



How Pre-K May Narrow Early Gaps in Children's Learning

California's Roll-out of Universal Transitional Kindergarten

Ja'Nya Banks, Carla Bryant, Bruce Fuller, Chunhan Huang, Abigail Slovick

Berkeley Children's Forum and District Innovation and
Leadership in Early Education
2022

Will California Achieve Fairness for Young Children?

Several cities and states aim to reduce disparities in children's early learning by widening access to quality preschool. California's governor and lawmakers share this goal, woven into legislation extending universal transitional kindergarten (UTK) to all 4-year-olds by 2026.¹

A half-century of research details how children raised in low-income families often begin kindergarten far behind middle-class peers.² The good news is that discernible progress has occurred in narrowing this gap in recent decades nationwide.³

But for California this brief offers a word of warning. We find that African American and White children under enrolled in transitional kindergarten (TK), relative to their share of 4-year-olds in several counties, during the program's initial decade.

These historical disparities may constrain UTK's future ability to integrate young children across racial groups

or social classes. In addition, TK enrollment of Black children fell by 35% during the Covid era, compared with a decline of one-fourth among Latino and White children.⁴ Enrollment of dual-language learners remains spotty across urban and rural school districts as well.⁵

California policy makers and the education department face pressure to expand UTK quickly. This brief argues that mindful attention to the *distribution* of new UTK spaces across groups and communities is required – to deliver on the promise of narrowing gaps in children's early growth.⁶

A Fair Start?

Policy leaders outside California's capital endeavor to distribute pre-K access or quality in fair ways, intending to reduce early disparities. States such as Georgia support nonprofit pre-K centers, not only programs situated in public schools, building from historical roots in poor communities.⁷ Oklahoma officials cooperate closely with Head Start programs to widen access for 2 and 3-year-old children, as public schools serve rising counts of 4-year-olds.⁸

California’s method of financing schools, known as Local Control Funding, provides added dollars for 4-year-olds enrolled in districts that serve high concentrations of disadvantaged students. This, on top of the \$21,000 in approximate funding per student (in 2022-23). President Biden’s pre-K proposal, stuck in the U.S. Senate, would go further: offering federal dollars for states that first expand access to children in poor communities, before moving out to middle-class families.⁹

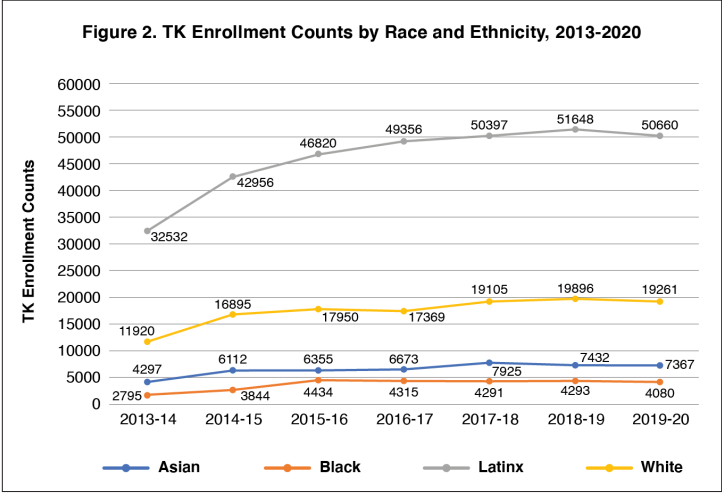
The integration of young children, along racial or social-class lines, offers one mechanism for reducing disparities in early learning. Initial empirical work shows developmental benefits for poor children when attending pre-K’s with middle-class peers.¹⁰ But to what extent will the steady expansion of TK bring children from diverse groups under one roof? And what forms of racial or economic integration will narrow early gaps in children’s learning? These are questions that must be asked and new data gathered to yield empirical answers.

Racial Differences Surface – Early Enrollment Growth

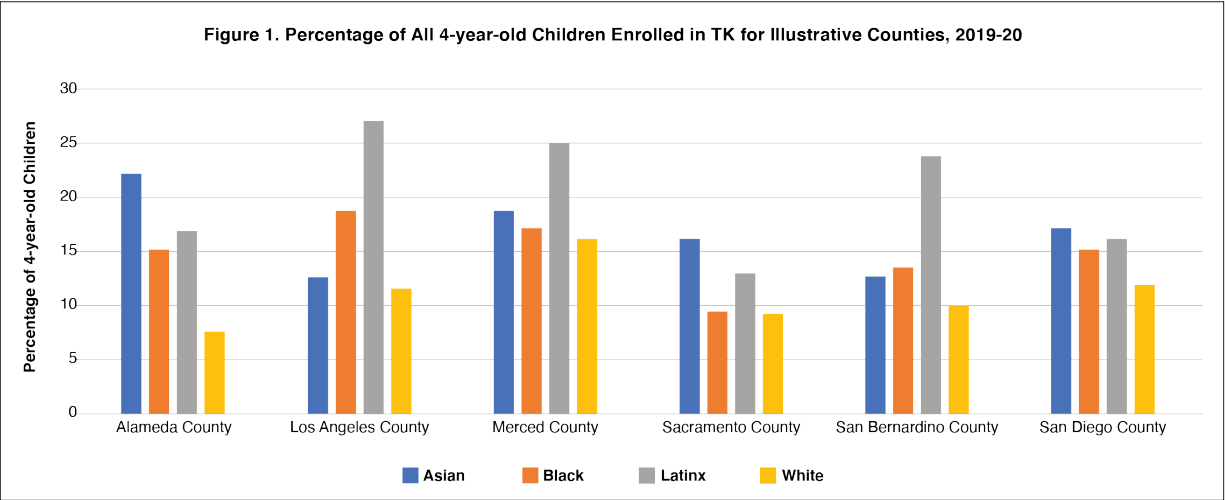
Against this backdrop, we ask how enrollment rates in transitional kindergarten may have varied among groups since the program’s inception in 2010. Our earlier paper showed how Black and White children have tended to under enroll in TK relative to other ethnic groups in several counties, shown in Figure 1.¹¹ Latino children consistently entered TK classrooms in 2019-20 prior to school closings in March, 2020. Yet, Black and White children enrolled up to 10 percentage points lower than Latino youngsters, as a share of each county’s 4-year-old population.

Looking back to 2013-14, we also see robust growth in TK for Latino children and for Whites to a lesser extent (Figure 2). But enrollment growth statewide quickly leveled-off for Black and White children through 2019-20. The count of Black children enrolled was declining in the three years prior to the Covid pandemic.

We do not know if these trends will persist as districts extend TK to additional 4-year-olds. Yet, indicators of progress should be sensitive to which ethnic or social-class groups are benefiting from anticipated gains in access.



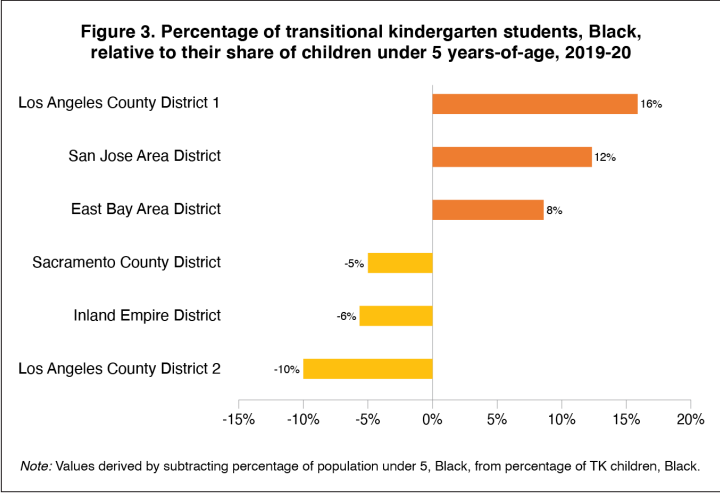
We discovered significant variation in the representation of Black and White children among *school districts* as well. Some local school boards act to enroll more Black children than the share of young children, African American, residing in the district. In contrasting areas, Black enrollments lag behind their proportional representation inside district bounds.



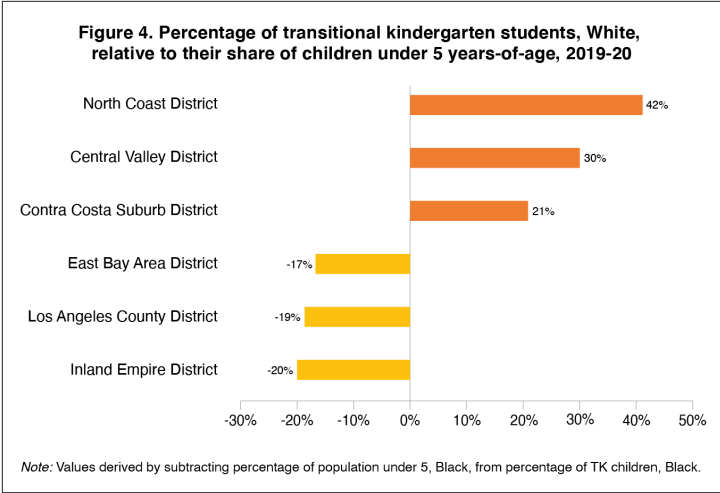
One Los Angeles-area district, for instance, enrolls more Black 4-year-olds in TK than the proportional representation of Black youngsters who reside in the district (Figure 3). When we subtract this percentage of TK enrollments from the percentage of resident young children, Black, a positive 16 percentage point difference results. Note the district labels designate a region of California, while protecting each district’s anonymity.

A second L.A. County district under enrolls Black 4-year-olds in TK by 10 percentage points, appearing at the bottom of Figure 3. That is, the share of resident young children, Black, is 10 points higher than this group’s enrollment in TK.

These deviations from population parity may stem from other pre-K options available to Black families, including Head Start, California State Preschool (CSPP), and nonprofit centers. Data from these programs has yet to be compiled to paint a complete picture of access across disparate pre-K programs.



Similar variation among districts arise for White children enrolled in TK, a pivotal dynamic that will shape UTK’s future ability to integrate youngsters. Districts may regressively allocate TK slots to disproportionately high shares of White children at the expense of other youngsters and families.



One North Coast district, for example, enrolls a high share of White children in TK, fully 42 percentage points above this group’s percentage of the under-5 child population residing inside district boundaries. A portion of these children may come from disadvantaged families; we make no assumption regarding their social-class origins. But this level of over enrollment may limit the racial integration of youngsters.

In contrast, one Inland Empire district enrolls a limited count of White 4-year-olds in TK – 20 percentage points below their proportional representation among young children living in the district. Again, other White families may be selecting alternative pre-K programs or forms of child care. Yet, these patterns do raise the question of whether UTK expansion will invite all children under the same roof, or inadvertently reinforce differing levels of access to pre-K.

TK Rolls Out – Defining and Tracking Fairness for Diverse Children

Little is known about the efficacy of pre-K entitlements in reducing disparities in children’s early learning and well-being. We know that high-quality pre-K lifts youngsters from low-income families. And two studies indicate that the nation is making discernible progress in narrowing gaps in children’s “school readiness.”

But we do not know how the spread or quality of preschool may help to explain this hopeful progress.

The initial findings in this brief – stemming from TK’s first decade – suggest that Black parents do not enroll their 4-year-olds in the program at the same rate as other ethnic groups. In several counties, White children are under enrolled as well, relative to their representation among resident children.

Black families may opt to rely on other pre-K programs, including CSPP and federal Head Start. Or, they may lean on kin members or paid caregivers for their 4-year-olds. (California spends nearly \$1 billion yearly on child-care vouchers.) We can better inform these questions as state agencies improve and consolidate existing data gathering.

Policy makers and local districts might explicitly *define* what they mean by fairness or equity. California’s CSPP effort is means-tested, long focused on lifting children from poor and lower middle-class families. Yet, TK will become an entitlement, spread across all communities, no matter how rich or poor. How will this distribution reduce disparities?

The related distributional question is how quality is spread across differing school districts. Local education agencies already face a teacher shortage and spike in post-Covid retirements. Universal provision of TK will require at least another 11,000 teachers. Which 4-year-olds will benefit most from skilled and experienced teachers, and which children will not?

This brief offers a word of warning – that without mindful implementation at state and local levels, the odds of reducing early disparities by integrating diverse children may remain low. California will require richer data before we can empirically inform these pressing questions. At stake: Are we serious about creating a high-quality pre-K system that’s fair, one that moves all children to the same starting line as they begin school?

Special thanks to analysts at the California Department of Education for compiling and sharing much of the data on which our research is based, and for their patience with our endless questions. Authors are listed alphabetically, contributing equally to this report. Our research is funded by the Berkeley Children’s Forum at UC Berkeley and District Innovation and Leadership in Early Education.

Will TK Narrow Disparities? Implementation Dollars Arrive

School districts received implementation funding in spring, 2022 from the Department of Education (CDE). State lawmakers weighted these funds toward districts serving larger shares of disadvantaged children – building local capacity to narrow early disparities in children’s learning.

Districts slow to create TK programs over the past decade also received extra funding, helping them catch-up with districts that have assertively expanded TK access.

Analyzing these distributions, we find that districts in small to mid-size towns received more implementation dollars per pupil, relative to large urban districts. A large urban district such as L.A. Unified received \$154 per (kindergarten) pupil, compared with a small district, like Auburn Union east of Sacramento, awarded \$639 per pupil.

Districts hosting larger percentages of children from low-income or Latino backgrounds received slightly higher allocations per pupil, compared with districts in economically better-off communities – consistent with the funding formula. Local districts won about eight dollars more per pupil for each percentage point increase in the share of children enrolled from poor Latino families. Districts hosting larger shares of Black students also gained a few more dollars per pupil.

At the same time, districts with better educated residents tended to win additional dollars per pupil, after accounting for the overall progressivity of distributions.

These kinds of data will illuminate whether the distribution of resources helps to reduce early disparities in learning.

References

- Amadon, S., Gormley, W., Claessens, A., Magnuson, K., Hummel Price, D., & Romm, K. (2022). Does early childhood education help to improve high school outcomes? Results from Tulsa. *Child Development*. Online DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13752.
- California Legislature (2021). Education omnibus budget trailer bill, Chapter 252. Sacramento.
- Cascio, E. & Schanzenbach, D. (2013). The impacts of expanding access to high-quality preschool education. Cambridge, MA National Bureau of Economic Research (19735).
- Fuller, B. (2007). *Standardized childhood: The cultural and political contest over early education*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Fuller, B. & Leibovitz, T. (2022). Do preschool entitlements distribute quality fairly? Racial inequity in New York City. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 60, 414-427.
- Havnes, T. & Mogstad, M. (2015). Is child care leveling the playing field. *Journal of Public Economics*, 127, 100-114.
- Hill, L. & Prunty, E. (2022). Setting the stage for universal preschool: Is Transitional Kindergarten serving students equitably? San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California. Online: <https://www.ppic.org/publication/setting-the-stage-for-universal-preschool/>.
- Jenkins, J., Farkas, G., Duncan, G., Burchinal, M. & Vandell, D. (2016). Head Start at ages 3 and 4 versus Head Start followed by state pre-k: Which is more effective?. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 38, 88-112.
- Kuhfeld, M., Soland, J., Pitts, C., & Burchinal, M. (2020). Trends in children's academic skills at school entry: 2010 to 2017. *Educational Researcher*, 49, 403-414.
- Latham, S., Corcoran, S., Sattin-Bajaj, C. & Jennings, J. L. (2021). Racial disparities in pre-K quality: Evidence from New York City's universal pre-k program. *Educational Researcher*, 50, 607-617.
- Miller, P., Votruba-Drzal, E., McQuiggan, M. & Shaw, A. (2017). Pre-K classroom economic composition and children's early academic development. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 109, 149-162.
- Prunty, E., & Hill, L. (2022). What do enrollment declines mean for Transitional Kindergarten? San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California. Online: <https://www.ppic.org/blog/what-do-enrollment-declines-mean-for-transitional-kindergarten/>.
- Ready, D. & Reid, J. (2022). Segregating Gotham's youngest: Racial/ethnic sorting and the choice architecture of New York City's Pre-K for All. Providence: Brown University (Ed Working Paper 22-560). Online: <https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/NYC%20PreK%20Segregation%20Ready%20Reid.pdf>.
- Rules Committee (2021). Text of H.R. 5376, Build Back Better Act. Washington, DC: United States Congress (November 3).
- Yoshikawa, H., Wuerml, A., Raikes, A., Kim, S. & Kabay, S. (2018). Toward high-quality early childhood development programs and policies at national scale: Directions for research in global contexts. *Social Policy Report*, 31, Society for Research in Child Development.

Endnotes

- ¹ The legislation authorizing Universal Transitional Kindergarten - the budget trailer bill for 2021-22 - repeatedly talks of high-needs students or schools, and targets new funding for districts or teacher-training institutions that intend to serve higher shares of children eligible for free or reduced-price meals, dual-language learners, homeless students, and low-income children served by the California State Preschool Program. New planning funds going to local districts are weighted by the proportion of disadvantaged students under Local Control Funding. New facilities funding dedicated to TK and full-day kindergarten classrooms must first go to districts with weaker tax bases (California Legislature, 2021).
- ² One recent review of empirical work appears in Yoshikawa, Wuerml, Raikes, Kim and Kabay (2018). And see Amadon, Gormley et al. (2022).
- ³ Reardon and Portilla (2016), Kuhfeld, Soland, Pitts and Burchinal (2020). A small literature examines whether universal pre-K programs drive longer-term equity effects in adulthood (e.g., Havnes & Mogstad, 2015).
- ⁴ Prunty and Hill (2022).
- ⁵ Hill and Prunty (2022).
- ⁶ The distribution of pre-K quality under universal entitlements is receiving empirical attention as well. For example, Fuller and Leibovitz (2022), Latham, Corcoran, Sattin-Bajaj and Jennings (2021).
- ⁷ Cascio and Schanzenbach (2013).
- ⁸ Fuller (2007); Jenkins, Farkas, Duncan, Burchinal and Vandell (2016).
- ⁹ Rules Committee (2021).
- ¹⁰ Miller, Votruba-Drzal, McQuiggan and Shaw (2017), Ready and Reid (2022).
- ¹¹ Slovick, Bryant, Huang and Fuller (2022).