



Universal PreK Expansion

How Many 3- and 4-Year-Olds Does California Enroll?

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Summary

In 2021, California committed to making prekindergarten (PreK) universal for all 4-year-olds and income-eligible 3-year-olds. The largest expansion was making transitional kindergarten (TK) universal for all 4-year-olds. Between 2021–22 and 2024–25, TK enrollment increased by more than 100,000 children. Looking across all publicly funded early childhood education (ECE) programs, including the California State Preschool Program, Head Start, and subsidized child care, California made great strides in serving 4-year-olds, with approximately 62% enrolled in 2024–25. The state also made progress, albeit slowly, among 3-year-olds. In 2019–20, California enrolled 21% of all 3-year-olds in publicly funded ECE. In 2024–25, it enrolled 25% of all 3-year-olds, comprising 44% of 3-year-olds from families with low incomes. California is on a positive trajectory but still has substantial work ahead to guarantee that all families who want to enroll their child in preschool have access.

Introduction

When California policymakers signed a law to fund universal PreK in 2021, the largest investment was gradually expanding TK, a school-based PreK program, to all 4-year-olds by 2025–26. At the same time, the legislature committed to maintaining other federally and state-funded early learning and care options for income-eligible 3- and 4-year-olds, including the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), Head Start, and subsidized child care.¹ These programs have differing eligibility criteria, and not all children are eligible. (See [Table 1.](#)) A child may also enroll in more than one program at a time.

This brief examines how these substantial investments have impacted enrollment by calculating how many 3- and 4-year-old children have enrolled in publicly funded ECE programs to date. It builds upon a brief published in 2024, *Progressing Toward Universal Prekindergarten in California*, widening the analysis to 3-year-olds and including additional child care data.

Table 1. Publicly Funded Early Childhood Education Programs in California, Age and Income Eligibility

Eligibility	Transitional kindergarten	California State Preschool Program	Head Start	Subsidized child care
Ages served	4-year-olds	3- to 5-year-olds	3- to 5-year-olds	Birth through school age
Maximum family income	None	100% state median income	130% federal poverty limit	85% state median income

Notes: Subsidized child care includes several state- and federally funded programs, including Alternative Payment; CalWORKs Stages 1, 2, and 3; subsidized family child care home networks; General Child Care; migrant programs; and Severely Handicapped. Two-year-olds are also temporarily eligible for the California State Preschool Program between June 2024 and June 2027.

Source: California Department of Social Services. *Child care and development programs* (accessed 09/18/2024).

Findings

How many 4-year-olds have enrolled in TK?

TK is the fastest-growing PreK program in California. When TK was created in 2010, eligibility was limited to older 4-year-olds with birthdays between September 2 and December 2. Starting in the 2022–23 school year, eligibility was incrementally expanded until all 4-year-olds became eligible in 2025–26. (See [Table 2](#).)

Table 2. Transitional Kindergarten Rollout Schedule

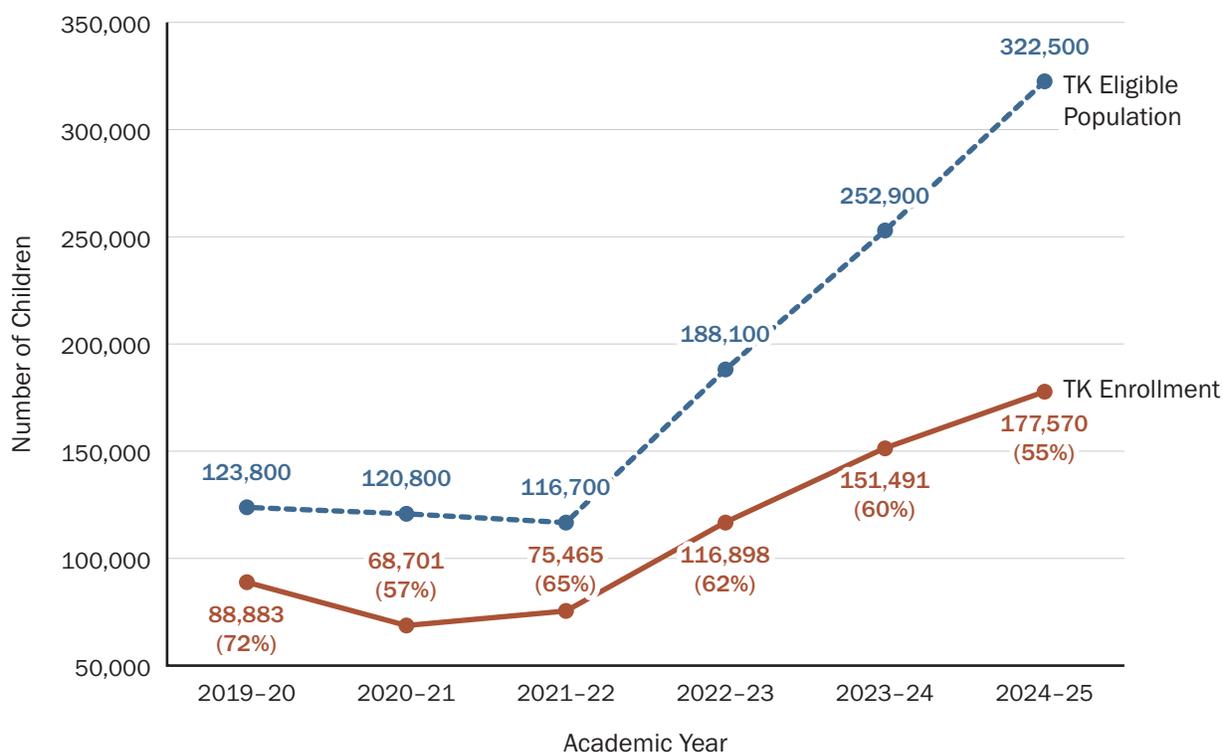
Academic year	TK eligibility (date of 5th birthday)	Percentage of 4-year-olds eligible
2011–12 to 2021–22	Sept 2–Dec 2	25%
2022–23	Sept 2–Feb 2	42%
2023–24	Sept 2–Apr 2	58%
2024–25	Sept 2–June 2	75%
2025–26	Sept 2–Sept 1	100%

Source: California Education Code § 48000 (2023).

TK enrollment has more than doubled since 2019–20, reaching 177,570 children in 2024–25. (See [Figure 1](#).) The state increased TK enrollment by more than 100,000 children in just 3 years, influenced by the fact that more children were eligible. TK enrollment was expected to increase further in 2025–26 as all 4-year-olds became eligible.

While the number of TK enrollees has risen, the proportion of eligible 4-year-olds enrolled in TK (the uptake rate) has declined. This is because the number of eligible children has increased more rapidly than the number of additional children enrolling. It is not currently understood why a declining share of eligible children is enrolling. It may be that families are unaware that TK is an option; that they prefer the location, hours, or learning environment of other ECE settings; or that they experience barriers to enrolling in the program.²

Figure 1. TK Enrollment, Eligible Population, and Uptake Rates, 2019–20 to 2024–25



Notes: Percentages in parentheses represent the share of the TK-eligible population enrolled in TK (i.e., the uptake rate). The eligible population is rounded to the nearest 100.

Sources: California Education Code § 48000 (2021); California Department of Education. *Transitional kindergarten data from 2019–20 to 2024–25* [DataQuest. Annual enrollment data.] (accessed 09/01/2025); U.S. Census Bureau. (2025). *State population by characteristics: 2020–2024. Annual estimates of the resident population by single year of age and sex for California: April 1, 2020, to July 1, 2024* [Dataset SC-EST2024-SYASEX-06] (accessed 07/02/2025); U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). *State population by characteristics: 2010–2019. Annual estimates of the resident population by single year of age and sex for California: April 1, 2010, to July 1, 2019* [Dataset SC-EST2019-SYASEX-06] (accessed 07/15/2024).

How many 4-year-olds have enrolled across all of California’s publicly funded ECE programs?

In addition to TK, California families may enroll their 4-year-old child in CSPP, Head Start, or subsidized child care. To understand the reach of state investments, it is important to account for children who participate in these programs.

To estimate the number of 4-year-olds in publicly funded ECE, we looked at the total number of children enrolled across four programs: TK, CSPP, Head Start, and subsidized child care. Subsidized child care includes several state- and federally funded programs and may be offered in a variety of settings, including child care centers; licensed family child care homes; and the home of a family member, friend, or neighbor.³ Some children are enrolled in more than one program at the same time, but the state does not track dual enrollment. We thus estimated the number of children dually enrolled and counted them only once. More information about the methodology can be found in the [Technical Supplement](#) for this brief.

[Figure 2](#) shows that the number and proportion of California 4-year-olds enrolled across publicly funded PreK and child care programs grew substantially between 2019–20 and 2024–25. The number of all 4-year-olds participating in these programs dropped in the first year of the pandemic (as seen in the height of the blue-shaded bars) but has risen each year since. Combined, the number of 4-year-olds enrolled in publicly funded PreK and child care grew from about 208,300 in 2019–20 to 264,700 in 2024–25, a 27% increase.

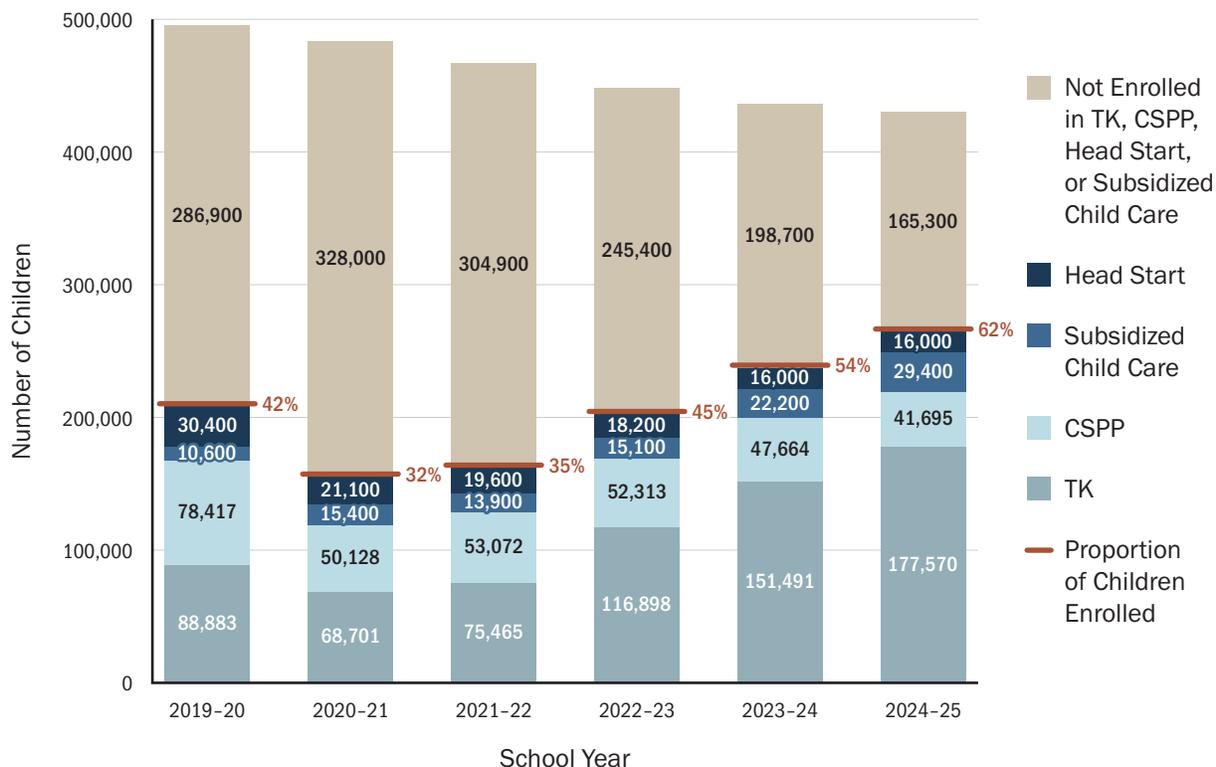
At the same time, the total 4-year-old population (the total number represented by each year’s bar) declined due to lower birth rates and migration out of the state. In part because of increases in the number of enrolled 4-year-olds and in part due to the declining population, the overall uptake rate—or proportion of children served in these programs combined—increased from about 42% in 2019–20 to 62% in 2024–25. Importantly, over the same period, the number of 4-year-olds who did not enroll in any publicly funded PreK declined from 286,900 to 165,300.

Most of the increase in 4-year-old enrollment has been in TK. Subsidized child care participation has also grown substantially, aided by an infusion of federal funding during the pandemic that was later continued through the state general fund.⁴ Unduplicated 4-year-old enrollment in subsidized child care grew from around 10,600 in 2019–20 to 29,400 in 2024–25. (See [Figure 2](#).)

Four-year-old enrollment in CSPP and in Head Start, meanwhile, declined. The number of children in CSPP declined from 78,417 to 41,695 between 2019–20 and 2024–25. Head Start’s unduplicated 4-year-old enrollment declined as well, from approximately 30,400 in 2019–20 to 16,000 in 2024–25. The reasons for the decreasing enrollment are not well studied, but they may include 4-year-olds moving into TK, reduced pressure to recruit new families due to “hold harmless” provisions that allow programs to receive full funding without full enrollment, staffing shortages that prevent providers from enrolling as many children as they are funded to serve, and program closures.⁵

Finally, slightly more than 22% of 4-year-old children in California were enrolled in private preschool in 2023, according to the American Community Survey.⁶ Some of these children may also be enrolled in publicly subsidized child care, CSPP, and Head Start, but with available data, it is not currently possible to estimate how many children that might include.

Figure 2. Enrollment of 4-Year-Olds in Publicly Funded PreK or Child Care, 2019–20 to 2024–25



Notes: Subsidized child care programs include Alternative Payment; CalWORKs Stages 1, 2, and 3; subsidized family child care home networks; General Child Care; migrant programs; and Severely Handicapped. Children dually enrolled in CSPP and Head Start are only included in CSPP counts. Children dually enrolled in subsidized child care and CSPP or Head Start are only included in CSPP or Head Start counts, respectively. All values except for TK and CSPP enrollment are estimates rounded to the nearest 100.

Sources: California Department of Education. *Transitional kindergarten data from 2019–20 to 2024–25* [DataQuest. Annual enrollment data.] (accessed 09/01/2025); California Department of Education. *California State Preschool Program, two-month average data reports by school year of age* [Dataset], obtained through personal communication with Jian Hua Liang, Education Administrator, California Department of Education (2026, January 5); California Department of Education. *Average number & percent of children by program type and age group, October 2019/April 2020*; California Department of Social Services. *October enrollments by age group: 2020–2024*; California Department of Social Services. *CalWORKs data tables, 2019–2024* [Dataset] (accessed 10/01/25); Office of Head Start PIR Reports. (n.d.). *Enrollment statistics report*; U.S. Census Bureau. (2025). *State population by characteristics: 2020–2024. Annual estimates of the resident population by single year of age and sex for California: April 1, 2020, to July 1, 2024* [Dataset SC-EST2024-SYASEX-06] (accessed 07/02/2025); U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). *State population by characteristics: 2010–2019. Annual estimates of the resident population by single year of age and sex for California: April 1, 2010, to July 1, 2019* [Dataset SC-EST2019-SYASEX-06] (accessed 07/15/2024).

How many 3-year-olds have enrolled across all of California’s publicly funded ECE programs?

California’s Master Plan for Early Care and Education stated the goal to serve all 3-year-olds from low-income households in publicly funded ECE, including through CSPP, Head Start, and subsidized child care. Unlike TK, each of these programs limits their enrollment to children from families with low incomes, children with disabilities, or those with other qualifying needs. While these eligibility restrictions are in place for 3-year-olds in these programs, this brief looks at the enrollment of all 3-year-olds in publicly funded PreK programs—including 3-year-olds who would not qualify for subsidized programs—to align with our analyses of 4-year-olds. For more information, see [Enrollment Among 3-Year-Olds From Families With Low Incomes](#).

Enrollment among all 3-year-olds in publicly funded ECE has grown over the past 6 years, but at a slower pace than among 4-year-olds. [Figure 3](#) shows that the number of 3-year-olds enrolled across publicly funded ECE programs grew from approximately 100,300 to 104,200 between 2019–20 and 2024–25, a 4% increase. Meanwhile, the total number of 3-year-olds living in California declined in that same period by about 15%, as seen in the declining height of the bars. As a result of increasing enrollment and declining population, the share of 3-year-olds of all incomes served in California’s publicly funded ECE programs grew from 21% in 2019–20 to 25% in 2024–25.

Subsidized child care accounts for the greatest increase in 3-year-old enrollment, growing from 14,400 to 29,800 unduplicated 3-year-olds between 2019–20 and 2024–25. CSPP’s 3-year-old enrollment grew steadily between 2020–21 and 2024–25, nearly returning to prepandemic enrollment levels. This growth in 3-year-old CSPP enrollment indicates that some programs may have shifted their enrollment to younger children, as 4-year-old enrollment declined. Meanwhile, Head Start’s unduplicated 3-year-old enrollment declined substantially, from 29,800 to 19,700 children between 2019–20 and 2024–25.

Finally, an estimated 306,800 3-year-olds (75% of the 3-year-old population) did not enroll in a public preschool program in 2024–25. These children may have attended private child care or preschool; been in the care of a friend, family, or neighbor; or stayed at home with a parent. According to the American Community Survey, 20% of 3-year-olds attended private school in 2023. Some of these children may also have been enrolled in publicly subsidized child care, CSPP, or Head Start, but it is not possible with available data to estimate how many.⁷

Enrollment Among 3-Year-Olds From Families With Low Incomes

California’s preschool programs for 3-year-olds do not all use the same income eligibility thresholds. Because of that, it can be complicated to measure progress toward the state’s Master Plan goal of serving all children from low-income families.

One common way to define “low income” is a family earning less than 85% of the state median income (SMI). This is the income cutoff used to qualify for subsidized child care in California. Nearly all children enrolled in Head Start and subsidized child care meet this definition of low income.

The California State Preschool Program (CSPP), however, has broader eligibility rules. It allows children from families earning up to 100% SMI to enroll, as well as children with disabilities, regardless of family income. To estimate how many enrolled children fall below the 85% income level, the California Department of Education (CDE) provided enrollment data by family income. CDE also used census data to estimate how many 3-year-olds in California have a family income below 85% SMI.

Based on these data, we estimate that about 100,500 3-year-olds from families earning less than 85% SMI were enrolled in publicly funded early childhood education programs in 2024–25. This excludes the approximately 4,000 3-year-olds who were enrolled in CSPP with household income above 85% SMI. In total, there were about 230,500 3-year-olds in California living in families below 85% SMI in 2024–25.

Taken together, these numbers mean that about 44% of 3-year-olds from low-income households were enrolled in publicly funded programs in 2024–25. Conversely, 56% of 3-year-olds from low-income households did not participate in a state-funded program—leaving substantial room for improvement.

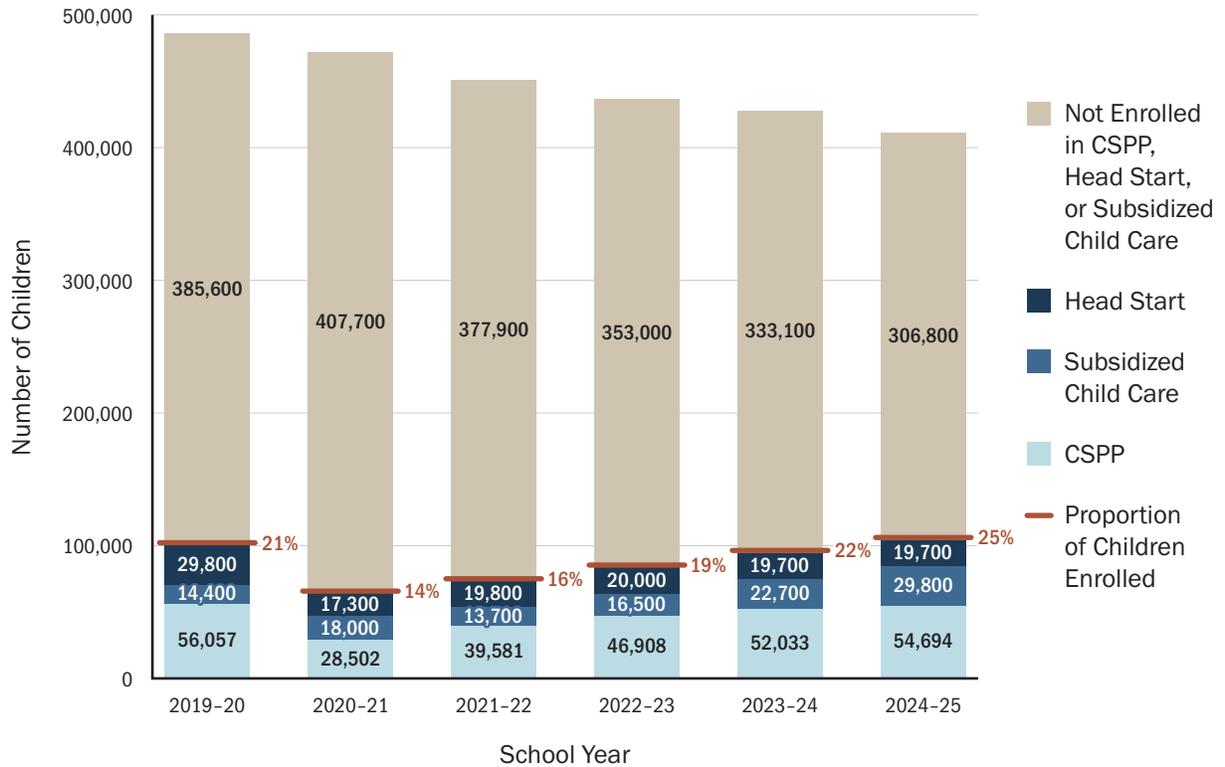
Three-Year-Old Enrollment in CSPP, Head Start, and Subsidized Child Care by Family Income, 2024–25

Category	3-year-olds, all incomes	3-year-olds, low income
Population	411,000	230,500
Unduplicated program enrollment	104,200	100,500
Percent enrolled	25%	44%

Note: “Low income” is defined as having a family income of less than 85% of the state median income.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of data from the California Department of Education. *California State Preschool Program, two-month average data reports by school year of age and family income* [Dataset], obtained through personal communication with Virginia Early, Policy Office Administrator, California Department of Education (2026, February 4); California Department of Social Services. *October enrollments by age group: 2024* [Dataset]; Office of Head Start PIR Reports. (n.d.). *Enrollment statistics report*; U.S. Census Bureau. (2025). *State population by characteristics: 2020–2024. Annual estimates of the resident population by single year of age and sex for California: April 1, 2020, to July 1, 2024.*

Figure 3. Enrollment of 3-Year-Olds in Publicly Funded PreK or Child Care, 2019–20 to 2024–25



Notes: Subsidized child care programs include Alternative Payment; CalWORKs Stages 1, 2, and 3; subsidized family child care home networks; General Child Care; migrant programs; and Severely Handicapped. Children dually enrolled in CSPP and Head Start are only included in CSPP counts. Children dually enrolled in subsidized child care and CSPP or Head Start are only included in CSPP or Head Start counts, respectively. Head Start data from 2019–20 and 2024–25 were not available, so we used data from the prior year as a proxy. All values except for CSPP enrollment are estimates rounded to the nearest 100.

Sources: California Department of Education. *California State Preschool Program, two-month average data reports by school year of age* [Dataset], obtained through personal communication with Jian Hua Liang, Education Administrator, California Department of Education (2026, January 5); California Department of Education (2026, January 5); California Department of Social Services. *October enrollments by age group: 2020–2024* [Dataset]; Office of Head Start PIR Reports. (n.d.). *Enrollment statistics report*; U.S. Census Bureau. (2025). *State population by characteristics: 2020–2024. Annual estimates of the resident population by single year of age and sex for California: April 1, 2020, to July 1, 2024* [Dataset SC-EST2024-SYASEX-06] (accessed 07/02/2025); U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). *State population by characteristics: 2010–2019. Annual estimates of the resident population by single year of age and sex for California: April 1, 2010, to July 1, 2019* [Dataset SC-EST2019-SYASEX-06] (accessed 07/15/2024).

Conclusion

Since 2021, California has worked to expand access to publicly funded ECE programs for 3- and 4-year-olds. ECE enrollment is rapidly increasing, especially among 4-year-olds. The number of 4-year-olds in TK, CSPP, Head Start, and subsidized child care rose from about 208,300 in 2019–20 to 264,700 in 2024–25—expanding its reach from about 42% to about 62% of all 4-year-olds in the state. Much of the growth was in TK, but subsidized child care also expanded, while 4-year-old enrollment in CSPP and Head Start declined. The number of 4-year-olds who did not participate in state- or federally funded ECE declined by 42% during the same period, from 286,900 to 165,300.

Three-year-old enrollment in public PreK and child care programs has also grown since the pandemic, but more slowly, from about 100,300 in 2019–20 (21% of all 3-year-olds) to 104,200 in 2024–25 (25% of all 3-year-olds). This means that 75% of 3-year-old children are still not accessing subsidized ECE programs. Understanding why and improving access for those who want to enroll is an important next step for California.

Endnotes

1. California AB 130 (2021–22).
2. Barriers to enrollment may include paperwork challenges or a school not offering TK. Hill, L., & Lawton, M. (2025). *California's transitional kindergarten expansion*. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-transitional-kindergarten-expansion/>; Sandstrom, H., Kuhns, C., Prendergast, S., Derrick-Mills, T., & Wagner, L. (2024). *Parental search and selection of child care and early education: A literature review* [OPRE Report 2024-082]. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation.
3. Programs included in this analysis were Alternative Payment; CalWORKs Stages 1, 2, and 3; subsidized family child care home networks; General Child Care; migrant programs; and Severely Handicapped. The Bridge Program for foster youth and California Community College CalWORKs Stage 2 were not included due to data limitations.
4. Prior, L., & Schumaker, K. (2025). *California funding trends for early care and education*. California Budget and Policy Center. <https://calbudgetcenter.org/resources/california-funding-trends-for-early-care-education-programs/>
5. Saucedo, E. (2025). *Preschool-age enrollment trends across California's early learning programs*. California Budget and Policy Center. <https://calbudgetcenter.org/resources/preschool-age-enrollment-trends-across-californias-early-learning-programs/>; Legislative Analyst's Office. (2025). *The 2025–26 budget: Child care and state preschool*. <https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/5024>
6. Learning Policy Institute analysis of the American Community Survey. (2023). *Enrollment by type of school*; Ruggles, S., Flood, S., Sobek, M., Backman, D., Cooper, G., Rivera Drew, J., Richards, S., Rodgers, R., Schroeder, J., & Williams, K. (2025). *IPUMS USA: Version 16.0 [ACS 2023]*. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V16.0> (accessed 12/02/2025).
7. Learning Policy Institute analysis of the American Community Survey. (2023). *Enrollment by type of school*; Ruggles, S., Flood, S., Sobek, M., Backman, D., Cooper, G., Rivera Drew, J., Richards, S., Rodgers, R., Schroeder, J., & Williams, K. (2025). *IPUMS USA: Version 16.0 [ACS 2023]*. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V16.0> (accessed 12/02/2025).

Acknowledgments

This brief benefited from review by Brett Guinan, Research Associate at the Public Policy Institute of California, and Erik Saucedo, Senior Policy Analyst at the California Budget and Policy Center.

This research was supported by the Ballmer Group, Heising-Simons Foundation, and Kelson Foundation. Additional core operating support for the Learning Policy Institute is provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Raikes Foundation, Sandler Foundation, Skyline Foundation, and MacKenzie Scott. The ideas voiced here are those of the authors and not those of our funders.

Suggested citation: Melnick, H., & García, E. (2026). *Universal PreK expansion: How many 3- and 4-year-olds does California enroll?* [Brief]. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/ca-universal-prek-expansion-enroll-brief>

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Document last revised March 19, 2026