

Examining Transitional Kindergarten Staffing Challenges and Solutions at the Local Level



Jennifer Anthony, Leanne Elliott, Heather Quick

March 2024

Introduction

Governor Gavin Newsom signed the TK-12 Education Trailer Bill (AB 130) in July 2021, which expanded California’s Transitional Kindergarten (TK) program to move beyond serving only those children who just miss the kindergarten entry-age cutoff to serving all 4-year-old children by the 2025–26 school year (Early Edge California, 2021). This change is the primary component of the state’s larger Universal Prekindergarten effort.

The expectation for ramp-up is quick: Expansion began in 2022–23 by extending eligibility to children who turn 5 years old between September 2 and February 2 (from September 2 to December 2 in the prior school year). Eligibility expands by 2 months each subsequent year until full expansion in 2025–26, when all children who turn 4 years old by September 1 can enroll in TK (Aguilera, 2022). Although some districts had already expanded the age eligibility for TK, for most districts, this change meant adding more TK classrooms, including in schools that did not previously offer TK. In addition, adult-child ratios changed from a maximum of 31 children per adult (1:31) in 2021–22, to 1:12 in 2022–23, and 1:10 in subsequent years (Melnick et al., 2022), which further increases the demand for staff. In addition, TK teachers hired or assigned to teach TK on or after July 2015 must have a valid teaching credential in addition to a TK-specific certification (TK California, 2023), which added a limitation to the hiring pool for TK teachers.¹ Specifically, teachers who started teaching TK after July 1, 2015, must have one of the following by August 1, 2023: (a) at least 24 units of early childhood education (ECE), child development, or both; (b) professional experience in a classroom setting with preschool-aged children, which a local education agency deems comparable to 24 units of early childhood education or child development; or (c) a child development teacher permit issued by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (TK California, 2023).

Given the current teacher shortage and the swift ramp-up required under the legislation, TK expansion has the potential to pose a significant workforce challenge for some districts throughout the state.

¹ Teachers assigned to teach TK students prior to July 1, 2015, have an exemption. Any current credentialed teacher who is or was assigned to teach TK, or a combination class of TK and kindergarten, on or before July 1, 2015, is “grandfathered” in to teach TK without having to meet the additional requirements (CDE, 2023).

With the projected TK enrollment of more than 300,000 children by 2025–26 (compared with approximately 100,000 currently enrolled in TK), the need to hire upward of 15,000 teachers and assistant teachers, along with the reduction in adult-child ratios in TK from 12:1 to 10:1 (Melnick et al., 2022), schools and districts have been or will experience the need for immediate staffing solutions for their new TK classrooms.

To address these new areas of focus in the state and the challenges that accompany expansion, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) conducted a multipronged exploratory study to understand the expansion of TK across the state and identify needs and strategies to support successful expansion and effective learning opportunities for eligible children. That project includes this study, *Examining TK Staffing Challenges and Solutions at the Local Level*, the goal of which is to provide information for policymakers and district and school leaders during the quick expansion of TK.

This brief describes how districts and schools are currently staffing TK classrooms and building the TK pipeline to address future needs, the contexts and constraints under which they operate, and the supports and stop-gap and long-term common and unique solutions used to address these constraints. It also offers a list of promising strategies to support the work of district and school leaders to expand TK.

Methodology

AIR conducted a qualitative study in a diverse sample of schools and districts in California. We selected 10 districts diverse in terms of region, urbanicity, size, proximity to teacher preparation programs, and experience offering TK. Between May and June 2023, AIR conducted interviews with 10 district administrators representing various regions in the state: one northern district, three districts in the San Francisco Bay area, three districts in the Central Valley, two southern districts, and one district on the Central Coast. To capture experiences at the school level, we also included up to two elementary schools from all 10 districts. AIR conducted interviews with 16 school leaders between June and November 2023. These schools and districts served as case studies to illustrate various approaches to staffing.

We gathered detailed information about the challenges that districts have experienced or are experiencing in hiring TK teachers and the strategies they have employed for hiring, training, placement, and retention. Using qualitative thematic analysis techniques, we identified common successes and challenges in staffing TK classrooms and offer promising strategies to address those challenges in the context of continued expansion.

This brief addresses and discusses the following questions:

- To what extent have districts and schools faced challenges finding teachers and teaching assistants for their TK classrooms?
- How have schools and districts staffed TK classrooms?

- How are district leaders helping TK teachers meet required qualifications?
- How are schools and districts building a TK pipeline?
- How are school leaders supporting and retaining their TK staff?

Findings

To what extent have districts and schools faced challenges finding teachers and teaching assistants for their TK classrooms?

Expanding age eligibility for TK, coupled with decreasing adult-child ratios, means that many districts need to staff additional TK classrooms. A few district and school administrators we interviewed reported experiencing some challenges finding TK teachers. In one rural district, an administrator noted the teacher shortage, which affects all grades, created a “teacher’s market,” which means that teachers have more choice in their selection of where to seek jobs, and this typically disadvantages rural areas. Another administrator highlighted challenges specific to finding TK teachers who had the required ECE credits, noting, “When teachers walk out of teacher education programs, they generally don’t have those early childhood credits.” However, most of the district and school administrators we interviewed did not report challenges finding TK teachers. A few attributed that lack of difficulty, in part, to their previous proactive recruitment efforts. Others attributed their success to the fact that they started expansion before the state required them to do so, so they had already overcome these challenges in prior years.

Finding teaching assistants was more often cited as a challenge than finding teachers by school and district administrators in our study. One district administrator said, “Paraprofessionals are really, really hard to come by.” The number of hours offered to teaching staff seems to make a difference in the degree to which districts faced challenges. Districts and schools that offered assistants more instructional hours (e.g., 6 hours per day versus 3 hours per day) reported finding it easier to secure teaching assistants for TK. For example, one school-level administrator explained that teaching assistants actually prefer taking jobs in their TK classrooms, which offer 6-hour days, versus taking jobs in special education settings, which offer 3.5 hours per day. In other words, even those districts and schools that did not experience challenges finding teaching assistants for TK still sometimes found it challenging to staff paraprofessionals in other classrooms and settings.

How have schools and districts staffed TK classrooms?

Schools and districts took a range of approaches to staffing their TK classrooms, finding staff from within the district or expanding the search to the larger community or farther afield.

Recruiting or Reassigning Staff From Within the District

The most commonly reported method for finding teachers and teaching assistants to fill new TK classrooms is recruiting teachers from or reassigning staff within the district. In the majority of districts we spoke with, teachers from other grades were interested in teaching TK, and as of fall 2023, at least two districts did not need to hire a teacher outside the district for TK positions, given sufficient interest

among their current staff. In one district, the human resources director held an annual informational meeting for staff about TK each spring, to let them know about instructional approaches used in TK classrooms, outline required staff qualifications (e.g., teaching credential, ECE units), and offer to help interested staff achieve those qualifications if needed. In some cases, a general decline in enrollment in the district increased the availability of teachers who could move to TK. In at least one district, declining enrollment overall meant that these other elementary grade teachers could be reassigned to a newly added TK classroom.

Expanding Teacher Recruitment Pools

Common strategies for finding staff in the community include posting job opportunities on online job sites (e.g., EDJOIN, LinkedIn, Monster) or attending recruitment and job fairs to get the word out about opportunities and sometimes interview potential candidates. Beyond this traditional approach, the majority of administrators we interviewed mentioned establishing and maintaining relationships with nearby colleges and universities to recruit for the TK positions. One district, for example, informs their local university about the district’s upcoming job fairs to encourage prospective teachers to attend. Another principal shared that local universities occasionally host mock interviews, a career preparation opportunity in which experienced alumni and district representatives conduct practice interviews for teaching credential candidates. This principal participates in these mock interviews to meet and recruit potential candidates for TK positions.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: LEVERAGING INTEREST TO HELP WITH TK EXPANSION

“As a matter of fact, I have a few more teachers who want to go and teach TK, but I’m like, ‘I can’t have you ALL teach TK.’”

– School Leader

“We are fully staffed. If anything, I would say the TK realm is easier to find folks for than upper elementary, middle school, and high school. I think those are harder to staff.”

– School Leader

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: OFFERING MORE HOURS HELPS WITH STAFFING TK TEACHING ASSISTANTS

“In general, it’s just been a challenge to get instructional assistants, period. We don’t have enough in special ed. We don’t have enough for our EL [English learner] supports. It’s just a challenge overall. We have lots and lots of positions open. But I think because the TK position is a 6-hour position, they’ve gravitated to those. So, it hasn’t been as difficult to fill the TK ones, but now we’re stuck trying to fill the other positions that they vacated.”

– District Administrator

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: CASTING A WIDE NET

“I’m not one to sit idly and wait for people to send me folks. If I was in a staffing shortage situation right now, I would be partnering with local universities. I would be calling the junior colleges that specialize in early childhood education. I would be reaching out to private preschool employees. I would just cast a really wide net.”

– School Leader

Administrators also shared unique ways to encourage potential candidates from within the district, school, or immediate community. For example, in a few districts, staff hired parents for TK teaching positions. A school leader from one of these districts shared that because of the school’s focus on family engagement, they know their parents well and recruit them for paraprofessional positions.

Districts also recruit potential TK teachers and teaching assistants from nearby communities and sometimes even farther afield. An interviewee from a rural district, noting the compounded challenges of finding staff in a rural area amidst a teacher shortage, shared that she has traveled to regions of other states with similar rural geographies and landscapes to recruit potential staff because they are more likely to be comfortable living and working in rural areas than recruits from more urban areas.

Planning Strategically

Early and strategic planning also is a common approach to minimize or avoid challenges with securing staff for TK classrooms. Interviewees from the majority of the districts we interviewed reported that recruiting early in the calendar year—sometimes as early as January—was critical to finding staff. In one district, a principal who recommended starting recruitment early in the calendar year explained that he seeks out potential candidates throughout the school year and is “always looking.” Several districts shared that TK expansion, including hiring new TK staff, needed a systemwide approach, ensuring that any department staff within the district who might be impacted are engaged in the planning process to gain buy-in and anticipate needs. In one district, for example, an administrator shared that when they planned for the expansion, they made sure to involve key staff from human resources, general education, special education, and preschool in the process. In this same district, they also worked with a demographer for years to help predict the number of incoming TK students and the number of needed staff. The administrator in that district shared that during the first 2 years they offered TK, they incorporated the demographer’s data into their planning, and the estimated number of TK students was within two students of the actual enrollment total.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: PLANNING USING A SYSTEMWIDE APPROACH

“We brought a group together of people. We were leading it, but it was HR [human resources], facilities, purchasing, and the communications department. Everybody knew that if we were going to make this possible, everybody needed to contribute. So, every 2 weeks I had conversations with HR, [asking], ‘How are we doing with recruitment?’ It needed to have that sense of urgency but also that it wasn’t just going to happen out of [our department]. That this was not [just our] project; this was a systemwide approach. And it didn’t come just from us; it was our superintendent or board talking about it and sending the message about it. When we did the whole presentation about the expansion, everybody knew that it wasn’t just a smaller project. Everybody knew that impact that it could possibly create in our community. So . . . from the beginning, there was that commitment—we’re going to make it happen..”

– District Administrator

Offering Incentives

Incentivizing current or future teaching staff is another strategy to secure staff for TK. One district offers a substantial signing bonus for new TK teachers and assistance with moving, including help finding housing and paying for moving expenses if needed. Another district incentivized current teaching staff to help with the process by offering them a bonus to recruit new teachers. These districts felt these incentives were helpful for bringing in new TK teacher candidates to their schools.

How are district leaders helping TK teachers meet required qualifications?

Some districts in the study have worked independently or teamed with other districts and organizations to help develop their TK workforce by identifying and addressing any factors that might help with or impede advancement, including obtaining additional qualifications, degrees, or credentials.

Supporting Attainment of Units or Credentials

Nearly all district administrators interviewed shared that their district leaders had helped or actively encouraged current or prospective staff to attain the required ECE units or teaching credentials for teaching TK. For example, one district focused on helping teachers attain the required 24 ECE units by ensuring that all professional development offered in the district carried college units. Other districts used grant funding (e.g., from the Early Education Teacher Development [EETD] Grant from the California Department of Education) to pay for teachers or assistant teachers to take ECE classes or for assistant teachers to pursue bachelor’s degrees or credentials. One district used some of their EETD grant funds to pay for a newly hired teacher’s credentialing program. (This teacher had previously taught at a private school that did not require a credential and was working for the district under a waiver.) This same district also partnered with a local organization to offer a virtual, job-embedded early childhood apprenticeship program. The district uses EETD funding to cover the fees for staff who have either a GED/high school degree or associate’s degree and are working at least 15 hours per week to earn college credits through the partner organization while they work for the district.

Collaborating With Other Local Districts and Schools to Jointly Pursue Funding to Help Teachers Meet the TK Requirements

One unique strategy for helping TK staff meet qualifications has been to partner with other districts and local schools to apply for funding together. For example, one district is part of a TK consortium with other districts that have pursued funding (e.g., the EETD Grant). Through this partnership, the district was able to acquire funds to support their kindergarten teachers transitioning to TK. Another district established an early childhood collaborative that includes their own district, several local state-funded preschools, a local private school, and a local charter school. Members of this consortium jointly applied for the EETD Grant; the funding will help assistant teachers obtain bachelor's degrees so that they can become TK teachers.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: LEVERAGING RESOURCES THROUGH COLLABORATION

“The other really important thing is partnerships with other agencies. The partnerships, the relationships have really been important. To partner with other early learning nonprofits, community-based organizations that have like-minded values . . . that’s really powerful because everyone needs resources. Nobody has enough resources. Everything’s limited, but the more you leverage those resources, the better it is for families and children.”

– District Administrator

Identifying and Addressing Barriers to Advancement

Another strategy to support capacity building within a district or school involves pinpointing and working to resolve barriers that might be preventing staff from applying for or furthering their education to be eligible for TK positions. One district administrator we interviewed described meeting with paraprofessionals to determine and address any challenges they might be facing. For example, during a recent one-on-one meeting with a paraprofessional, she discovered that the assistant teacher’s lack of familiarity with computers was preventing her from advancement, so the district interviewee ensured that the staff person received coaching and access to a computer to improve her computer literacy skills.

How are schools and districts building a TK pipeline?

TK expansion has meant that California’s districts and schools stand to benefit from building a staffing pipeline to ensure sufficient TK teachers and teaching assistants in the future, as more children become eligible for TK. Some districts and schools gave examples of how they were working to build a pipeline for their communities.

Collaborating With Colleges and Universities

Close partnerships and relationships with local universities may help districts and schools fill immediate staffing needs, such as through job and recruitment fairs, but several interviewees noted that these collaborations also may help bring in more teaching staff in the future, such as by educating prospective staff about the steps needed to pursue job opportunities that they had not considered. For example, job fair attendees might not know what job positions are immediately available to them or could be available, if they pursue additional education.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: INCREASING AWARENESS OF TK TEACHING OPPORTUNITIES

“I’ve noticed that there are candidates out there who have never even thought of teaching—or didn’t know that there was a way they could start now. And so just from the conversation, I can share, ‘There are several programs. You could get a short-term teaching permit. We have a county office that you could do your credentialing program through.’ And they say, ‘Are you sure? You mean I could teach this year?’ And we say, ‘Yes, you could. Here’s a number.’”

– School Leader

Establishing a Teacher Residency Program

Relationships with colleges and universities may also take on a more formal approach for building the teacher pipeline by establishing a teacher residency program. Two district interviewees mentioned having teacher development residency programs that help prospective teachers achieve the qualifications to teach TK but also help to build the local pipeline by requiring participants to commit to working in the district for a minimum number of years after completion. One of these districts has a partnership with three different local universities, which provides a pathway to preparing candidates for TK classrooms by helping them earn a credential within a year. The cohort model provides students with mentorship and placement in a classroom to provide hands-on experience as they take courses. Students’ tuition is covered, and they receive a stipend because the program is full time. In this district, they recently found that preschool teachers who already had the 24 ECE units wanted to join the residency program to earn their multiple-subject credential to become qualified to teach TK.

Partnering With High Schools to Grow Your Own Workforce

At least one district collaborated with a local high school to help build the TK teacher pipeline. An administrator from this district shared that they maintain a close relationship with the high school, working together on a “grow-your-own” model that helps high school students pursue teaching careers in two ways. First, the high school offers a career experiences class, through which the students can volunteer in ECE classrooms to earn high school credit and determine whether they want to work with children. Second, they help those students who are interested in teaching attain their ECE units and set them on a pathway to achieve their bachelor’s degree and teaching credential. The high school’s close proximity to the community college and the district’s collaboration with the community college to ensure that ECE courses are offered at a time that works for high school students facilitates this pathway.

Collaborating With Other Local Education Organizations

One district discussed plans to expand a partnership with a local organization to help build the TK pipeline. At the time of the interview, the district was considering using their EETD Grant funds to work with an educational nonprofit organization that works with the immigrant community. This organization helps identify needs and barriers and provides holistic, wraparound support to adult taking English-as-a-second-language classes or adult basic education classes at community colleges. The partnership would focus on helping students interested in teaching in an early childhood classroom attain their 24 ECE units, associate's degrees, and bachelor's degrees, which in turn, would serve to build the pipeline and help build a diverse workforce.

How are school leaders supporting and retaining their TK staff?

Another strategy to ensure that districts and schools have sufficient staff for TK classrooms is supporting staff's professional needs and classroom resource needs to retain the teachers they already have.

Providing TK Teachers and Teaching Assistants With Professional Learning Opportunities

Offering opportunities to further develop their knowledge and skills through professional development were commonly mentioned ways of supporting new or existing TK staff. For example, one district administrator reported using EETD Grant funds to support professional development, academic coaches, and "learning walks" (i.e., hiring a substitute teacher so that TK teachers can visit a "high-performing" TK teacher at another school). Similarly, another district arranged for TK teachers to visit preschool classrooms to learn how they use the Desired Results Developmental Profile assessment tool to inform instruction. A third district works with a local nonprofit partner to support professional learning communities for TK teachers. These were highlighted as key strategies for supporting retention.

Supporting the TK Classroom

Although this study focused on staffing, district and school administrators we interviewed noted that TK expansion should consider the program in its entirety—all elements that make teachers' jobs easier and more effective and can therefore enhance retention and increase the attractiveness of their program to new hires. Having developmentally appropriate space (including access to bathroom facilities) and materials, for example, are key and help support teachers. One district administrator shared that the district nearly quadrupled spending on classroom materials for TK classrooms to ensure that the learning environments were developmentally appropriate. One school-level interviewee explained that making classrooms developmentally appropriate will help with teacher retention, adding, "Let's actually build a program that is age appropriate. That's how you keep [the teachers] happy."

Promising Strategies for Hiring and Retaining TK Teachers

Based on interviews with school and district administrators from a sample of 10 districts throughout the state, we found variation in how districts have approached staffing their TK classrooms in the context of TK expansion and variation in the extent to which staffing has been a challenge for them so far. While some districts have not had significant challenges hiring TK teachers, finding assistant teachers has been somewhat more difficult. Several promising strategies to facilitate TK expansion emerged from these interviews and are described below.

- 1. *Recruit TK teaching staff throughout the year.*** Start the recruitment process as early in the year as possible. Some districts start the process in January for the upcoming school year, although some noted looking for potential teachers throughout the year in various ways (e.g., by participating in mock interviews with teacher candidates at local universities).
- 2. *Actively collaborate with other districts, preschools, high schools, and other local organizations to build the pipeline of future TK teachers.*** Ways to potentially build the pipeline include partnering with other entities to pursue grants to help prospective teachers attain ECE units, degrees, and credentials; working with high schools to find and develop future teaching staff; and looking to local nonprofit organizations to increase the pool of eligible teaching staff.
- 3. *Support TK teachers to ensure retention.*** Professional development, coaching, mentoring, professional learning communities, visits to other TK classrooms or preschool classrooms, and other professional supports can help ensure that TK teachers feel equipped for the job. This can support retention, which reduces the need to find and hire new TK teachers. These supports are particularly helpful for teachers who are new to the grade or on campuses in which there is only one TK classroom who may feel isolated.
- 4. *Take a systemwide approach to expanding TK.*** Throughout the expansion process, engaging staff across departments within the district who might be impacted by TK expansion will help to gain buy-in and identify efficiencies. This includes a consideration of space and facilities, as well as hiring, classroom resources, and professional learning opportunities for new and continuing TK teachers. Soliciting the help and input from various levels and departments can help with planning for staffing (e.g., how many staff needed), finding and hiring, and supporting staff after they are hired.

Although the findings shared in this brief are based on a small sample of districts and are not generalizable to all districts in California, we hope that highlighting some of the successful strategies employed by the districts we interviewed can be used to inform the expansion efforts of other districts that may be at a different stage or facing greater challenges. In addition to supporting TK teacher recruitment and retention, many of the strategies described here, such as offering incentives or building residency programs, may also address inequities in the existing teacher pipeline and thus help to diversify the TK workforce.

References

- Aguilera, E. (2022, November 2). *Schools scramble to find teachers as California expands transitional kindergarten*. CalMatters. <https://calmatters.org/education/2022/11/california-transitional-kindergarten/>
- California Department of Education. (2023). *Universal prekindergarten FAQs*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/em/kinderfaq.asp>
- Early Edge California. (2021). *Summary of Assembly Bill (AB) 130: K-12 trailer bill language early childhood*. <https://earlyedgecalifornia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/July-2021-Summary-K-12-Trailer-Bill-Language-AB-130.pdf>
- Melnick, H., Garcia, E., & Leung-Gagné, M. (2022). *Building a well-qualified transitional kindergarten workforce in California: Needs and opportunities* [Brief]. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/3724/download?inline&file=California_Transitional_Kindergarten_Workforce_REPORT.pdf
- TK California. (2023). *Staffing*. <https://tkcalifornia.org/administrators/staffing/>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was funded by the Heising-Simons Foundation through grant 2023-4100



1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor
Arlington, VA 22202-3289
+1.202.403.5000 | AIR.ORG

Established in 1946, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit institution that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance both domestically and internationally in the areas of education, health, and the workforce. AIR's work is driven by its mission to generate and use rigorous evidence that contributes to a better, more equitable world. With headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, AIR has offices across the U.S. and abroad. For more information, visit [AIR.ORG](https://www.air.org).