13 included TK students as well) do not show a substantial decline from 2011-12 to 2012-13, suggesting that there are not large numbers of eligible children who are not enrolled in school at all.

⁹ Small, medium, and large districts were defined using a tertile split on kindergarten enrollment records from CDE for the 2011–12 school year. Small districts enrolled 50 or fewer kindergartners, medium-sized districts enrolled 51 to 350, and large districts enrolled more than 350 kindergartners.

Date of implementation is also associated with districts' choice of classroom configuration. Early adopters were more likely to offer standalone TK classrooms (65 percent) than districts that began offering TK during the 2012–13 school year (30 percent). Over the next two years, as more districts expand the age-eligibility window for TK and enrollment increases, it is likely that more districts will have the numbers to support standalone TK classrooms.

Summary and Conclusions

Through an analysis of data from a survey of all elementary and unified districts in California, this research brief provides an initial glimpse of transitional kindergarten in its first year of statewide implementation. Results indicate that despite the short timeframe for implementation, 89 percent of districts reported providing TK in 2012–13, and an additional 7 percent reported they had no students enroll. Most districts implementing TK (72 percent) reported serving students with birthdays between November 2 and December 2 as outlined in the law, while others expanded eligibility to include a broader age range. Districts implementing TK reportedly served approximately 39,000 TK students in 2012–13, representing approximately 70 percent of eligible students (based on local policy), suggesting there is some room to improve outreach to families. In addition, although a larger proportion of districts (57 percent) provided TK exclusively through combination classrooms, 43 percent reported having at least one school in the district with a standalone TK classroom.

Findings from the district survey also suggest variability in implementation. In particular, it appears that small and rural districts may confront special challenges due to their lower student populations. For example, small and rural districts were more likely to report that they were not able to offer the program in 2012–13. Additionally, while large districts were most likely to offer standalone TK classrooms, small districts with fewer students almost exclusively provided combination classrooms for their TK students. As with any statewide policy applied to a state as diverse as California, local variation is to be expected. Future research briefs based on this continuing study will explore this variation as we describe the implementation of TK in greater depth at the district, school, and classroom levels.

For more information about the Study of California's Transitional Kindergarten Program, please visit <http://tkstudy.airprojects.org/> or contact: Heather Quick, Study Director, hquick@air.org, 650-843-8130.

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About AIR

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