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California's Transitional Kindergarten Program: Report on the First Year of Implementation

Executive Summary

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In 2010, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the Kindergarten Readiness Act (Senate Bill [S.B.] 1381) into law. The law changed the date by which children must turn 5 to enter kindergarten from December 2 to September 1, phasing in the new age requirement by moving the cutoff date back one month per year for three years, beginning in fall 2012. S.B. 1381 also established a new grade level—transitional kindergarten (TK)—which is the first year of a two-year kindergarten experience for students born between September 2 and December 2. When fully implemented, TK is intended to provide an additional year of early education to this group of children, with the goal of promoting their school readiness.

Investigating the Implementation of TK in its First Year

With the support of the Heising-Simons Foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted an investigation of the planning and implementation of TK in the 2012–13 school year. The study addressed the following broad research questions:

1. What was the landscape of TK programs in California in the program’s first year?
2. How did districts and schools plan for, structure, and support their TK programs?
3. How was TK implemented at the classroom level, and how did TK differ from kindergarten?
4. Are districts using TK as an opportunity to build greater articulation between preschool and grades K–3? If so, how?
5. What were the challenges and lessons learned in planning for and implementing TK?

To address these questions and the complexities of the implementation of a statewide policy initiative, AIR conducted a mixed-methods study examining these issues at multiple levels of the system. Data collection strategies included surveys of district administrators (both a short-form census survey and a longer survey for a sample of districts), principals, and TK and kindergarten teachers; classroom observations; case study interviews; and parent focus groups.

This summary highlights key findings from the study.

Key Findings

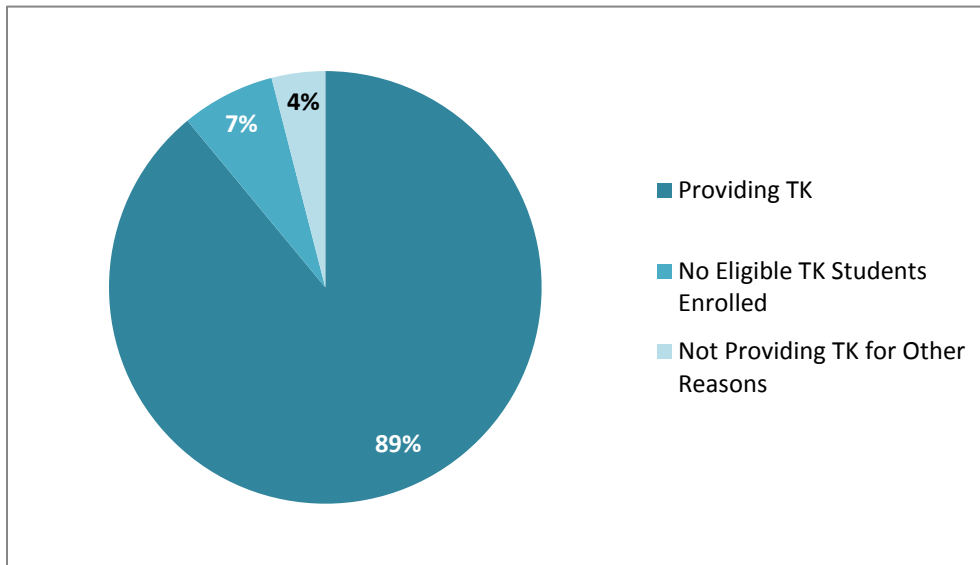
In the first year of transitional kindergarten implementation, California school districts overcame challenges and learned important lessons that can be applied in future years of the program.

Most School Districts Offered TK in 2012–13

Overall, 89 percent of districts reported, through a survey of administrators in all elementary and unified school districts conducted by AIR, that they offered TK in 2012–13. An additional 7 percent of districts indicated that no students were eligible for TK or no families were interested in enrolling their eligible child in TK, and therefore they did not offer the program (Exhibit A).

The 89 percent of districts offering TK served 96 percent of the state’s kindergarten population—so a very small percentage of students eligible for TK were located in districts that were not yet implementing the program. The majority of districts implemented TK for the first time in the 2012–13 school year, although approximately 15 percent initiated a TK or similar program prior to the statewide program becoming law. Overall, we estimate approximately 39,000 students were enrolled in TK in its first year of statewide implementation.

Exhibit A. Percentage of California Districts Providing TK in 2012–13



Source: Short-form district census survey (n = 629)

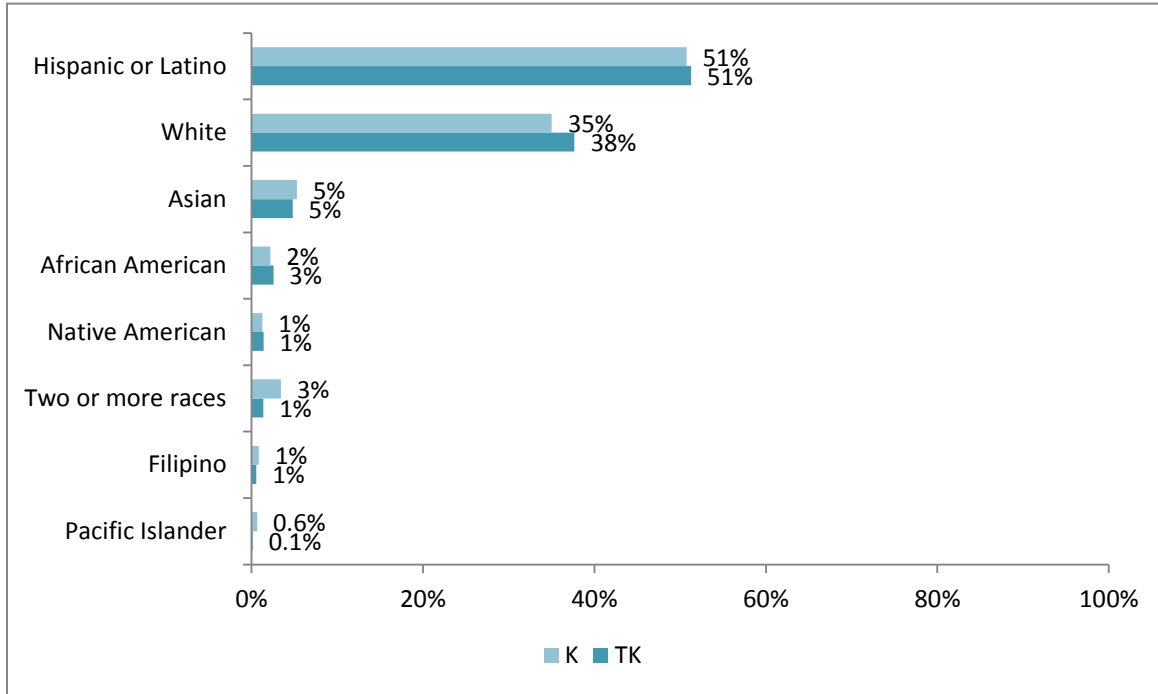
Students Enrolled in TK Mirror the Population

To determine whether particular groups of students were more or less likely to enroll in TK, we compared the demographic characteristics of students enrolled in TK with the demographic characteristics of the overall kindergarten population in those same districts.¹

TK students and kindergarten students appeared statistically similar in terms of gender, ethnicity, eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL), and English learner (EL) status (see Exhibits B and C).

¹ The district surveys provided figures for TK enrollment. District respondents were asked to report the total number of TK students in their districts, as well as the number of TK students by gender, EL status, FRPL eligibility, and race/ethnicity. Kindergarten figures for EL status and race/ethnicity come from kindergarten enrollment records from the California Department of Education (CDE) for the 2012–13 school year. FRPL eligibility is not available from CDE by grade level, and therefore kindergarten rates reflect the overall FRPL rate for the district. Analyses compare demographic characteristics for a district’s TK students with the characteristics of its kindergarten population overall (TK plus kindergarten).

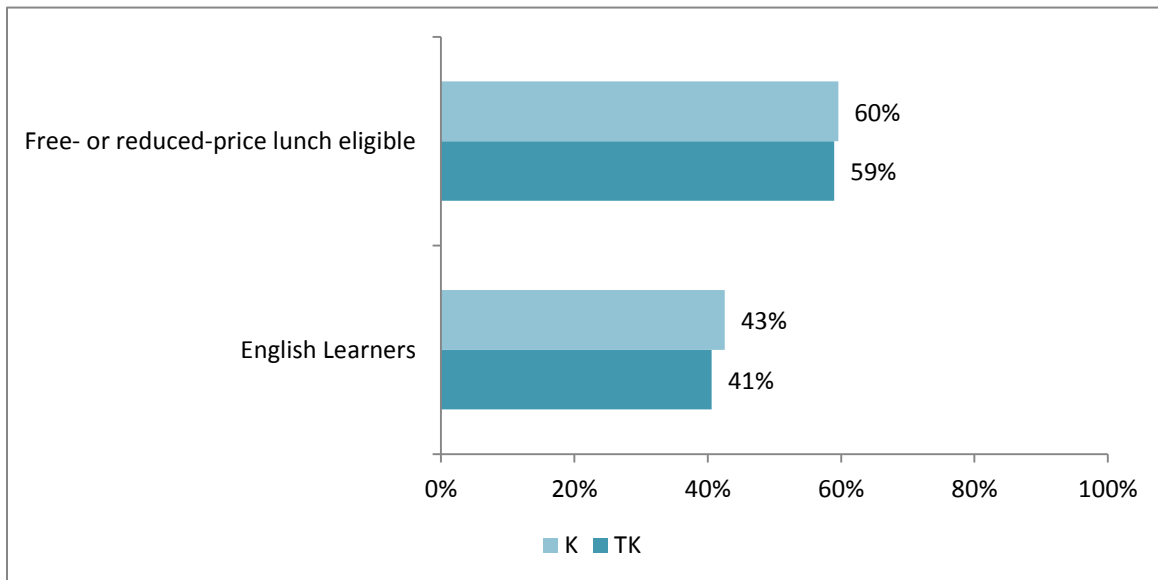
Exhibit B. Comparisons of TK and Kindergarten Enrollment Overall, by Race/Ethnicity, 2012–13 School Year



Note: Differences are not statistically significant unless noted.

Sources: In-depth district survey ($n = 75$), California Department of Education

Exhibit C. Comparisons of TK and Kindergarten Enrollment by FRPL Eligibility and EL Status, 2012–13 School Year



Note: Differences are not statistically significant unless noted.

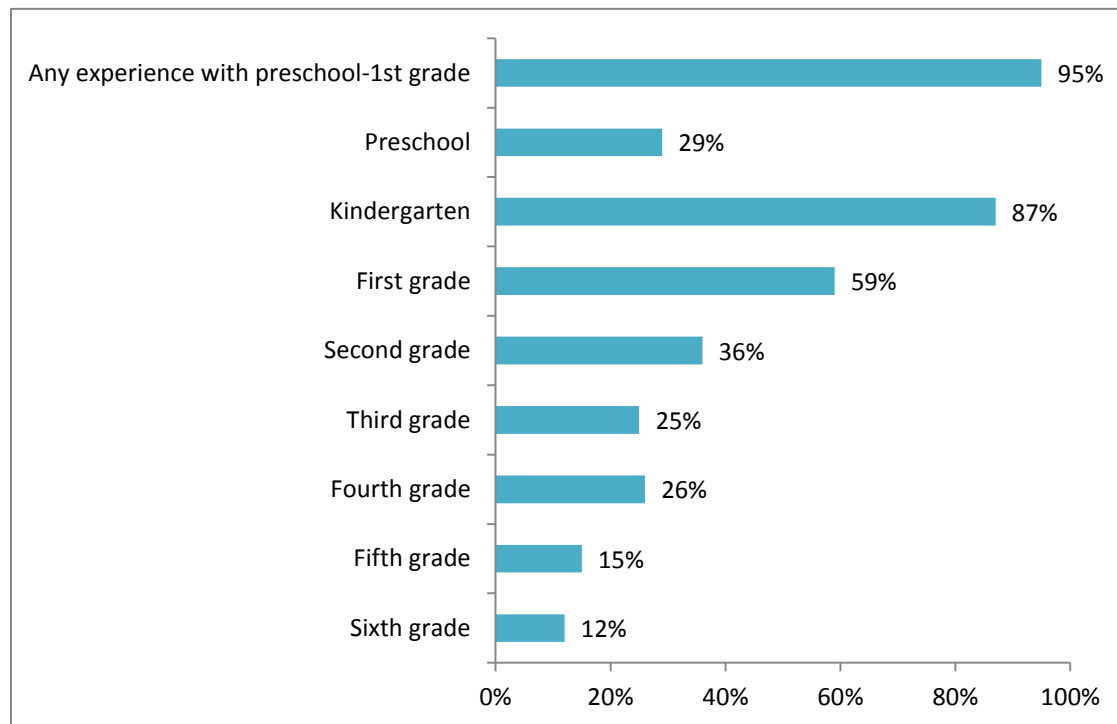
Source: In-depth district survey ($n = 74$).

Nearly All TK Teachers Had Early Education Experience

95 percent of TK teachers had experience teaching preschool, kindergarten, or first grade, and they have over 14 years of teaching experience on average.

To staff TK classrooms, most districts reported reassigning teachers already teaching in the district, for example, by moving a kindergarten teacher into a newly established TK classroom in each school. The qualifications most principals reported looking for in selecting a TK teacher were experience teaching kindergarten and experience teaching preschool. Most TK teachers reported having early education teaching experience; 95 percent of teachers had taught preschool, kindergarten, or first grade. The largest group of teachers came from kindergarten teaching backgrounds—87 percent of teachers surveyed reported they had taught kindergarten previously. In addition, 29 percent had taught preschool previously (Exhibit D).

Exhibit D. Proportion of TK Teachers With Previous Experience Teaching Other Grade Levels, 2012–13



Source: TK teacher survey ($n = 96$)

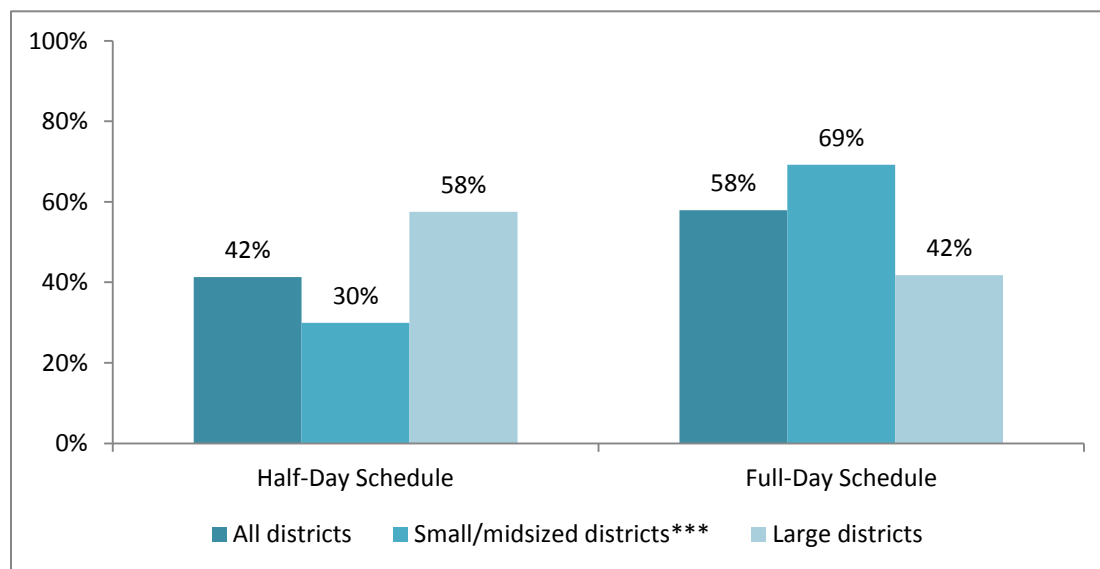
TK teachers also were relatively experienced, reporting an average of approximately 15 years of teaching experience. This is comparable with K–12 teachers in California overall, who have an average of 14.2 years of experience (California Department of Education, n.d.).

TK Structure Varied Across Districts

More than Half of Districts Offered Full-Day TK

Over half of districts reported offering full-day TK classrooms (more than four hours per day), although more than 40 percent offered half-day schedules (four hours per day or fewer). Large districts were more likely than small and mid-sized districts to offer half-day schedules (Exhibit E).

Exhibit E. Percentage of TK Classrooms With Half-Day Versus Full-Day Schedules, by District Size



*** $p < .001$.

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100 percent as a result of rounding. Large districts include those with 350 or more kindergartners; small/mid-sized districts have fewer than 350 kindergartners. Large districts served as the reference group for significance testing.

Source: In-depth district survey ($n = 99$)

“Hubs” Were More Common in Large Districts

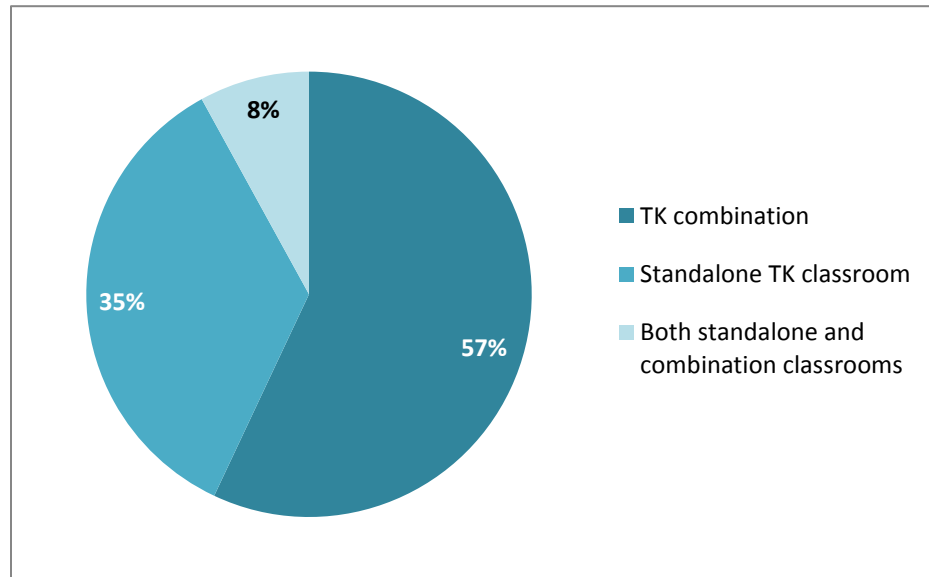
Just fewer than half of districts offered TK in one or more “hub” schools, in which eligible students from across the district attend TK and then return to their home school for kindergarten. Large districts were more likely to have used TK hubs in the program’s first year.

Combination Classes Were Common

Classrooms in which TK students were combined with other grades—mostly kindergarten—were prevalent throughout the state (Exhibit F). With only one twelfth of the kindergarten population eligible for TK in the first year (under the minimum eligibility guidelines), TK combination classrooms were the only option for many districts that did not have enough TK students to justify creating a standalone classroom for them. As expected, small and mid-sized

districts were more likely than large districts to combine TK with other grades as a strategy for serving TK students.

Exhibit F. Classroom Configurations Used in 2012–13



Source: Short-form district census survey ($n = 629$).

TK Looks Different from Kindergarten

Nearly two thirds of principals and teachers reported that they received guidance from the district that TK should resemble kindergarten; however, teacher responses suggest that the TK and kindergarten classrooms are different, as the law intended.

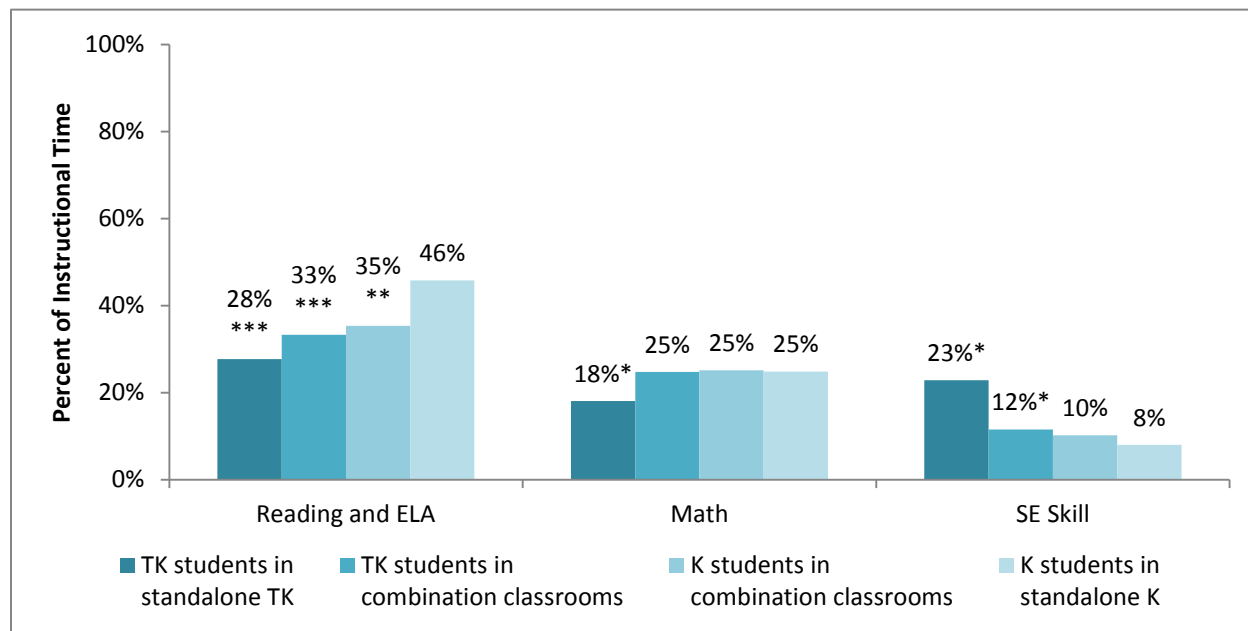
Curricula Varied Widely with No Single Curriculum Standing out as Most Common

TK and kindergarten teachers both reported using a wide variety of curricula to guide their classroom instruction; no single curriculum was used by a majority of teachers in any content area. In addition to academic curricula, most standalone TK teachers reported using some type of social-emotional curriculum, although fewer kindergarten and TK combination teachers did so. Most standalone TK teachers used a social-emotional curriculum they designed themselves.

TK Teachers Focused More on Social-Emotional Instruction

Kindergarten teachers reported that their students spent significantly more time on reading and English language arts (ELA) lessons or projects than TK teachers in standalone or combination classrooms reported for their students (Exhibit G). Additionally, TK teachers in standalone classrooms reported that their students spent a significantly smaller proportion of time on mathematics lessons or projects than kindergarten teachers reported. On the other hand, the proportion of time spent on social-emotional skill development reported by standalone TK teachers was nearly three times as great as the proportion of time reported by standalone kindergarten teachers.

Exhibit G. Percentage of Instructional Time Teachers Reported Spending on Reading and English/Language Arts (ELA), Math, and Social-Emotional Skills, by Student and Classroom Type



*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, † $p < .1$

Note: Kindergarten students in standalone classrooms served as the reference group for significance testing.

Source: TK teacher survey and kindergarten teacher survey ($n = 158$)

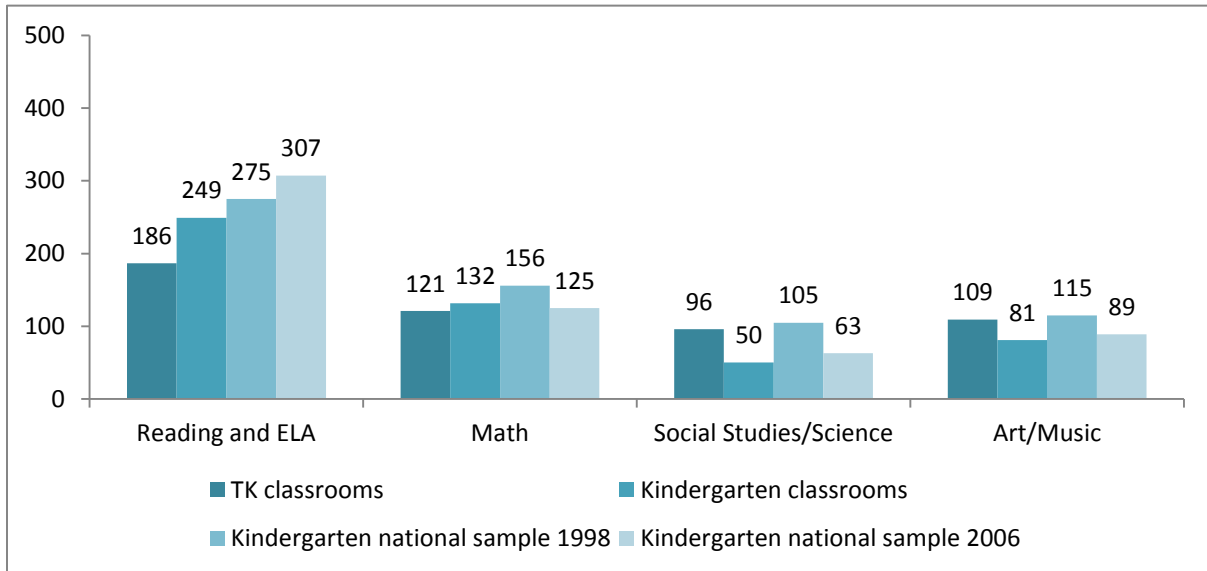
In national kindergarten studies, the amount of instructional time spent on reading and language arts increased and the amount of time spent on social studies/science and art/music decreased from 1998 to 2006, in both half-day and full-day classrooms. In half-day TK programs in California, students spent approximately 96 minutes per week on social studies and science activities, and 81 minutes per week on art and music activities. These time reports more closely resemble reports from kindergarten teachers nationally in 1998 than in 2006 (Exhibit H).² In contrast, California kindergarten teachers in 2012–13 reported instructional practices that were more similar to the 2006 national sample for social studies, sciences, and arts. In other words, California’s TK classrooms, according to teacher reports, looked more like kindergarten looked 15 years earlier with respect to time spent on science, social studies, art, and music.

Large Group Instruction was Less Prevalent in TK

In terms of format, TK teachers reported using more small-group and child-directed instruction than kindergarten teachers did (Exhibit I).

² Testing for statistically significant differences was not performed.

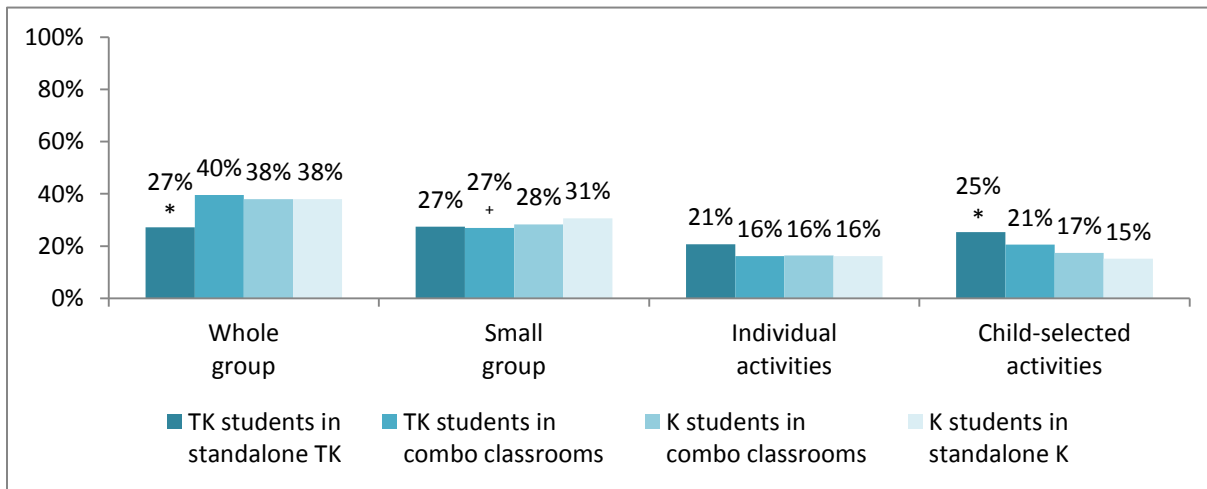
Exhibit H. Reported Minutes per Week Spent Focusing on Specific Content Areas in Half-Day Programs, by Classroom Type



Note: TK classroom category includes responses from standalone TK and TK combination classroom teachers. National kindergarten sample estimates are based on calculations using data from the fall 1998 wave of the ECLS-K and the fall 2006 wave of the ECLS-B (Bassok & Rorem, 2013). The results presented are descriptive; statistical comparisons were not conducted.

Source: TK teacher survey and kindergarten teacher survey ($n = 48$)

Exhibit I. Portion of the Day Spent in Various Activity Formats in TK and Kindergarten Standalone/Combination Classrooms



*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, † $p < .1$

Note: Kindergarten students in standalone kindergarten classrooms served as the reference group for significance testing.

Source: TK teacher survey and kindergarten teacher survey ($n = 96$)

Adult–Child Interactions were of Moderate Quality

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) tool was used to assess the quality of teacher–child interactions in TK classrooms with different formats (e.g., standalone TK classrooms or combination TK classrooms). The quality of teacher–child interactions, in the Emotional Support and Classroom Organization domains, was typically moderately high in TK classrooms. However, scores for the Instructional Support domain were low, which is similar to those of a national sample of preschool classrooms and lower than those of a comparison group of kindergarten classrooms³. Standalone TK classrooms were more likely than combination classrooms to earn higher CLASS scores in the Productivity, Behavior Management, and (lack of) Negative Climate dimensions.

District Planning and Implementation Processes Varied

With only a few months between the release of the governor’s revised budget in May 2012—which made clear that the requirement to implement TK was not eliminated—and the start of the 2012–13 school year, most districts had a short time to develop their TK programs.

Teachers and District Staff Often Collaborated to Plan TK in Small Districts

The type of staff involved in this quick planning differed by district size, likely because larger districts typically have more specialized staff positions. In most large districts, directors of curriculum and instruction led or were actively involved in planning efforts, and in most small and mid-sized districts, superintendents typically led planning efforts. Small and mid-sized districts also had higher rates of teacher involvement in TK planning efforts.

Districts and Schools Needed More Guidance

Principals and teachers differed in their reports about the district support they received for TK planning and implementation; most principals reported that their districts provided a clear plan for TK implementation, but only about a third of teachers reported the same. Eight out of ten principals and teachers reported that districts gave their schools flexibility in planning their own TK program.

The most common resource district and school administrators reported using to plan their TK programs was guidance from CDE, even though they also reported not receiving sufficient guidance overall.

Eligibility and Promotion Policies Varied

Although the Kindergarten Readiness Act specifies the intended age cutoff for kindergarten and TK in each year of implementation, administrators had some flexibility in how they applied the law in their district. Although most districts providing TK in 2012–13 reported offering TK only to students who would turn 5 years old between November 2 and December 2, as required by

³ Comparison kindergarten classrooms come from a study of 36 rural classrooms in the Southeast (Ponitz, Rimm-Kaufman, Grimm, & Curby, 2009).

law, 5 percent reported also offering TK to students who turned 5 in October, and 19 percent said they included September and October birthdays.

About half of districts reported that their district policy allowed for younger-than-age-eligible children to enroll in TK. These exceptions, however, were typically not made frequently. When younger children were allowed to enroll in TK, the most common factors considered were the child's specific age and availability of space in the TK classroom.

About one third of districts reported that they allowed some TK students to be promoted to first grade the following year.

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Many Successes, But Some Challenges Remain

Parents and districts reported many successes with TK. But as with any new program, districts and schools also faced challenges as they implemented TK in its first statewide year.

Districts and Parents Reported Benefits of TK

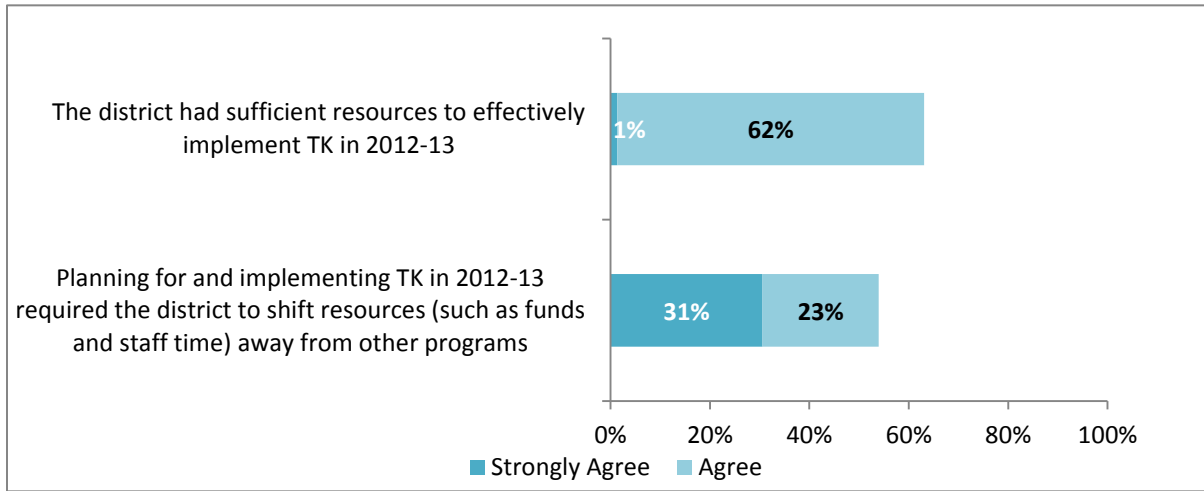
Interviews and focus groups with school staff, district staff, and parents in case study districts suggested that many parents were pleased with the program and felt their children were benefitting from the additional support prior to kindergarten. Focus groups yielded some suggestions that TK was benefitting kindergarten by exposing kindergarten teachers to resources such as the *Preschool Learning Foundations*, as reported by one school, or as in another school, by removing the youngest students from the kindergarten classroom, thereby enabling the kindergarten teacher to focus more on the kindergarten content with fewer behavioral disruptions.

District and School Leaders Have Concerns About Funding

Districts identified finding resources for implementation as a primary challenge in 2012–13, and many reported that they had to shift resources away from other programs to implement TK (Exhibit J).

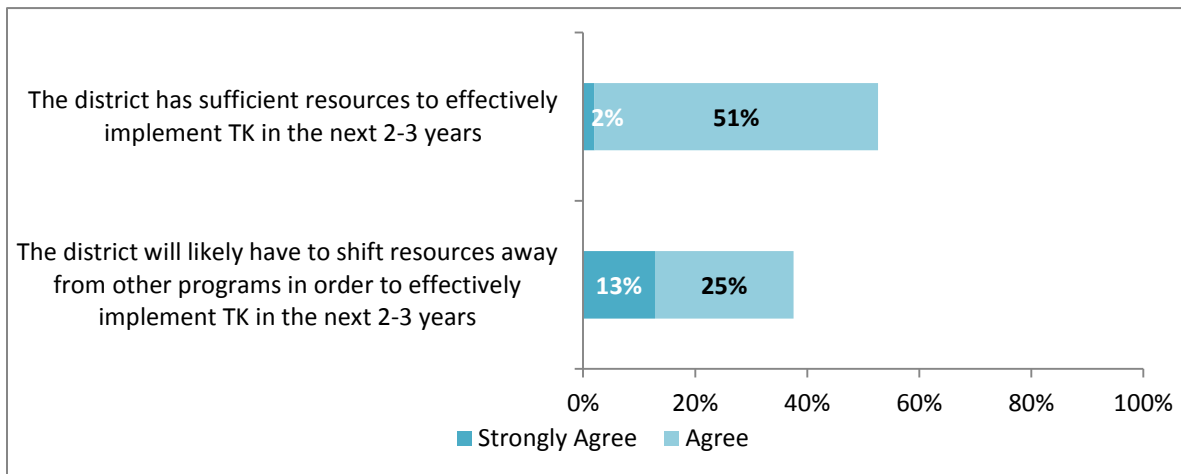
Thinking ahead, administrators reported that they anticipated that finding resources for the program would be less of a challenge in 2013–14, once state funding was no longer in question, and fewer anticipated having to shift resources from other programs. However, only half agreed that their district would have sufficient resources to effectively implement TK in the next two or three years (Exhibit K).

Exhibit J. Proportion of District TK Administrators Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed With Various Statements About the Availability of Resources for TK Implementation, 2012–13



Note: “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” response categories are not shown.
Source: In-depth district survey (n = 118)

Exhibit K. Proportion of District TK Administrators Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed With Various Statements About the Availability of Resources for TK Implementation in the Next Two to Three Years



Note: “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” response categories are not shown.
Source: In-depth district survey (n = 117)

Not All TK Teachers Received TK-Specific Training

TK teachers reported that they received an average of 42 hours of professional development (PD) in 2012–13, of which approximately 11 hours on average were specifically focused on TK. More than half of TK teachers, however, reported receiving no PD specifically related to TK.

The five most common topics emphasized in TK teachers’ PD were ELA, mathematics, instruction for ELs, differentiating instruction for individual students, and the use of

developmentally appropriate practice. Just under two thirds of TK teachers reported receiving PD with a major or moderate emphasis on social-emotional development.

Coordination between TK and Kindergarten Was Relatively Common; Broader Articulation Was Not

One indirect benefit of TK anticipated by some was that it would provide an opportunity for more collaboration among teachers and alignment of curricula in Grades PK–3, considered an appropriate practice in sustaining the benefits of early education (e.g., Kagan & Kauerz, 2007). There is some evidence that TK teachers were collaborating with kindergarten teachers—more than half reported having common planning time, sharing curriculum materials and content standards, and participating in joint professional development with kindergarten teachers.

However, few TK teachers reported collaboration with other TK teachers, and articulation with other early elementary grades also seemed to be limited, with few TK teachers reporting planning, sharing materials, or attending training with first- through third-grade teachers. Similarly, TK teachers reported little coordination with preschool programs.

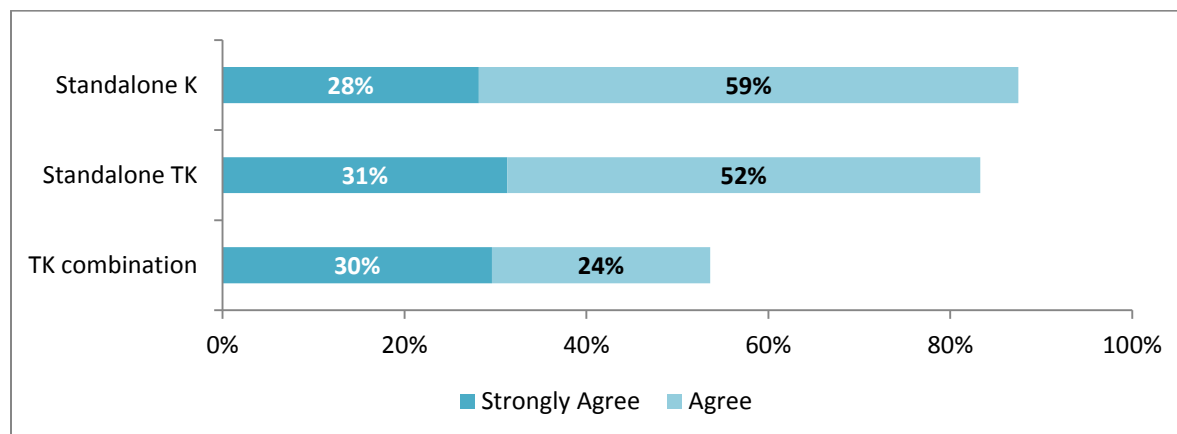
Additional Challenges Were Identified

After funding, the most common challenge reported by district administrators was developing an appropriate report card for TK students, which was also the most frequently reported challenge expressed by both principals and TK teachers. Other basic resources and practices, such as selecting curricula and assessments and providing professional development, also were big challenges reported by district survey respondents. Teacher recruitment and securing appropriate facilities and furniture were not identified as major challenges overall, although large districts were more likely than small or mid-sized districts to report them as challenges.

District administrators were asked about challenges they had faced when recruiting families for TK enrollment. The most commonly reported challenges were parents' desire to enroll their children in kindergarten instead of TK, parents' lack of awareness of the existence of the TK program, their hesitation to send their children to a program that they did not understand, and their concern that TK was a remedial program.

Teachers also reported challenges including differentiating instruction (particularly in combination classrooms) (Exhibit L).

Exhibit L. Proportion of Teachers Who Agreed That Differentiating Instruction for All Students Was Possible Given the Range of Needs or Class Size, by Class Type



*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, † $p < .1$

Note: Scale reversed for exhibit. “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” response categories are not shown.

Source: TK teacher survey and kindergarten teacher survey ($n = 137$)

Recommendations

Although it is early in the statewide implementation of TK, several recommendations emerge from these experiences of districts and schools in the first year.

1. Further Attention to Expanding Enrollment Within Implementing Districts Is Needed.

Although most districts served children in TK or reported having no children to serve in the program (because of small student populations sometimes combined with lack of interest or awareness among parents), a small percentage of districts did not offer TK to their eligible students. Thus, there is room for further expansion of the program.

Districts and schools reported a range of strategies for reaching out and recruiting families to enroll their children in TK, but it is clear from parent focus groups and estimated participation rates that some families remained unaware of TK or opted out of participation in the program. Most districts reported that parents’ preference to have their TK-eligible child enroll in kindergarten instead of TK was a challenge for recruitment. More information about the program and its benefits may be needed before enrollment levels match those of kindergarten. Districts and schools could improve outreach efforts by engaging in more active advertising of the program, such as by reaching out to preschool programs and family service programs, and by posting notices in the community where parents who are unaware that their child is eligible for TK might see them. A coordinated statewide effort, such as a public awareness campaign, also could be effective in spreading the word about TK. Over time, enrollment rates will likely improve as more students go through the program and overall awareness increases. Additional outreach efforts may be warranted in the meantime, however.

2. A Focus on Efficiently and Sufficiently Funding TK Is Warranted.

Late decisions at the state level to provide state Average Daily Attendance (ADA) funding for TK created a challenge for districts because they had no dedicated resources for program planning until the fall. Districts identified finding resources for implementation as a primary challenge in 2012–13, and many reported that they had to shift resources away from other programs to implement TK. Administrators reported that they anticipated that finding resources for the program would be less of a challenge in the future, but they still have concerns. Districts might be able to allocate resources more effectively to TK under California’s new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), and more resources may be available in future years given the state’s improved fiscal condition beginning in 2013–14. How districts draw on different funding sources for TK should continue to be a focus for examination, as the new LCFF is implemented and TK enrollment grows.

3. Substantial Variability Exists in Districts’ Approaches to TK, and More Guidance on Best Practices Is Needed.

It is not surprising that in its first year of statewide implementation, there is significant variation in TK programs across districts and schools. With minimal guidelines from the state for implementation, districts have had substantial discretion in the structure and emphasis of the program. This has resulted in some innovative approaches to TK as well as some frustration and uncertainty among district and school staff.

More guidance on what an “age and developmentally appropriate” program might look like and how to differentiate instruction effectively would support better decision making at the district and school levels. The TK outcomes study, begun in November 2013 (see Next Steps section), will provide additional information about the relationship between particular TK classroom practices and social-emotional and academic outcomes for participating children.

In addition, guidance on identifying or developing basic resources like curricula, assessments, and a TK report card are needed. Most district and school staff reported that identifying these basic building blocks was a challenge.

4. Further Guidance on How to Implement Combination Classrooms Effectively Is Needed.

Because many of the districts not implementing the program reported having few eligible students, further guidance from the CDE on providing an effective program when there are very few students to enroll may be warranted.

As a result of these low student numbers in some districts, TK combination classrooms were prevalent throughout the state. Although the proportion of students eligible for TK is increasing over time (with one sixth of the kindergarten population eligible for TK in 2013–14 and one fourth eligible in 2014–15), many districts will still not have the number of students needed to support standalone TK classrooms in each school at full implementation.

Substantial variation was found in how districts and schools approached combination classrooms, but it appears that combination classrooms resembled kindergarten more closely than did standalone TK classrooms. If TK is to be developmentally appropriate and provide a

qualitatively different experience from a one-year kindergarten experience, then districts, schools, and teachers will likely need additional guidance on how to provide the highest quality instructional environments within TK combination classrooms. More information, guidance, mentoring, and ongoing professional development on how best to differentiate instruction, in particular, could help strengthen these programs.

5. Additional Support and Professional Development for TK Teachers Is Needed.

Many TK teachers reported receiving little to no PD focused on TK specifically. However, with the bulk of the responsibility on teachers for providing a TK program that supports students' learning and development, attention to this kind of targeted professional development for teachers is critical. In addition to providing guidance on differentiating instruction for TK and kindergarten students in combination classrooms, TK standalone teachers also need support for differentiating their instruction to meet the individual needs of their TK students. Although most principals reported that their districts provided guidance on differentiating instruction, few teachers reported receiving such guidance.

In addition, relatively low scores on the CLASS Instructional Support scale (which has been found to be linked to student outcomes) and the lower attention paid to academic content, such as reading and language arts and mathematics, in TK classrooms compared with kindergarten suggest that some attention to teacher practice and strategies for integrating reading and math in a developmentally appropriate way would be beneficial. Professional development on developmentally appropriate practice, the *California Preschool Learning Foundations*, and instructional practices that support children's concept development and extend their language development could support teachers' ability to provide effective TK instruction that supports later outcomes for students.

Providing opportunities for teachers to engage with each other—to learn, plan lessons, and collaborate—also can enhance their ability to provide an effective TK experience for students. Many TK teachers reported collaborating with their kindergarten colleagues, but far fewer reported having other TK teachers with whom to engage in shared learning opportunities. TK teachers often were alone in their schools, and in small districts, a TK teacher may have no other TK colleagues districtwide. Developing and encouraging communities of practice among TK teachers could facilitate the sharing of ideas, strategies, and lessons learned as educators work together to improve TK programs.

6. More Attention to Preschool-to-Grade 3 Alignment and Articulation Is Needed.

Even less common than TK teachers partnering with other TK teachers are opportunities for TK teachers to plan and participate in professional learning experiences with preschool teachers or other early elementary teachers beyond kindergarten. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the divide between preschool and the K–12 system is being bridged by TK in some contexts, but there is still relatively little communication and coordination between the two systems. Also, although principals reported some articulation from preschool to Grade 3, few TK teachers reported having common curricular materials or meeting in person with preschool teachers to align curricula. If a seamless system from preschool to K–12 is the goal, then more work must be done to integrate and align preschool with TK, kindergarten, and the early elementary grades.

More guidance on best practices for alignment and outreach by districts to preschool programs to develop coordinated plans could support these efforts.

Next Steps

The full report presents results from the statewide study of the implementation of the Kindergarten Readiness Act (S.B. 1381) in its first year. We expect to see changes in implementation as district and school administrators as well as teachers refine their approaches to carrying out this program. The next phase of this study, currently underway, will examine the impacts of the TK program on student learning and development, and continue to track and document implementation of the program over time.