

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

Early Outreach, Enrollment, and Parent Perspectives

Introduction

When transitional kindergarten (TK) began in the 2012–13 school year, there were many questions about this new grade—available typically to only those children born during the month of November.¹ Parents wondered: What is TK? Who is eligible? Does my district offer TK? Is TK right for my child? With the delayed final approval of TK at the state level, stakeholders across the state wondered how districts would recruit families and roll out a new program in such a short time frame. Who would show up on the first day of school? And what would they find when they arrived?

About the Study

With support from the Heising-Simons Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and First 5 California, American Institutes for Research explored these TK issues as part of an in-depth investigation of the program's first year of implementation,² with subsequent follow-up with a subset of districts in the second year. This implementation study is the first phase of the statewide *Study of California's Transitional Kindergarten Program*. The second phase, now underway, examines the quality and impacts of TK.

What is TK?

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.

The law specified a phase-in period for 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. SB1381 also specified that the new grade level 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 In the 2012–13 school year, districts were only required to offer TK to children who would turn five between November 2 and December 2.

² A full copy of the final report is available at <http://tkstudy.airprojects.org/about-the-study/reports>.

Purpose of This Research Brief

This third research brief in a series investigating TK implementation in Year 1 focuses on district outreach efforts, parent perceptions of TK, and TK student demographics.³ Specifically, we address the following questions:

1. How did districts approach parent outreach?
2. How did parents decide whether to enroll their children in TK?
3. Who actually enrolled in TK?
4. What did parents think of their children's TK experiences?

Methodology

The results presented in this brief draw primarily on data collected through a survey of 120 district administrators from across California in 2012–13. The survey was administered electronically, and respondents were asked a range of questions regarding their district's implementation of TK, including strategies for outreach and recruitment of families and student enrollment in TK. The survey was re-administered in the spring of 2014 to the subset of districts participating in the quality and impact study as well; results for the districts with responses to both surveys ($n = 10$) are presented where applicable. Additional information regarding kindergarten enrollment was obtained for comparison purposes from the California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS). The study team also selected nine districts for more in-depth case studies to supplement the survey data. As part of the case studies, members of the study team conducted focus groups with parents of children enrolled in TK.⁴ Focus groups explored parent experiences with TK recruitment and personal perceptions of the program.

How Did Districts Approach Parent Outreach?

Districts varied in their approaches to parent outreach for the 2012–13 school year. According to respondents to the district administrator survey, the most common recruitment strategy employed by districts was simply telling parents about the program when they arrived to enroll their children in kindergarten (91 percent). Almost two thirds of districts reported taking a somewhat more proactive approach, however, by holding parent information sessions (65 percent) or posting information on the school or district website (63 percent). Half of all districts also reported running advertisements to reach TK-eligible families (48 percent), and a few districts shared information about TK with family service providers in the community (12 percent) or posted notices in the community (13 percent). These proactive outreach efforts might have been more likely to reach parents who were unaware that their children were eligible for TK and therefore would not have attended a parent information session or visited the district's website.

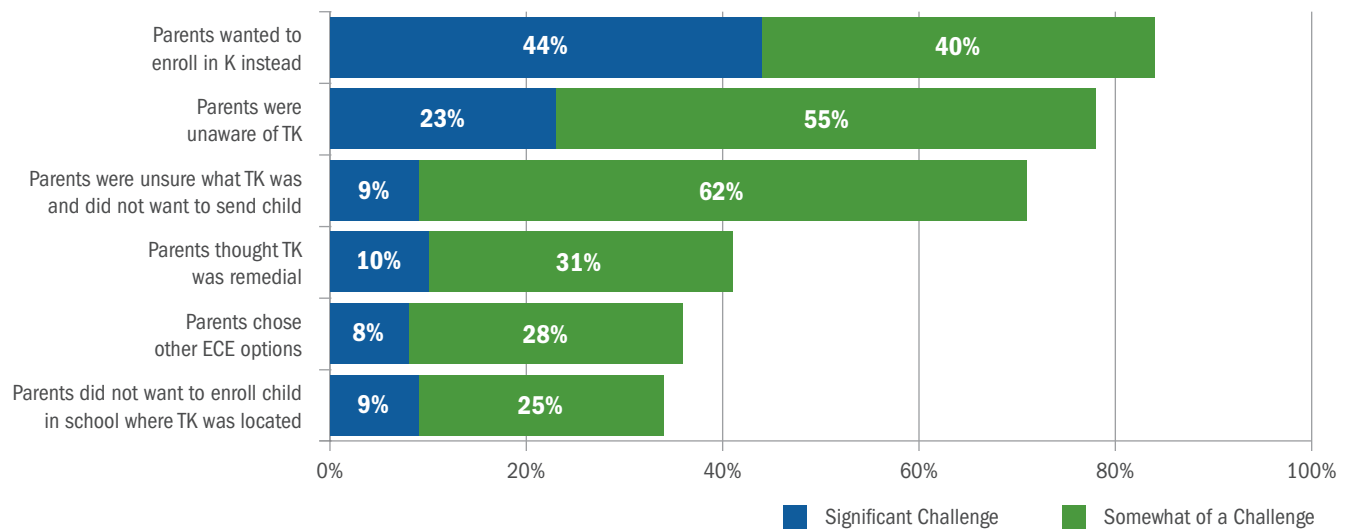
District respondents reported a number of challenges when reaching out to parents to encourage them to enroll their children in TK (Exhibit 1). The most frequently reported challenge (reported by 84 percent of districts) was parents' desire to enroll their children in kindergarten instead of TK. Forty-four percent of districts reported this was a *significant* challenge for them. In addition, of the 10 districts that participated in the study in 2013–14 as well, five districts reported that parents' preferences for their children to be in kindergarten instead of TK became

³ The first research brief focuses on the overall landscape of TK, including number of districts offering TK and the percentage of districts that offered stand-alone TK classrooms and TK/kindergarten combination classrooms. The second research brief compares characteristics of TK classrooms with kindergarten classrooms. Both briefs are available at <http://tkstudy.airprojects.org/about-the-study/reports>.

⁴ Focus groups were conducted in English and Spanish. All parents of TK students at case study schools were invited to participate.

more challenging in the second year.⁵ This may reflect the increased number of children eligible in Year 2 (October and November birthdays compared to just November birthdays in Year 1). Direct parent requests are more visible to districts (compared to simply opting out); thus, the increased number of vocal parents (even if the percentage of parents requesting enrollment in kindergarten remained constant) might pose a greater challenge to districts.⁶ The state or other statewide organizations might help to ameliorate these challenges by continuing to work on raising awareness about TK and its purpose as a developmentally appropriate program.

Exhibit 1. Challenges When Recruiting Students for TK, 2012–13 School Year



***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05

Note: “Not a challenge” response category not shown; percentage totals may not match due to rounding. K = kindergarten; ECE = early childhood education.

Source: In-depth district survey (n = 120)

In addition, more than three quarters of districts in 2012–13 reported that parents’ lack of awareness of the TK program was a challenge for their recruitment efforts (78 percent). Other recruitment challenges reported by districts in the first year included parents’ hesitation to send their children to a program they did not understand (71 percent), and their concern that TK was a remedial program (40 percent). For the most part, these issues continued to challenge districts in the 2013–14 school year as well.

How Did Parents Decide Whether to Enroll Their Children in TK?

When parents of TK students were asked, in focus groups, about their decision to enroll their children in TK in the first year, they generally expressed appreciation for having been given the option. Financial considerations were a key motivating factor for some parents to enroll their children in TK. With the change in kindergarten age eligibility, the options for parents of children born in November would otherwise be limited to preschool, keeping their children at home, or another care arrangement. Many parents viewed TK as a convenient and economical option that would help to give their children an advantage going into kindergarten. Some parents also

“I thought it was such a good opportunity, because basically it’s free pre-K. And you know how expensive those [programs] are. So we grabbed the opportunity, and we told our friends about it.”

-Parent

⁵ District administrator surveys from the 2012–13 and 2013–14 school years were used to derive these results. Respondents were asked the same questions regarding TK recruitment and enrollment in both years, and comparisons were made for districts participating in both the implementation phase of the study and the quality and impacts phase of the study currently in progress.

⁶ District administrator interviews planned for 2015 will further explore outreach strategies and challenges among study districts.

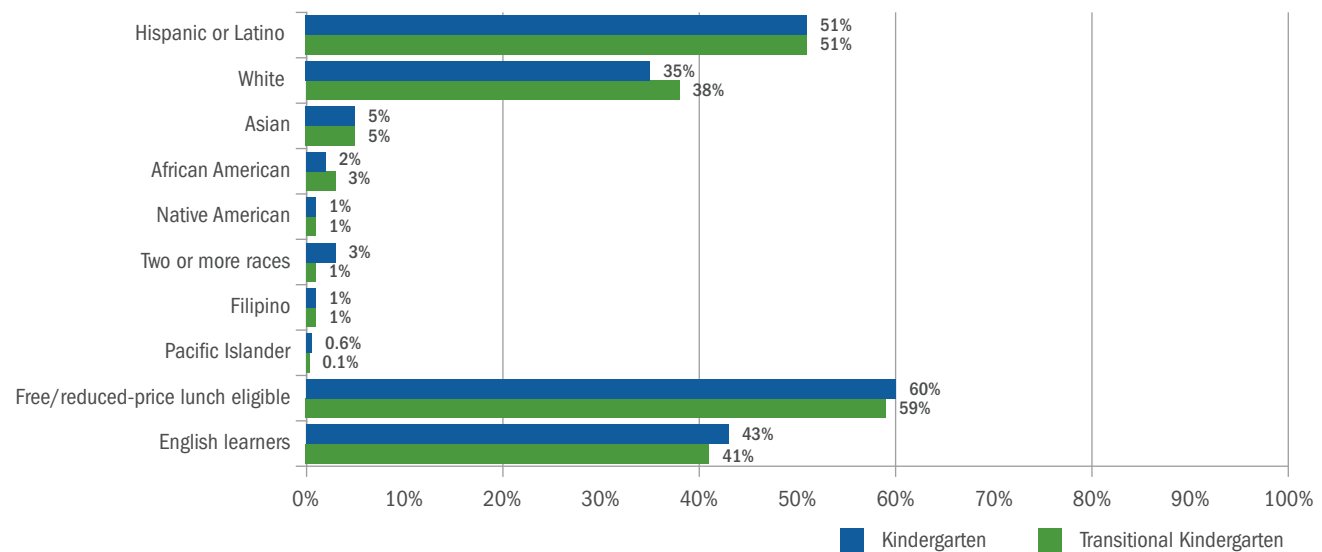
highlighted full-day programs as especially appealing because the full-day programs provided more hours of schooling for children, which can be critical for working parents.

Although the study team did not conduct focus groups with parents who chose not to enroll their children in TK, reports from district administrators and comments from TK parents who relayed the concerns expressed by their friends who opted out of TK suggest that uncertainty about the new program played a role in the decision not to enroll. TK parents reported that other parents they knew held the belief that TK was more academic than other early childhood program options, and parents wanted a program that instead emphasized more opportunities for socialization. For example, a TK parent reported, “The [other parents I know] thought it was going to be too academic, and they didn’t want academics. They wanted more play, more [socialization]. They did not want papers. They thought it was going to be papers and worksheets. They wanted more of the preschool [experience].” Other parents may have opted to stay with their early learning or care arrangement already in place rather than switch to an untested program.

Who Actually Enrolled in TK?

Given variation in both districts’ outreach efforts and parents’ alternative care options, the study team investigated whether there were differential rates of enrollment for particular groups of students in TK. Despite district recruitment challenges and some uncertainty among parents, TK served students from all demographic groups in its first year (Exhibit 2). In fact, comparisons of TK students and kindergarten students reveal no significant differences in race/ethnicity, free or reduced-price lunch status, or English learner status.⁷ This finding suggests that TK was indeed accessible to all groups of students.

Exhibit 2. Comparisons of TK and Kindergarten Enrollment Overall, by Demographic Characteristics, 2012–13 School Year



Note: Differences are not statistically significant unless noted. K = kindergarten.

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

⁷ 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, English learner status, free or reduced-price lunch eligibility, and race/ethnicity. Kindergarten figures for English learner status and race/ethnicity come from kindergarten enrollment records from the California Department of Education’s CBEDS for the 2012–13 school year. Free or reduced-price lunch eligibility is not available from the California Department of Education by grade level; therefore, kindergarten rates reflect the overall free or reduced-price lunch eligibility 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).

In the first year of implementation, most districts reported that they did not target any particular groups of students for their recruitment efforts. However, in the second year of implementation (2013–14), more districts reported targeting their outreach toward students who could benefit most from TK. For example, of the 10 districts that participated in the study in both years, only two districts reported that they targeted children with little or no preschool experience for the 2012–13 school year, but seven districts reported doing so for 2013–14. Similarly, although only three of the 10 districts reported giving extra attention to recruiting English learners, children with special needs, or children who were at risk for other reasons in 2012–13, more than twice as many districts reported focusing recruitment efforts on these children in 2013–14 (eight that targeted English learners, seven that targeted children with special needs, and seven that targeted otherwise “at risk” students). With the significant challenge of getting a new program up and running in the first year, targeting simply may not have been a priority for districts in 2012–13. However, as a result of this change in district approach, the demographics of the 2013–14 TK cohort may look slightly different.⁸

What Did Parents Think of Their Children’s TK Experiences?

Overall, parents of TK students who participated in focus groups described positive experiences with the program. Several parents highlighted positive outcomes for their children across developmental domains. One parent explained, “I believe that the level of learning has been at the kindergarten level. They’ve learned numbers, letters, shapes, colors—a great deal.” Parents reported feeling that the extra year of instruction would position their children to be at the top of their kindergarten class the following year.

“I think it has given [my son] a jump start on mathematics and reading—so that when he does transition into kindergarten, he will be much [further] ahead.”

-Parent

In addition, parents mentioned seeing gains in their children’s social and emotional development. For example, one parent explained that, through TK, her son “learned quite a bit—especially the social part. He loves going to school.” Another parent added, “The children learned a great deal about how to be responsible in the classroom.” Parents also noted that their children’s patience and focus improved—they are able to sit still and pay attention, which will be expected in kindergarten.

Summary and Conclusions

Findings from this study point to the challenges districts faced in recruiting children for TK during the first year of TK implementation. Most districts reported that parents frequently wanted to enroll their children in kindergarten rather than in TK. District administrators also described other parents who were not aware of the TK program or who were concerned that TK was a remedial program and did not want to send their children to a program they did not understand. Despite these challenges, there were no particular demographic groups of students disproportionately left out of TK. District survey results compared with statewide kindergarten enrollment data from the California Department of Education reveal no significant differences in ethnicity, poverty, or English learner status between students in TK and students in kindergarten.

⁸ Demographic information from the state data system will be available to examine potential demographic shifts in spring 2015.

It is important to note that the results in this brief are from the first year of implementation, when many parents lacked awareness of the program and districts had little time to plan for parent outreach. Many parents participating in focus groups told the study team that TK was an economical alternative to another year in preschool or child care that also supported their children's kindergarten readiness, although these parents also said that they knew parents who were afraid that the program would be "too academic." Recent policy changes have made State Preschool available as an affordable option for low-income families with TK age-eligible children. This change may have implications for district outreach to families regarding TK enrollment, because some parents now have more choices. This change also may impact the demographics of students in TK. Tracking these trends going forward will be important.

In focus groups, parents who did enroll their children in TK reported positive experiences with the program; they expressed appreciation for having the option to send their children to TK and felt TK was a positive experience for their children. Following up on these preliminary positive reports, results from a large-scale impact study, now under way, will help us learn more about whether TK is having its intended impact on kindergarten readiness.

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

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About AIR

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