



Universal Prekindergarten Expansion in California

Progress and Opportunities

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Executive Summary

In 2021, California committed to providing universal prekindergarten (UPK) for all 4-year-olds and expanding access for income-eligible 3-year-olds by 2025–26. California UPK includes several early learning programs, including transitional kindergarten (TK), the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), Head Start, and locally funded early learning programs.

To support UPK expansion, California’s legislature and administration established the Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant in 2021, which allocated \$200 million to all local education agencies (LEAs) serving kindergarteners, which include school districts, charter schools, and county offices of education. The 2022 budget added another \$300 million to the UPK Planning and Implementation Grant program, with funds released in 2023. LEAs may use the funds to support TK and CSPP, as well as to strengthen partnerships among prekindergarten (PreK) providers. The California Department of Education surveyed all grant recipients in August 2023 about their UPK programs.

This report provides an update on UPK implementation across the state through an analysis of survey responses from 1,384 LEAs, which represent almost all (95%) public school districts and two thirds (65%) of charter schools that serve elementary grades. Findings provide insights into LEAs’ progress in UPK implementation related to service delivery models, facilities and transportation, instruction and assessment, strategies to support student needs, workforce development, implementation challenges, and technical assistance needs.

Key Takeaways

- **Most LEAs offered TK at all elementary school sites.** In the 2022–23 school year, 81% of LEAs offered TK at all elementary sites, and 82% of LEAs offered a full-day TK option. Forty-six percent of UPK classrooms in California were TK stand-alone classes; 33% were California State Preschool Program, Head Start, or other early learning classes; 18% were TK and kindergarten combination classes; and the rest (2%) were combination classes of TK with either CSPP or locally funded preschool.
- **Half of California’s LEAs expanded TK faster than legislatively required through early-admittance TK.** LEAs are required to expand children’s age eligibility gradually each year until all 4-year-olds are age-eligible by the 2025–26 school year; however, LEAs have discretion to offer early-admittance transitional kindergarten, which would allow children to enroll before the legislatively determined age eligibility. LEAs that offer early-admittance TK do not receive state funding for educating early-admittance TK students until their 5th birthday and must cover the costs themselves. Fifty percent of all LEAs offered early-admittance TK in the 2022–23 school year, and 48% of all LEAs planned to continue offering early-admittance TK in 2023–24.
- **Many LEAs want to serve more PreK students through the California State Preschool Program.** Over 300 LEAs currently run a CSPP program for 3- and 4-year-old children. Of these districts, about a third have applied to expand their program or plan to expand in the coming year. Among LEAs that do not yet have a program, 12% plan to apply for a contract in the future.

- **Most LEAs had sufficient classroom space for projected TK enrollment, although facilities remain a top challenge in UPK implementation.** Eighty-two percent of LEAs reported that they had sufficient classroom space for anticipated enrollment in the 2025–26 school year. However, the 249 LEAs (18% of all respondents) that indicated not having enough classroom space reported needing a total of 946 additional UPK classrooms to accommodate projected enrollment by 2025–26. (LEAs reported a total of 15,425 existing UPK classrooms statewide in the 2022–23 school year.) Furthermore, in an open-ended question on UPK challenges, more than one third of LEAs noted facilities-related challenges such as finding funding to update existing facilities to meet requirements, having age-appropriate bathrooms and playgrounds, and improving spaces for early learners.
- **Just over half of LEAs reported using curriculum that is specific to literacy, math, or social and emotional learning.** High-quality curricula that focus on specific areas of child development are linked to improved child outcomes. Just over half of LEAs reported using a social-emotional learning curriculum (56%), 52% reported using a PreK curriculum specific to literacy, and less than one third (30%) are using a PreK math-specific curriculum in their TK classrooms. One fourth of all LEAs (26%) used kindergarten curriculum in their TK classrooms. In the open-ended response question, several LEAs reported challenges with choosing or implementing appropriate curriculum, indicating a need for state guidance in this area.
- **Over one fourth of LEAs did not offer supports for multilingual learners.** Two fifths of California public school students speak multiple languages; however, 27% of LEAs reported that they did not offer a dual language program, home language program, or home language support to assist multilingual learners in the 2022–23 school year. About 4 in 10 of the LEAs not offering a language model have student populations in which one third or more of the students are English learners. The majority of all LEAs (57%) offer only English instruction with home language supports, and 10% offer only dual language programs.
- **Most LEAs had sufficient staffing for lead TK teachers, but many struggled to find classroom aides and expect future challenges in finding staff who meet upcoming teacher requirements.** Ninety-two percent of LEAs reported that they had enough fully qualified TK teachers to accommodate TK classrooms. Across all LEAs, respondents reported that just 1% of lead teacher positions were vacant in the beginning and middle of 2022–23. However, they struggled to find classroom aides, resulting in a statewide vacancy rate of 12% at the beginning of the 2022–23 school year and 8% in the middle of the year. Additionally, LEAs cited staff recruitment and retention as a common challenge facing UPK implementation. In particular, they are facing difficulties finding staff who meet the early childhood education requirements for TK teachers that will go into effect in 2025–26, when all TK classes receiving state funding will be required to be staffed by lead teachers with a valid teaching credential as well as 24 units of coursework in early childhood education or child development, a Child Development Teacher Permit, or equivalent experience.
- **LEAs prioritized offering teachers professional development in literacy, social and emotional learning, and curriculum use, and over half sought additional assistance in offering coaching and mentoring supports.** In 2022–23, the most common professional development topics LEAs offered to TK teachers were children’s literacy and language development (53%), children’s social-emotional

development (48%), and curriculum selection and implementation (32%). Over half of LEAs (52%) also noted that technical assistance on coaching and mentoring would be most helpful in supporting professional development for UPK implementation.

- **Funding is a top concern for many LEAs as they expand UPK.** Over one tenth of LEAs noted that securing sustainable funding and resources for UPK implementation was one of the biggest challenges they faced in the 2022–23 school year. Costs associated with staffing, facilities upgrades, and curriculum development often exceeded the funding provided by the state, placing a strain on LEAs' budgets. This concern was also prevalent among basic aid districts that do not receive additional funding for TK students.

In addition to statewide insights, the survey revealed promising practices and wide access with UPK expansion in California's four largest districts during their first year of implementation. Los Angeles Unified, San Diego Unified, Fresno Unified, and Long Beach Unified educate about 800,000 students in total, or 14% of California's public school students. All offered full-day TK and CSPP within their districts, provided dual language programs in TK, used domain-specific literacy curriculum, implemented established early childhood assessments, provided professional development on early learning to school leaders, and expected to have sufficient classroom space to meet UPK enrollment by 2025–26.

Overall, LEAs are making promising progress toward expanding UPK across the state. However, the survey data from the 2022–23 school year indicate that LEAs are facing challenges with facilities, staffing, and sustainable funding, and they may need additional supports to implement developmentally appropriate and high-quality learning practices that support the needs of all PreK students. LEAs also requested a wide range of technical assistance from the state, most commonly related to professional development, guidance on updating facilities, support in surveying parents' UPK needs, and projecting and increasing UPK enrollment. The findings in this report may help policymakers and practitioners identify areas for additional investments and supports. As California moves forward with the expansion of UPK, more research and data will be needed to monitor progress and needs.

Introduction

In 2021, California committed to providing universal prekindergarten (UPK) for all 4-year-olds and income-eligible 3-year-olds by 2025–26. California UPK includes several early learning programs, including transitional kindergarten (TK), the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), Head Start, and locally funded early learning programs. The largest new investment in UPK is the expansion of TK, a district-based prekindergarten (PreK) program. TK was created in 2010 and is the only UPK program that is free and universally available as part of California’s public school system. Under the new law established in 2021, eligibility for TK is scheduled to expand to all 4-year-olds by extending the eligibility age by 2 to 3 additional months each year. By the 2025–26 school year, all 4-year-olds will be eligible for TK. In addition to TK expansion, the legislature made new investments in CSPP, a preschool program for income-eligible 3- and 4-year-old children. CSPP is state-funded and can be provided by local education agencies (LEAs) and community-based organizations.

To support UPK expansion, California’s legislature and administration established the Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant in 2021, with close to \$200 million available to all LEAs—school districts, charter schools, and county offices of education. LEAs may use the funds to support TK and CSPP, as well as to strengthen partnerships among PreK providers. The 2022 budget added another \$300 million to the UPK Planning and Implementation Grant program, with funds released in 2023.

This report shares an update on California’s progress toward UPK from the 2022–23 UPK Planning and Implementation Grant Survey, administered by the California Department of Education in August 2023 to all LEAs offering UPK. It builds on the Learning Policy Institute’s May 2023 report that examined 1,108 LEAs’ initial plans for UPK expansion, as captured in the 2021–22 UPK Planning and Implementation Grant Survey.¹

This report analyzes responses from 1,384 LEAs in California, which represent 817 of the 862 public school districts (95%) and 567 of the 875 charter schools (65%) that offer elementary grades in the state.² Findings from this analysis provide key insights into LEA plans and implementation related to service delivery models, facilities and transportation, instruction and assessment, strategies to support student needs, workforce development, teacher and school leader professional development, implementation challenges, and technical assistance needs. It notes differences between charter schools and non-charters, as well as between small, medium, and large LEAs, when differences are statistically significant.³ In addition to providing descriptive statistics, this report includes illustrative quotes drawn from the open-ended survey questions.

Universal Prekindergarten Delivery Models

Local education agencies make several decisions that impact children's universal prekindergarten access and experience, including where to offer transitional kindergarten, whether they will offer early-admittance TK, what other early learning programs to offer, how long the school day should be, and whether to offer expanded-day learning. All LEAs are required to offer TK. LEAs are encouraged, but not required, to offer the California State Preschool Program (CSPP) and Head Start, and to partner with community-based providers that offer other UPK options.

This section of the report provides findings on how LEAs structured and combined programs to offer UPK during the 2022–23 school year. Survey responses indicate that the majority offered full-day TK at each of their elementary school sites, and about half of LEAs expanded TK eligibility faster than the legislated rollout schedule. Most UPK classes were TK or CSPP stand-alone classrooms, but TK–Kindergarten combination classes were also common.

Where Did LEAs Offer Transitional Kindergarten?

Research shows that children are more likely to be enrolled in TK when it is offered at the school where they will attend kindergarten.⁴ In the 2022–23 school year, 81% of all responding LEAs (74% of school districts and 92% of charter schools) reported offering TK at all of their elementary sites. Among the 9,000 total elementary school sites reported by LEAs, 88% of elementary schools offered TK in 2022–23 and 93% plan to offer it in 2023–24.⁵ Offering TK at all elementary sites within a district may provide greater access and, consequently, higher enrollment into TK.

How Many LEAs Offered Early-Admittance Transitional Kindergarten?

California's rollout of universal TK will expand children's age eligibility gradually each year until all 4-year-olds are eligible by the 2025–26 school year. However, LEAs have discretion to offer ETK, which allows children to enroll before the legislatively determined age eligibility.

LEAs that offer early-admittance TK do not receive state funding for educating these students until their 5th birthday. Consequently, if LEAs elect to offer early-admittance TK, they must cover the costs of educating early-admittance TK students with funds from their existing budgets. Despite this added cost, half of all LEAs committed to expanding TK more quickly than legislatively required and offered early-admittance TK in the 2022–23 school year, and almost half (48%) of all LEAs planned to continue offering early-admittance TK in 2023–24.

LEAs that offer early-admittance TK do not receive state funding for educating these students until their 5th birthday. Despite this added cost, half of all LEAs committed to expanding TK more quickly than legislatively required.

A medium-sized, suburban school district respondent commented on the district's decision to offer early-admittance TK:

In the 2021–22 school year, the TK program was offered only to those students who turned 5 between July 1 and end of the first semester. When California announced the timeline of extending the eligibility window, [the district] determined that allowing all students who will have their 4th birthday by September 1 of the school year was in the best interest of the students.

How Did LEAs Offer UPK Classrooms?

LEAs may provide PreK in several ways. All public LEAs are required to offer TK. Those with qualifying students may apply for CSPP and Head Start contracts and may choose to partner with community-based providers.

In the 2022–23 school year, almost half (46%) of the state's 15,425 UPK classrooms were TK stand-alone classrooms. One third (33%) of UPK classrooms operated in LEAs were stand-alone classes for non-TK programs such as CSPP, Head Start, or other early learning programs. Eighteen percent were TK–Kindergarten combination classes, and the rest (2%) were combination classes of TK and either CSPP or locally funded preschool (see [Figure 1](#)).

How classes are formed may have implications for the quality of instruction. TK stand-alone classes serve a narrower age range and may be more developmentally appropriate than TK–Kindergarten combination classes. A study of California TK classrooms, prior to universal TK expansion, found that TK stand-alone classes spent more time on child-directed activities, art, physical activities, and social and emotional learning than TK–Kindergarten combination classes.⁶ Additionally, TK classrooms combined with other public early learning programs such as CSPP or Head Start must meet higher quality requirements for teacher qualifications, class sizes, wraparound services, and facility standards, and they can facilitate integrated and socioeconomically diverse classrooms.⁷

A charter school respondent shared the impact of switching from a TK–Kindergarten combination to a TK stand-alone class:

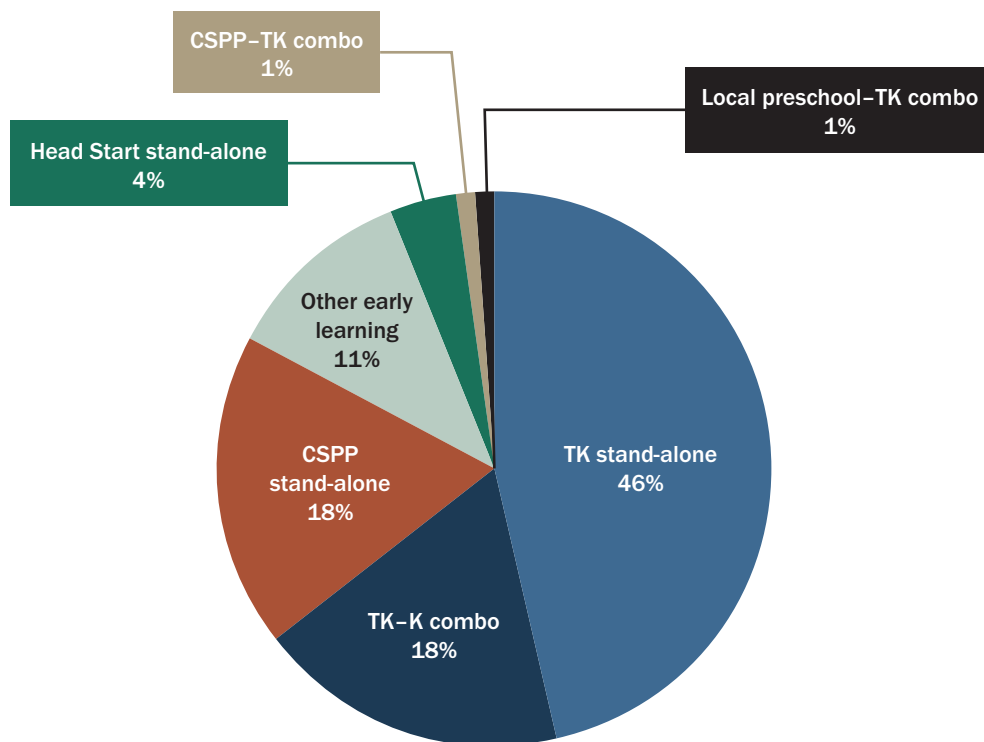
We were able to remove our TK–[Kindergarten] combo class, which we had in 2021–22, and instead have a TK-only class for the 2022–23 school year, which doubled our TK enrollment. The TK-only class allowed the teacher to teach developmentally appropriate lessons in a much easier fashion. We wanted to really emphasize TK being a different experience for students than kindergarten, whereas before our emphasis was on teaching kindergarten standards at an adjusted rate.

LEA size appears to be related to the ability to offer TK stand-alone classes: Almost all medium-sized LEAs (96%) and all large LEAs offered TK stand-alone classes in 2022–23, compared to 66% of small LEAs. Small LEAs have fewer TK students and resources, which makes offering a stand-alone TK classroom difficult. A survey respondent from a rural school district shared its challenges as a small LEA:

We are a very small, geographically necessary, rural school. We have 39 students enrolled. Our TK is rolled into a K–2, self-contained classroom, and there is not sufficient need to open a preschool program. TK in a multigrade classroom is proving to be difficult in regards to providing developmentally appropriate instruction and care within the district’s budget and within our current facility.

Given the challenges that small districts face in creating stand-alone classrooms, LEAs may benefit from assistance in running TK combination classrooms that are developmentally appropriate for children of different ages and, where feasible, support in transitioning to stand-alone classrooms.

Figure 1. UPK Classroom Models Offered by LEAs in the 2022–23 School Year



Notes: UPK = universal prekindergarten; CSPP = California State Preschool Program; TK = transitional kindergarten; K = kindergarten

Source: California Department of Education. (2023). Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant Survey.

How Many LEAs Offered Full-Day Transitional Kindergarten?

Research indicates that a longer preschool day can have positive impacts on school readiness outcomes.⁸ Additionally, a longer preschool day may better meet the needs of working families. For TK, LEAs have discretion to offer a part-day option (3 to 4 hours) or a full-day option (4 or more hours), each of which may be supplemented and lengthened with other early education or expanded learning programs (see [Table 1](#)). Overall, 82% of all LEAs offered full-day options in the 2022–23 school year, with 75% offering only full-day, 18% offering only part-day, and 7% offering both options.

A representative from a large, urban elementary school district shared how family and community engagement influenced its decision to offer full-day TK:

[We] conducted town hall meetings to solicit the input of the community as it related to transitional kindergarten and the different components of the program, including the transition from part-day TK classes to full-day instructional days. This change was made in an effort to meet the needs of the community, which expressed a desire for full-day programs to best meet working families and other child care needs.

To offer expanded-day options, or programming that extends past the full day to meet working families' needs or enhance program quality, LEAs can combine other early education or expanded learning programs with the TK instructional day. These programs can be offered on the same LEA site as the TK program or at a different location through a community-based organization and may vary in hours and quality. In 2022–23, LEAs were more likely to combine TK with programs on their own campus: 78% of LEAs combined TK on an LEA site with expanded learning programs, and 10% of LEAs combined TK with CSPP on an LEA site. Six percent of LEAs or less combined TK with other programs at a community-based site, either through expanded learning programs (6%), CSPP (1%), or another community-based preschool program (1%). (See [Table 1](#).)

Some LEAs have developed partnerships with community organizations to offer early learning programming that meets family needs. A small, rural school district respondent shared:

[Parents of] students enrolled are informed about the [Expanded Learning Opportunities Program] while also discussing the length of a long 9-hour day and the developmental needs of young children. Families who enroll in the [Expanded Learning Opportunities Program] are served and supported without cost. We collaborate with our neighboring family preschools and support our preschools who may be serving our 4-year-olds with meals during non-school time (30 non-school days) as well as transportation to and from school.

Overall, large LEAs were less likely than small and medium-sized LEAs⁹ to offer only full-day TK options (48% of large LEAs, compared to 78% and 72%, respectively). This difference may be due to the fact that large LEAs serve a greater number of students and would need more resources and capacity to offer full-day TK classrooms; alternatively, large LEAs might have sufficient capacity to offer both part- and full-day options in accordance with family preferences. However, large LEAs were more likely to offer expanded-day options in addition to their full-day programs by combining TK with expanded learning programs on an LEA site (97%) than medium (88%) and small (73%) LEAs, indicating a potential need for partnerships to offer expanded learning in smaller districts.

**Table 1. Expanded Learning Programs Combined
With the TK Instructional Day in 2022–23**

Program	% LEAs
Expanded learning programs on an LEA site (After School Education and Safety, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Expanded Learning Opportunities Program)	78%
California State Preschool Program on an LEA site	10%
LEA-funded or locally funded preschool	8%
Expanded learning programs at a community-based organization site (After School Education and Safety, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Expanded Learning Opportunities Program)	6%
Head Start	3%
State-subsidized child care (not including California State Preschool Program)	2%
LEA preschool funded with Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act funds	2%
California State Preschool Program at a community-based organization site	1%
Other community-based organization preschool	1%
Other	8%
None	14%

Source: California Department of Education. (2023). Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant Survey.

How Many LEAs Ran a California State Preschool Program?

As TK expands, California policymakers have promised to continue supporting CSPP, Head Start, and other early learning programs within California’s UPK system to serve 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds whose families prefer these programs.¹⁰ LEAs and community-based organizations may offer CSPP, a state-funded preschool program for 3- and 4-year-olds who qualify based on family income or other factors. If a CSPP contractor wishes to serve more children than their current contract, they must apply to expand their contract. To make it easier for CSPP providers to serve younger children, the state has raised the reimbursement rate for 3-year-olds.

In 2022–23, 25% of LEAs (343) operated a CSPP contract. Among these LEAs, 2% noted plans to relinquish or reduce CSPP services in future years. Nineteen percent said they applied to expand their existing CSPP contract in 2022–23, 5% said they applied for a new CSPP contract, and 12% plan to apply to expand their contract in future years. Among LEAs that did not operate a CSPP in 2022–23, 12% planned to contract with CSPP in future years. These data are promising, given concerns that TK may displace CSPP programs.

Facilities and Transportation

Local education agencies were surveyed about their facilities' needs for universal prekindergarten, as well as about their plans to provide transportation to transitional kindergarten students. Most LEAs (82%) indicated that they have sufficient facility space to meet projected TK enrollment, although facilities are still a top concern for many. Most LEAs did not offer transportation to TK students, which may have implications for accessibility.

What Are LEAs' Facility Needs?

Because all LEAs must offer TK, TK expansion will require LEAs to update or add classrooms, bathrooms, and play areas that meet regulatory requirements and are developmentally appropriate for early learners. Overall, one third (37%) of all LEAs used UPK Planning and Implementation Grant funding to update their facilities.

Survey data provided insight into whether LEAs' facilities were meeting UPK expansion needs in terms of having adequate physical classroom space, meeting minimum kindergarten standards, and providing developmentally appropriate spaces for early learners.

The majority of LEAs (82%) indicated they have adequate classroom space to meet the projected enrollment of TK students by 2025–26. However, medium-sized LEAs were less likely than small and large LEAs to say they would have enough classroom space by 2025–26 (77%, compared to 84% of small LEAs and 83% of large LEAs). The 249 LEAs that stated they did not have enough classroom space indicated needing a total of 946 more classrooms across California to meet projected TK enrollment by 2025–26. These classrooms are in addition to the existing 15,425 UPK classrooms in the state in the 2022–23 school year.

A medium-sized, suburban school district respondent elaborated on the district's challenges in finding adequate space for TK expansion:

The greatest challenge we've faced in our district is with facilities. Several schools are struggling to find adequate classroom space to meet the needs of our rapidly expanding program. Ideally, all preschool and TK classrooms would have sinks and restrooms [and] would be close to the enclosed kinder[garten] playground and near the kinder[garten] classrooms. Several schools are at enrollment capacity and have struggled to find an open classroom environment that meets the needs of our youngest learners. In addition to classroom facilities, restroom facilities have presented as an obstacle. TK students who are not yet toilet independent have unique needs, and our students need direct access to TK-sized restroom facilities and the staffing to support their toileting needs while at school.

In terms of meeting minimum standards, 81% of all LEAs said their classrooms meet kindergarten standards in California's Title 5 regulations, but larger LEAs were less likely to meet these requirements: 84% of small LEAs said their TK classrooms met kindergarten standards, compared to 77% of medium LEAs and 67% of large LEAs. As larger LEAs serve more students across the state, there may be a notable

percentage of TK students who are learning in classrooms that do not meet California's kindergarten standards. Seventy-eight percent of all LEAs indicated that all their classrooms had necessary adaptive equipment for children with disabilities.

Despite the majority of LEAs stating that they have adequate classroom space and that their classrooms meet kindergarten standards, one third of LEAs cited facilities as a common challenge in open-ended responses (see [Biggest Challenges in UPK Implementation](#)). In these open-ended responses, LEAs noted challenges with providing developmentally appropriate classrooms, and many sought guidance and funding to provide age-appropriate bathrooms and playgrounds or improve spaces for early learners.

Although classroom shortages have not been as acute as expected given the speed of TK expansion, these data indicate a significant need for new construction and facility upgrades across the state to ensure that children are learning in appropriate environments.

How Many LEAs Offered Transportation for Students?

LEAs in California are not required to provide transportation for all students; however, federal law requires public transportation for certain student populations, such as students with disabilities and students experiencing homelessness.¹¹

In the 2022–23 school year, 28% percent of LEAs offered transportation to all children who wanted it, and 16% provided transportation for some children, primarily to and from the TK program. Among the LEAs providing transportation for some children, offerings primarily depended on whether students met federal criteria requiring transportation or the location of students' homes in relation to the school campus or district boundary.

Offering transportation to students may improve the accessibility of UPK. Research has shown that proximity and convenience, including provision of transportation, play a strong role in the decisions made by low-income, working-class families when selecting an early childhood education provider.¹² Additionally, for families relying on multiple programs to meet the full hours of care they need, offering transportation between LEA-based programs and other early learning programs may also improve LEAs' ability to meet families' needs.

Instruction and Assessment

This section focuses on the curriculum and assessments used in transitional kindergarten classrooms, as well as how local education agencies supported social and emotional learning. Overall, LEAs reported using a wide range of curricula that vary across content areas, whether developed by the district or by individual teachers, and the age group for which the curricula were developed. Most LEAs assessed children's learning in TK using locally based assessments, while fewer used established preschool assessments. LEAs reported using a variety of strategies to support social-emotional learning, including learning through play.

What Curricula Did LEAs Use in Transitional Kindergarten?

Because California does not mandate specific curriculum for TK classrooms, LEAs have discretion in what curricula they use.¹³ However, the legislation requires TK curriculum to align with the [California Preschool Learning Foundations](#),¹⁴ which were being updated at the time of the survey.

LEAs reported using a variety of curricula in their TK programs (see [Table 2](#)). The most commonly used were a social-emotional curriculum (56%), a PreK literacy-specific curriculum (52%), district- or teacher-developed math units for TK (45%), and district- or teacher-developed literacy units for TK (42%).

Table 2. Curricula Used in Transitional Kindergarten in 2022–23

Curriculum approach	% LEAs
Social-emotional curriculum	56%
PreK literacy-specific curriculum	52%
District- or teacher-developed math units for TK	45%
District- or teacher-developed literacy units for TK	42%
Whole child or comprehensive PreK curriculum	41%
PreK math-specific curriculum	30%
Kindergarten curriculum (not PreK)	26%
Whole child approach or philosophy for PreK	13%
Other [open response]	6%

Note: The California Department of Education offered examples of potential curriculum approaches within the question options. The full list of examples can be found on the [2022–23 UPK Planning and Implementation Grant Program – Local Education Agency Planning Template](#) on the California Department of Education's website.

Source: California Department of Education. (2023). Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant Survey.

Research has shown that domain-specific curricula, or curricula that address a specific subset of children's development, have been more successful in improving child outcomes, as compared to comprehensive curricula (covering all developmental domains) or teacher-created curricula.¹⁵ Experts suggest integrating curricula to ensure that all domains of development are addressed in the school day.¹⁶

Research has shown that curricula that address a specific subset of children's development have been more successful in improving child outcomes.

LEAs' curriculum choices also differ in the targeted age groups for which they were developed. While LEAs are predominately using PreK-specific curricula, about one quarter (26%) of LEAs are using kindergarten curriculum in their TK classrooms. This may be a concern if kindergarten curricula are not designed to support multiage and multistage approaches to teaching and learning. Additionally, if curriculum is repeated from grade to grade, children may miss opportunities to develop new skills.¹⁷ Large LEAs were less likely to use kindergarten curriculum in TK classrooms than medium and small LEAs (12% of large LEAs, compared to 22% and 28%, respectively).

A medium-sized, urban elementary school district respondent described the changes the district made to offer more developmentally appropriate instruction:

Our instructional approach[es] for our TK classes prior to 2022–23 were focused on kindergarten standards, and classrooms were structured to mirror kindergarten. In the 2022–23 school year we converted our TK classes to support a more [age-appropriate] program, focused on the preschool learning foundations 48–60 months bridging to the kindergarten standards. ... We incorporated small-group-driven instructional days with facilitated play to address developmental appropriateness.

The variability among LEAs' curricula, the content areas for which they have curricula, and the fact that curricula were not designed for preschool-age children may indicate a need for additional state assistance on PreK curriculum and the need to educate instructional leaders on the new Preschool–TK Learning Foundations.

What Assessments Did LEAs Use in Transitional Kindergarten?

Early childhood assessments can support developmentally appropriate learning practices for students by providing educators with information to guide instruction and child development supports.

Two thirds (66%) of LEAs used LEA-based grade-level benchmarks and report cards for TK (see [Table 3](#)). Other common assessments used by LEAs were the Desired Results Developmental Profile (20%) and Work Sampling System (13%), observational assessments specifically designed for early learners. Eight percent of LEAs stated they did not use a common TK assessment during the 2022–23 school year. LEAs also wrote in assessments that they used, including the ESGI, DIBELS, NWEA MAP, STAR, iReady, and Core Growth.

Table 3. Assessments Used in TK Classrooms in 2022–23

TK assessment	% LEAs
LEA-based grade-level benchmarks and a report card	66%
Desired Results Developmental Profile	20%
Work sampling system	13%
The LEA did not use a common TK assessment	8%
BRIGANCE Early Childhood Screen	7%
Ages and Stages Questionnaire	6%
Teaching Strategies GOLD	2%
Other (describe, open response)	23%
Unsure	5%

Source: California Department of Education. (2023). Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant Survey.

Research suggests using assessments that are tailored to early learners; LEA-based assessments that mirror those of older grades may be developmentally inappropriate for young children.¹⁸ Given the common use of LEA-based grade-level benchmarks and the percentage of LEAs without a common TK assessment, it may be useful for the state to provide additional assistance on best practices in early childhood assessment.

How Did LEAs Support Students' Social and Emotional Learning?

Preschoolers' social, emotional, and academic development benefits from supportive and developmentally appropriate learning environments. LEAs used a variety of strategies in 2022–23 to create such learning environments for early learners, most commonly through promoting play-based learning (69%) and designing developmentally appropriate learning environments (62%). (See [Table 4.](#))

Table 4. Most Common Strategies Used to Support Social-Emotional Learning in 2022–23

Strategies to support social-emotional learning	% LEAs
Play-based learning	69%
Developmentally appropriate learning environments	62%
Lesson plans or curriculum on social-emotional learning	34%
Developmental observations	33%
Staff development on social-emotional learning	22%
Offered open-ended, self-directed learning opportunities	19%
Provided training for staff on the Center on the Social-Emotional Foundations for Early Learning Pyramid Model	14%
Implemented the Center on the Social-Emotional Foundations for Early Learning Pyramid Model	5%
Other (open response)	3%

Source: California Department of Education. (2023). Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant Survey.

Supporting Student Needs

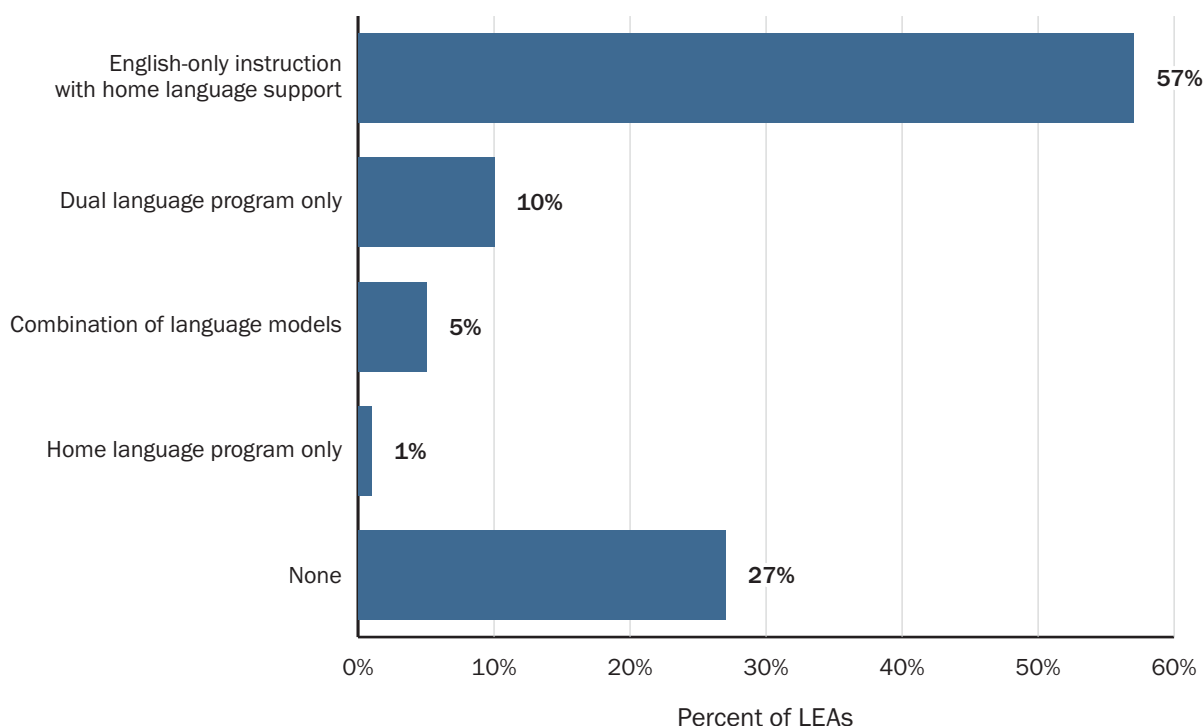
Local education agencies were asked several questions about how they supported specific transitional kindergarten student needs, including the needs of multilingual learners and students with disabilities. LEAs also reported how they were supporting the toileting needs of younger TK students, a key challenge for many TK programs. Most LEAs offered English-only instruction with home language supports, while just over a quarter had no specific classroom language model to serve multilingual learners. LEAs reported using a variety of strategies to work with children with special needs and to support toileting.

How Did LEAs Support Multilingual Transitional Kindergarteners?

Over half (59%) of children under age 5 in California are multilingual learners, meaning more than one language is spoken in their home.¹⁹ In the 2021–22 school year, 29% of California students attending kindergarten or TK were identified as English learners.²⁰

LEAs were asked which classroom language models they used in the 2022–23 school year to support TK students in learning English and/or their home language; respondents were able to select multiple options (see Figure 2). Fifty-seven percent of LEAs provided English-only instruction with home language support, 10% offered dual language programs only, 5% offered a combination of language models, and 1% offered a home language program only.

Figure 2. TK Language Models Used in 2022–23



Source: California Department of Education. (2023). Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant Survey.

Providing in-classroom strategies and practices that support the acquisition of both English and home languages can benefit multilingual learners in the long term.²¹ However, more than one fourth (27%) of LEAs did not provide any classroom language model in TK classrooms to support multilingual students. On average, these LEAs have an English learner enrollment of 15%, lower than the state average; however, 38% of them have student populations in which one third or more of the students are English learners. These data indicate a need for support for serving multilingual learners.

How Did LEAs Support Students With Disabilities?

Students with disabilities also benefit from individualized learning and inclusive practices. In 2022–23, the majority of LEAs (64%) provided adaptations to instructional materials to support students with special needs, and about half (47%) provided additional staff to support participation in instruction (see [Table 5](#)).

A survey respondent from a medium-sized, suburban elementary school district described the district’s approach to offering inclusive early learning classrooms:

With a waiver from [the Department of Social Services] to fully include students with disabilities to mingle and interact with state preschool–enrolled students, we are able to broaden access to play-based learning among preschool students with disabilities and their typical peers. This class also offers an opportunity for a number of students enrolled in part-day SDC [Special Day Class] classrooms to also enroll in and attend extended programming in CSPP on-site. Previous to this full-day CSPP program, these students would be bused to various child care centers until their parents could pick them up. This program ensures a seamless support system for our students with disabilities.

Table 5. Instructional Practices Used to Support Children With Disabilities

Instructional practices	% LEAs
Provided adaptations to instructional materials	64%
Provided additional staff to support participation in instruction	47%
Provided specialized services in the classroom with peer models	42%
Implemented Universal Design for Learning	42%
Implemented social-emotional strategies	40%
Other	2%

Source: California Department of Education. (2023). Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant Survey.

How Did LEAs Support Students' Toileting Needs?

With the addition of younger learners on campus, LEAs must support students' development of life skills, such as independent toileting. In an open-ended question, many LEAs flagged toileting as a challenge facing UPK implementation, noting difficulties in finding staff to accompany children to bathrooms far from the classroom, as well as some staff being unwilling or hesitant to assist children with toileting. (See [Biggest Challenges in UPK Implementation](#).)

When asked how they adjusted policies or practices to address the increase in children needing toileting assistance as TK age eligibility expands, LEAs reported adopting a variety of strategies. The most common adjustments include sharing resources with families about LEA approaches to toileting assistance (50%) and adopting practices to support children having access to additional clothing and/or toileting supplies (46%). Thirty-four percent of all LEAs (39% of school districts and 26% of charters) indicated already having dedicated staff to support toileting and communicating regularly with parents about toileting support. Additionally, 19% of LEAs have engaged or plan to engage in additional negotiation with local labor organizations to assign duties related to toileting to new or additional staff, and 16% reported that they plan to address toileting at an upcoming community meeting.

The challenges identified in open-ended responses indicate that LEAs will likely need continued assistance in supporting children's toileting needs.

Workforce Development

California's expansion of universal prekindergarten will require the recruitment and preparation of tens of thousands of early educators to meet increased student enrollment.²² In the survey, local education agencies were asked about their experiences staffing transitional kindergarten classrooms. Most reported that they had sufficient lead teachers in 2022–23, but, consistent with other research studies on TK implementation, many had challenges hiring assistant TK teachers. Further, they anticipated challenges in having sufficient lead teachers with early childhood education qualifications that will meet the 2025–26 legislative requirements.²³ The most common strategies LEAs reported using to develop their TK and California State Preschool Program (CSPP) workforce were partnering with local institutions of higher education or county offices of education and offering advising. LEAs reported offering several topics of professional development for teachers and school administrators, the most common of which were children's literacy and language development, children's social and emotional development, and curriculum selection and implementation.

Did LEAs Have Enough Qualified TK Staff?

In the 2022–23 school year, all TK classes were required to have an adult-to-student ratio of at least 1 adult to 12 students and a lead teacher with a valid California teaching credential. Almost all LEAs (92%) indicated having enough fully qualified staff to accommodate TK classrooms. It is unclear whether respondents interpreted “fully qualified” as referring to the 2022–23 requirements or to the legislative requirements for 2025–26, when all TK classes receiving state funding must be staffed by teachers with a valid teaching credential as well as 24 units of coursework in early childhood education or child development, a Child Development Teacher Permit, or equivalent experience.²⁴

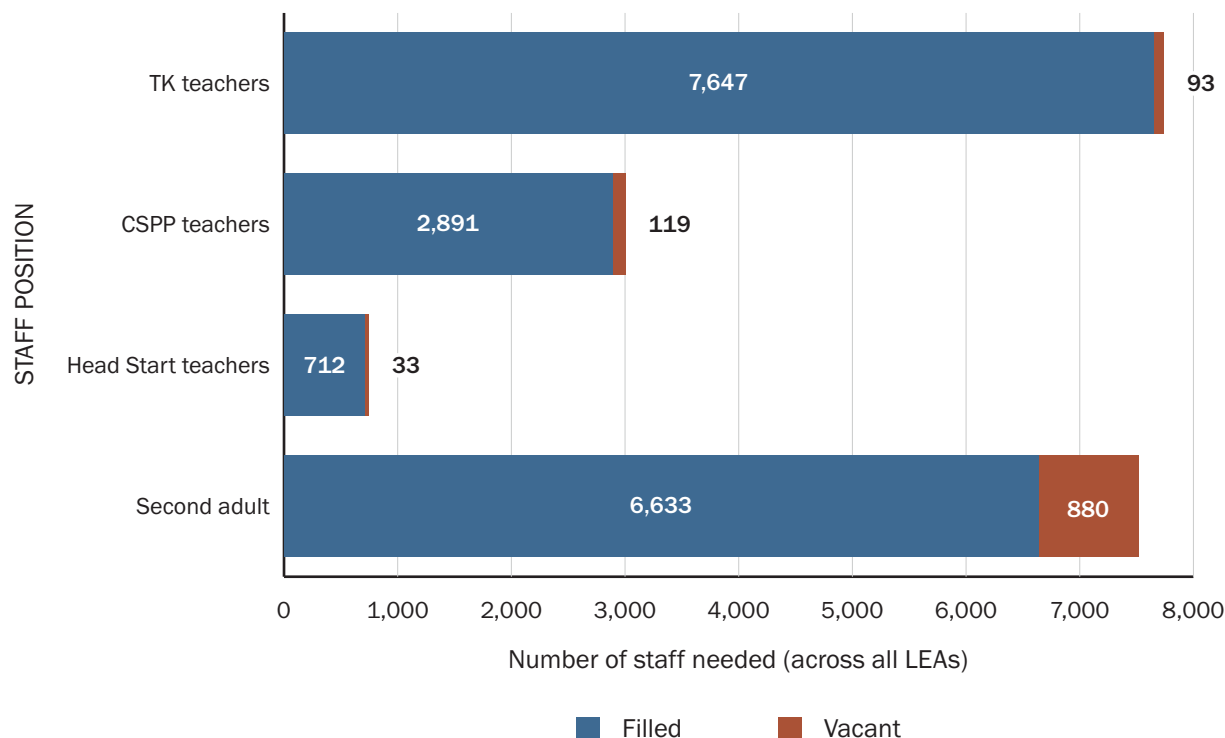
Despite almost all LEAs stating they had enough fully qualified staff in the 2022–23 school year, recruiting and retaining qualified staff for UPK was the second most commonly cited challenge that LEAs faced in UPK implementation, following facilities (See [Biggest Challenges in UPK Implementation](#)). While LEAs may have had sufficient staff in 2022–23, they noted concerns with being able to recruit qualified staff who would meet the TK requirements that go into effect in 2025–26. As TK continues to expand, LEAs may need additional support in recruiting and hiring qualified staff with early childhood education experience or expertise, as well as staff to meet the 1 adult to 10 student ratio.

While LEAs may have had sufficient staff in 2022–23, they noted concerns with being able to recruit qualified staff who would meet the TK requirements that go into effect in 2025–26.

How Many Teachers Did LEAs Need in 2022–23?

For the 2022–23 school year, California LEAs said that they needed a total of 7,740 TK teachers, 3,010 CSPP teachers, 745 Head Start teachers, and 7,513 second adult staff in classrooms (see [Figure 3](#)).

Figure 3. Staffing Needs and Vacancies at the Beginning of the 2022–23 School Year



Source: California Department of Education. (2023). Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant Survey.

Only 1% of TK lead teacher positions were vacant at both the beginning and middle of 2022–23, and between 2% and 4% of CSPP or Head Start teaching positions were vacant at the beginning and middle of 2022–23.

The vacancy rate for the second classroom adult positions was higher, at 12% at the beginning of the 2022–23 school year and 8% in the middle of the school year.

A respondent from a medium-sized, suburban school district shared the impact of not having a consistent second adult in TK classrooms:

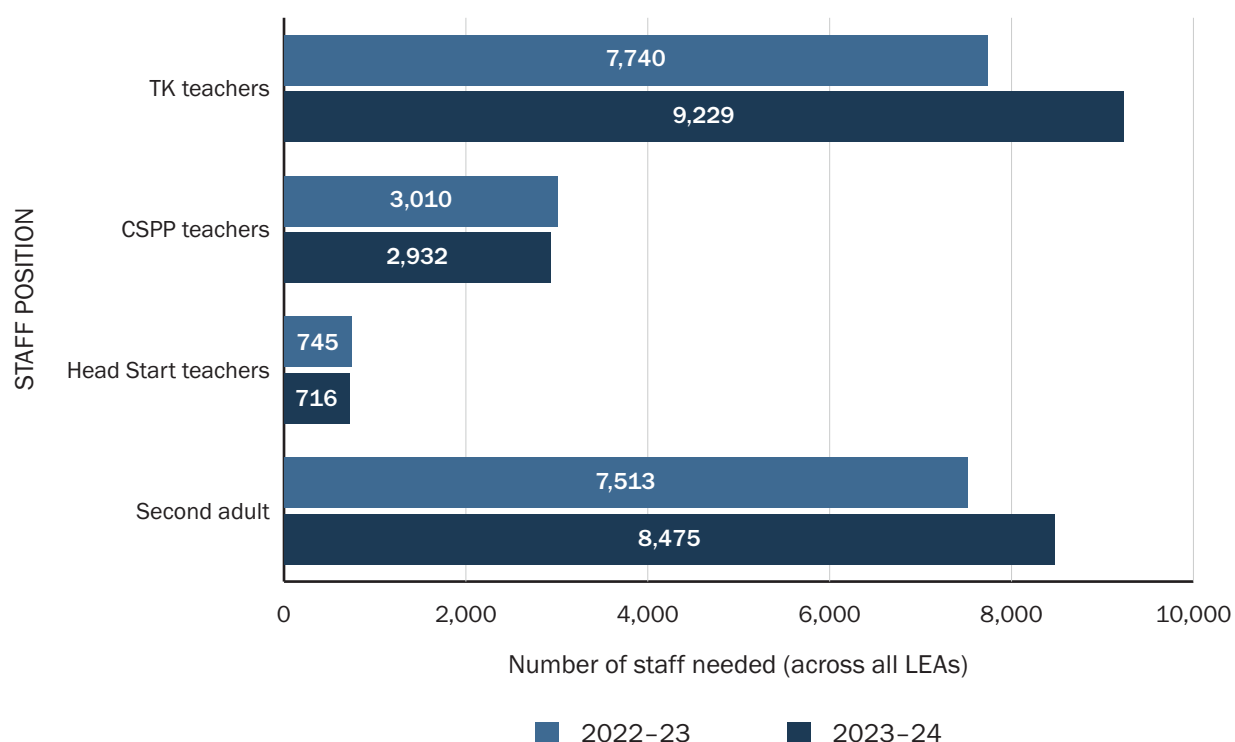
The biggest challenge that [our district] is facing is maintaining a consistent second adult in the classroom for the support of the students. Consistency in this position is critical to obtain student comfort with and acceptance of the support being provided by the adult. Consistency is also important in the method of instructional support/delivery of concepts so that the young learners grasp and retain the information being shared with them.

Paraprofessional shortages are not unique to TK. However, they play a critical role in early childhood classrooms. These high vacancy rates indicate a need to invest in recruiting, training, and retaining the paraprofessional workforce as well as lead teachers.

How Many Teachers Did LEAs Estimate Needing in 2023–24?

When asked to predict needed staff based on projected enrollment for the 2023–24 school year, LEAs anticipated similar numbers of CSPP and Head Start teachers as the 2022–23 school year (see [Figure 4](#)). For TK classrooms, however, LEAs predicted needing to fill 1,489 more TK lead teacher and 962 more classroom aide positions in 2023–24 than in the previous year.

Figure 4. Projected Staffing Needs in the 2022–23 and 2023–24 School Years



Note: CSPP = California State Preschool Program

Source: California Department of Education. (2023). Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant Survey.

How Did LEAs Develop Their TK Workforce?

By 2025–26, TK classes receiving state funding must be staffed by teachers with a valid teaching credential as well as 24 units of coursework in early childhood education or child development, a Child Development Teacher Permit, or equivalent experience. LEAs were surveyed on a wide variety of strategies they may have employed during the 2022–23 school year to support prospective TK teachers in meeting these requirements. Forty-three percent of all LEAs (40% of school districts and 47% of charters) indicated employing none of the listed strategies because they already had enough Multiple Subject credential holders to meet their need for TK teachers. About one third (36%) reported partnering with one or more local institutions of higher education (IHEs) or county offices of education (COEs), and another third (35%) reported providing advising on how to meet credential requirements.

Small LEAs were less likely than medium and large LEAs to have partnered with IHEs or COEs, received educator workforce development grants, or provided advising and information to teacher candidates. These differences may be due to the fact that almost half of small LEAs (48%) noted that they had enough teachers with a Multiple Subject credential to meet their need for TK classrooms, compared to 32% of medium LEAs and 10% of large LEAs. However, the rural location of some small LEAs may also have affected their ability to implement workforce development strategies, as described by a respondent from a small, rural elementary district:

The credentialing requirement necessary to be a teacher in our [TK] program has created challenges in our community. Those care providers that have been working with these prekindergarten students are the most well-trained and qualified individuals, but they do not possess the credentials to work in the program. We do not have a university in our area that they can readily access, and we are having trouble finding people that can work in the program.

Some small LEAs have worked with their COE to support teachers in meeting the new requirements. A small, rural district respondent noted:

[Our county office of education] is providing TK certification through a teacher residency program in partnership with [a university] for 20 local teachers free of cost to bolster local teacher reserves. [The county office] is providing support for local teachers to attend [a local UPK conference] and mentorship programs for TK teachers. [We] will continue to take advantage of the support and professional learning opportunities provided by our county office.

In the 2022–23 school year, 44% of LEAs provided advising to prospective TK teachers on how to meet these legislative requirements, and 31% provided information on scholarship and grant opportunities. It will be important for the state to continue monitoring TK workforce shortages as new requirements go into effect to see if additional workforce development strategies are needed.

How Did LEAs Develop Their CSPP Workforce?

CSPP teachers are required to hold a Child Development Teacher Permit, which requires at least 24 units of early childhood education, 16 units of general education, and 175 days of teaching experience.²⁵ All LEAs were surveyed on strategies employed during the 2022–23 school year to support prospective CSPP teachers in obtaining a Child Development Teacher Permit.

Over half (55%) of the 343 LEAs that operated a CSPP in 2022–23 provided advising on requirements and planning to obtain a Child Development Teacher Permit, and 50% provided information on scholarship and grant opportunities. One fourth of these LEAs partnered with a local IHE to offer early childhood education or child development coursework. Sixteen percent of LEAs offering a CSPP do not plan to support prospective CSPP educators in obtaining a Child Development Teacher Permit.

What Professional Development Did LEAs Offer TK Teachers?

Teachers of young children need a wide range of knowledge and skills that prepare them to support children's physical, social-emotional, and academic development, including supporting language, literacy, and math development; establishing safe, caring, and positive relationships with children and families; and recognizing and effectively supporting children's culture, language, and individual needs.²⁶ LEAs were asked to identify up to three priority areas of professional development offered to TK staff during the 2022–23 school year (see Table 6). The most common topics of professional development LEAs prioritized were children's literacy and language development (53%), children's social-emotional development (48%), and curriculum selection and implementation (32%).

Professional development is important for assistant teachers in TK classrooms, too. It is unclear from this survey what professional development LEAs offer specifically to paraprofessionals, a potential question for future research.

Table 6. Professional Development Opportunities Offered to TK Staff in 2022–23

Professional development offering	% LEAs
Literacy and language development	53%
Social-emotional development	48%
Curriculum selection and implementation	32%
Effective adult–child interactions	28%
Math and science	25%
Creating developmentally informed environments	25%
Child assessments to inform instruction	18%
Serving children with disabilities in inclusive settings	13%
Support for multilingual learners	10%
Implicit bias and culturally and linguistically responsive practice	7%
Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma- and healing-informed practice	7%
Early childhood behavioral health	5%
Engaging culturally and linguistically diverse families	3%
Other	3%

Source: California Department of Education. (2023). Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant Survey.

What Professional Development Did LEAs Offer School Leaders?

Principals and school leaders who oversee early childhood education programs also need specialized knowledge and skills in early childhood development and instructional alignment across preschool through 3rd grade.²⁷

However, many California administrators do not have early learning-specific training or expertise and could benefit from targeted professional development on early childhood topics.²⁸ The most common early childhood

education professional development topics offered to school leaders were children's literacy and language development (39%), curriculum selection and implementation (37%), and serving children with disabilities in inclusive settings (37%). (See [Table 7](#).)

Many California administrators do not have early learning-specific training or expertise and could benefit from targeted professional development on early childhood topics.

A survey respondent from a medium-sized district described the district's approach to teacher and leader development:

Our TK staff collaborates with our preschool program for lead teacher planning days on a monthly basis. We have also trained the administrators in CLASS [Classroom Assessment Scoring System] and will roll that out with TK staff this year. ... We have gone from pushing kindergarten down to now moving preschool philosophies and practices up into TK. As the TK age continues to get younger, we realize how important it is to braid the learning from preschool, TK, and kindergarten.

Notably, 15% of LEAs did not offer any professional development on early childhood topics to school leaders in the 2022–23 school year. Small LEAs were less likely to have offered school leaders professional development on early learning topics than medium and large LEAs: 17% of small LEAs did not offer this, compared to 12% of medium LEAs and 7% of large LEAs. This indicates a need for regionalized support for professional development for small LEAs that do not have the capacity to offer it themselves.

**Table 7. Professional Development Opportunities
Offered to School Leaders in 2022–23**

Early childhood professional development topics	% LEAs
Literacy and language development	39%
Curriculum selection and implementation	37%
Serving children with disabilities in inclusive settings	37%
Social-emotional development	35%
Effective adult–child interactions	34%
Creating developmentally informed environments	34%
Child assessments to inform instruction	29%
Math and science	28%
Implicit bias and culturally and linguistically responsive practice	25%
Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma- and healing-informed practice	25%
Support for multilingual learners	23%
Engaging culturally and linguistically diverse families	21%
Early childhood behavioral health	13%
Other	3%
Site leaders and principals were not offered professional learning on early childhood education	15%

Source: California Department of Education. (2023). Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant Survey.

UPK Expansion in California's Four Largest Districts

About 800,000 students, approximately 14% of California's TK–12 students, are served by the state's four largest school districts: Los Angeles Unified School District, San Diego Unified School District, Fresno Unified School District, and Long Beach Unified School District. These districts have been committed to universal prekindergarten (UPK) for several years and, due to their size, may have greater financial and staffing capacity for UPK implementation compared to smaller local education agencies. This section provides additional insights into their UPK implementation.

UPK Delivery Models

The four largest districts have widely accessible TK in their elementary schools. Notably:

- **Los Angeles, San Diego, and Fresno offered early-admittance TK in 2022–23.** These three districts expanded transitional kindergarten (TK) eligibility faster than the legislated rollout. Los Angeles opened its age eligibility for TK to all 4-year-olds in its 317 TK classrooms across the district.
- **San Diego and Fresno offered TK at all elementary sites within their districts.** In San Diego Unified, the expansion to all elementary sites more than tripled the number of TK classrooms in the district, from 56 to 189 total classrooms. Los Angeles and Long Beach offered TK at 364 of the 571 elementary schools across their districts (64%). They planned to increase TK sites to 540 of their 571 elementary schools (95%) in 2023–24. Additionally, Fresno plans to implement a two-classroom minimum at each site by the 2024–25 school year.
- **All four districts offered only full-day (4 hours or more) TK at their elementary schools.**
- **Almost half of the classrooms in these districts are TK stand-alone classes.** Together, the four largest districts operated 1,809 early learning classrooms in 2022–23. The most common service delivery model was TK stand-alone classes (47%), followed by stand-alone California State Preschool Program (CSPP) classes (17%); TK–Kindergarten combination classes (16%); and other early learning classes (15%), such as district-run preschool programs.
- **All four districts operated and plan to continue operating CSPP contracts on their campuses.** Additionally, Fresno applied to expand its existing CSPP contract in 2022–23.

Facilities, Transportation, and Toileting

All four districts indicated having sufficient facilities, all but San Diego have taken steps to offer transportation to early learners within their districts, and Los Angeles and Long Beach have dedicated staff to support toileting.

- **All four districts expect to have sufficient classroom space to meet UPK enrollment by 2025–26.** Additionally, all four districts' classrooms met kindergarten facilities standards and had all necessary adaptive equipment.
- **Los Angeles, Fresno, and Long Beach offered some form of transportation for early learners in 2022–23.** Fresno offered transportation for all of its TK students, while Los Angeles and Long Beach provided transportation for specific populations of students within their district, including students with special needs.

- **Los Angeles and Long Beach indicated having dedicated staff to support toileting needs.** Los Angeles also indicated being in negotiations with their union about toileting. Long Beach created a toileting tool kit and changed job descriptions to meet children’s needs. All districts indicated sharing resources with families about toileting.

Instruction and Assessment

The four largest districts implemented promising practices within their classrooms across TK language models, curricula, and assessments.

- **All four districts offered dual language programs in TK.** The number of dual language classes offered was not reported.
- **All four districts used a PreK literacy curriculum and social-emotional curriculum in TK classrooms.** Los Angeles, San Diego, and Fresno additionally used a whole child or comprehensive PreK curriculum, and Los Angeles used a PreK math curriculum. Fresno adopted TK Creative Curriculum in all TK classrooms.
- **Los Angeles, Fresno, and Long Beach used the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) early childhood assessment in TK classrooms.** In addition to the DRDP, all four districts used LEA-based grade-level benchmarks and report cards, and Los Angeles and Long Beach used the Ages and Stages Questionnaire. Additionally, Fresno formed a TK assessment committee to look at developmentally appropriate assessments for TK students and established the Fresno USD Foundational Skills Assessment, aligned to the California Preschool Learning Foundations, which they planned to use in all TK classrooms in the 2023–24 school year in lieu of the DRDP.

Workforce Development

The four largest districts supported the development of their early educator workforces in the 2022–23 school year. Notably:

- **Los Angeles, San Diego, and Long Beach indicated having enough fully qualified teaching staff to accommodate their TK classrooms; Fresno did not.** Los Angeles and Long Beach had no TK teacher vacancies at the beginning and middle of the 2022–23 school year. Los Angeles, San Diego, and Fresno had second adult vacancies at the beginning and middle of the school year. Fresno reported concerning challenges in finding qualified TK staff, with a 6–8% TK teacher vacancy rate and a 24–34% second adult vacancy rate throughout the 2022–23 school year.
- **All four districts offered professional development to TK staff jointly with CSPP, Head Start, or other preschool program staff.** Additionally, Long Beach offered its TK professional development jointly with grade-level staff in kindergarten through 3rd grade.
- **All four districts provided professional development to school leaders on creating developmentally informed environments for young learners.** Additionally, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Long Beach provided professional development on supporting and serving multilingual learners and children with disabilities, and Los Angeles, Fresno, and Long Beach provided professional development on children’s literacy and language development.

Source: California Department of Education. *Largest and smallest public school districts*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/ceflargesmalldist.asp> (accessed 03/15/24).

Biggest Challenges in UPK Implementation

Local education agencies were asked an open-ended question about their biggest challenges in universal prekindergarten implementation. Respondents identified a range of challenges, including facilities, staffing, curriculum and assessment, enrollment, special education, funding, toileting, and partnerships with expanded learning and other early learning providers. Below, we summarize common themes identified by LEAs in their responses.²⁹

Facilities and Space Constraints. The most commonly cited challenge across the state was providing adequate classroom space and facilities to meet requirements for UPK programs. Common needs included restrooms within classrooms, developmentally appropriate playgrounds, and additional classrooms to accommodate growing enrollment. Respondents pointed to the need for additional funding for construction or remodeling to meet Title 5 standards. A survey respondent from a medium-sized, suburban school district stated:

Our main challenges with UPK implementation are ... facilities—specifically restrooms, meeting square footage requirements with existing buildings, and access to age-appropriate outdoor play structures. It is becoming increasingly difficult to ensure every TK and kindergarten classroom meets the restroom requirements. Additionally, playground structures were built prior to TK implementation and are not all age-rated for 4-year-old children. To update both the restrooms and play structures is a financial burden.

Several LEAs also mentioned not being able to offer full-day TK or expand TK to younger 4-year-olds because of facility constraints.

Staffing and Professional Development. The second most commonly cited challenge was recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Respondents mentioned challenges in recruiting staff who meet the TK requirements that go into effect in 2025–26. They also noted difficulty in finding assistant teachers or other adults to maintain adult–child ratios, perhaps due to low compensation.³⁰ A smaller number of LEAs mentioned challenges in finding substitutes to cover TK staff when attending professional development. As noted by a respondent from a small suburban district:

For this year, [our biggest challenge] was to hire talented educators with experience working with young children to lead our TK classrooms, both as teachers and as instructional aides. Our current challenge is how to support these educators to develop their expertise, and setting a common vision districtwide for what high-quality TK looks like (with shared understanding and agreement from site leaders and non-TK coaches, instructional leaders, and others at different grades).

Curriculum, Standards, and Assessment. Many LEAs mentioned that adapting teaching environments to meet the developmental needs of younger students is a challenge. They noted that shifting toward a play-based, developmentally appropriate approach and aligning assessments with California’s Preschool Learning Foundations and Curriculum Framework requires significant effort and resources. Several LEAs said that identifying an appropriate TK curriculum was a challenge, as they had relied on kindergarten curricula in the past. A medium-sized, suburban district respondent stated:

The biggest challenge the district is facing with UPK is the quality implementation of the newly adopted curriculum with fidelity by the TK teachers. Continuous training and coaching support are necessary to build the capacity of the TK teachers.

Enrollment and Community Engagement. Many LEAs, particularly small districts and charters, identified challenges with projecting enrollment and/or enrolling sufficient numbers of children. LEAs mentioned concerns about being able to address the needs of families interested in full-day programs and effectively communicating the advantages of UPK. Many LEAs also mentioned needing support or guidance in running appropriate multigrade combination classes since they had insufficient enrollment for a stand-alone TK class. A small, rural district respondent shared:

Declining enrollment districtwide is our biggest challenge. It affects all grade levels, including UPK. Parents are opting out of UPK programming out of fear of COVID-19 and/or public schooling in our [rural county]. This is impacting multiple school districts.

Special Needs and Inclusion. LEAs had concerns about the increasing number of learners needing additional support and maintaining inclusive UPK environments. Respondents mentioned needing support and professional learning for UPK staff to accommodate learners with diverse needs. As a survey respondent from a medium-sized, urban district described:

Reaching and communicating with those families of preschool-aged children with an IFSP [Individualized Family Service Plan] or initial IEP [Individualized Education Plan] or active IEP to tell them about our district preschool programming is often difficult. Additionally, providing a special-needs preschool classroom to meet the needs of those [preschool-aged] students that need more than a general education preschool setting is also difficult [in terms of] trying to find qualified staff [and meeting special education] CSPP Title 22 requirements.

Funding and Financial Resources. Many LEAs said that securing sustainable funding and resources for UPK implementation is a critical challenge. Costs associated with staffing, facilities upgrades, and curriculum development often exceed the funding provided by the state, placing a strain on budgets. This concern was especially prevalent among basic aid districts that do not receive additional funding for TK students. A medium-sized, urban district respondent shared:

Costs associated with staffing, facilities upgrades, and curriculum development often exceed the funding provided by the state, placing a strain on budgets.

The biggest challenge that our LEA currently faces is the lack of funding for TK for community-funded districts. We are unable to move to a full-day TK program until the funding model is whole.

Toileting Challenges. As more LEAs begin to serve younger children, they need more TK-appropriate bathrooms located in classrooms, more staff to help children with toileting, and toileting training for staff. Some LEAs mentioned that staff are unwilling or hesitant to assist children with toileting. Others mentioned needing more staff to accompany children to bathrooms located far from the classroom. A respondent from a small, rural district stated:

One of the primary challenges is the younger age group of students, some of whom are still in the phase of toilet training. Managing toilet training in a classroom setting can be difficult. It demands extra time, can disrupt class routines, and may require additional resources like sanitation supplies or even additional staff support.

Rural and Geographic Considerations. LEAs in rural areas face unique challenges due to geographic isolation, limited access to community partners, and difficulties in staffing. Rural LEAs are often small, so they often lack sufficient enrollment to offer stand-alone TK classrooms. A small, rural district respondent said:

The biggest challenge in implementing UPK is the fact that we are an extremely small and rural school. Our classes are combination classes, which now are required to accommodate an additional grade. Accommodating that additional grade requires a very wide range of instructional services for one teacher, as well as a very large age gap between the youngest students and the oldest students in the classroom.

Preschool and After-School Partnerships. Several LEAs commented on challenges related to their CSPP and other early learning partners. A common theme was the negative effect that TK has had upon enrollment or staffing in CSPP and other early learning programs and the need to recruit more 3-year-olds to CSPP. A survey respondent from a medium-sized, urban district shared:

As the TK timeline unfolds, our CSPP part-day preschool enrollment is down considerably. We have maintained enrollment numbers in our tuition and full-day programs primarily because we have enrolled more 3-year-olds.

Many LEAs also noted partnership challenges with the Expanded Learning Opportunities Program or after-school programs, particularly finding adequate staff, especially those with prior experience or expertise working with younger learners, and children being very tired at the end of the day. As a medium-sized, suburban district respondent described:

One of the biggest challenges we face with the implementation of UPK is implementing a quality expanded learning program for TK to access the opportunity with the 9-hour day. It is challenging to find local providers for expanded learning to begin with, and none have had prior experience or expertise with the TK age group.

Technical Assistance Needs

Local education agencies were required to identify types and topics of technical assistance they need to support universal prekindergarten implementation. The most identified technical assistance needs spanned several areas of UPK implementation, including professional development, facilities, family engagement, curriculum, and enrollment projections (see [Table 8](#)).

Table 8. Technical Assistance Topics Most Requested by LEAs

Technical assistance	% LEAs
Modifying elementary school classrooms to serve young children	56%
Coaching and mentoring	52%
Support for parent surveys	51%
Professional development opportunities: Literacy and language development	50%
Professional development in early childhood education for site leaders	49%
Projecting enrollment	48%
Increasing UPK enrollment and parent awareness of programs	47%
Professional development opportunities: Math and science development	46%
Modifying district data systems	46%
Professional development opportunities: Social-emotional development	45%

Note: Respondents were asked to identify desired technical assistance among a list of about 70 items. The most common technical assistance request was general support with finding workshops with external professional development providers (58%); as later items provided more specificity on professional modality and topic, this item was removed from the table. Other items listed in this table were requested by 45% or more of LEAs. The percentage of LEAs requesting listed technical assistance ranged from 9% to 58%.

Source: California Department of Education. (2023). Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant Survey.

Conclusion

The results of the 2022–23 Universal Prekindergarten Planning and Implementation Grant Survey provide insights into how local education agencies are implementing universal prekindergarten expansion across California. These findings uplift promising practices, as well as common challenges, that can help policymakers identify areas for additional investments and supports.

Overall, LEAs are making notable progress toward UPK implementation across the state, with the majority of LEAs offering transitional kindergarten at all elementary sites and a full-day TK option. Additionally, LEAs have demonstrated commitment to expanding UPK more quickly than the legislatively required rollout, with half offering early-admittance TK to younger 4-year-olds in 2022–23 and one fourth continuing or expanding their California State Preschool Program contracts.

This report also highlights areas where LEAs may need additional support and resources to ensure students are learning in high-quality and developmentally appropriate environments. LEAs' key needs include expanding and updating UPK facilities; recruiting and retaining qualified TK lead teachers; hiring assistant teachers to meet adult-child ratio requirements; and choosing curriculum, assessments, and teaching strategies that meet the needs of diverse learners.

As California moves forward with UPK expansion, it will be important for the state to continue to monitor implementation to ensure that all children have access to high-quality early education.

Endnotes

1. Leung-Gagné, M., Wang, V., Melnick, H., & Mauerman, C. (2023). *How are California school districts planning for universal prekindergarten? Results from a 2022 survey*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/109.432>
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3. Large LEAs were defined as having a cumulative enrollment in the 2022–23 school year of over 20,000; medium LEAs have between 2,500 and 20,000 students; small LEAs have less than 2,500 students. Fifty-eight LEAs were classified as large, 311 as medium, and 1,015 as small. District cumulative enrollment data was sourced from California Department of Education. (2023). *Cumulative enrollment data, 2022–23*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/filesenrcum.asp> (accessed 03/28/24).
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29. The analysis of the open-ended responses included in this section was generated in part by ChatGPT. Survey responses were randomized and analyzed in batches of 280 responses. Batch outputs were then consolidated through ChatGPT. The model used for the analysis is GPT-4-Turbo, with a temperature setting of 0.15 to minimize randomness and allow for greater precision in the generated text. Authors of this memo verified the thematic output through their own analyses and selected salient quotes as examples.
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