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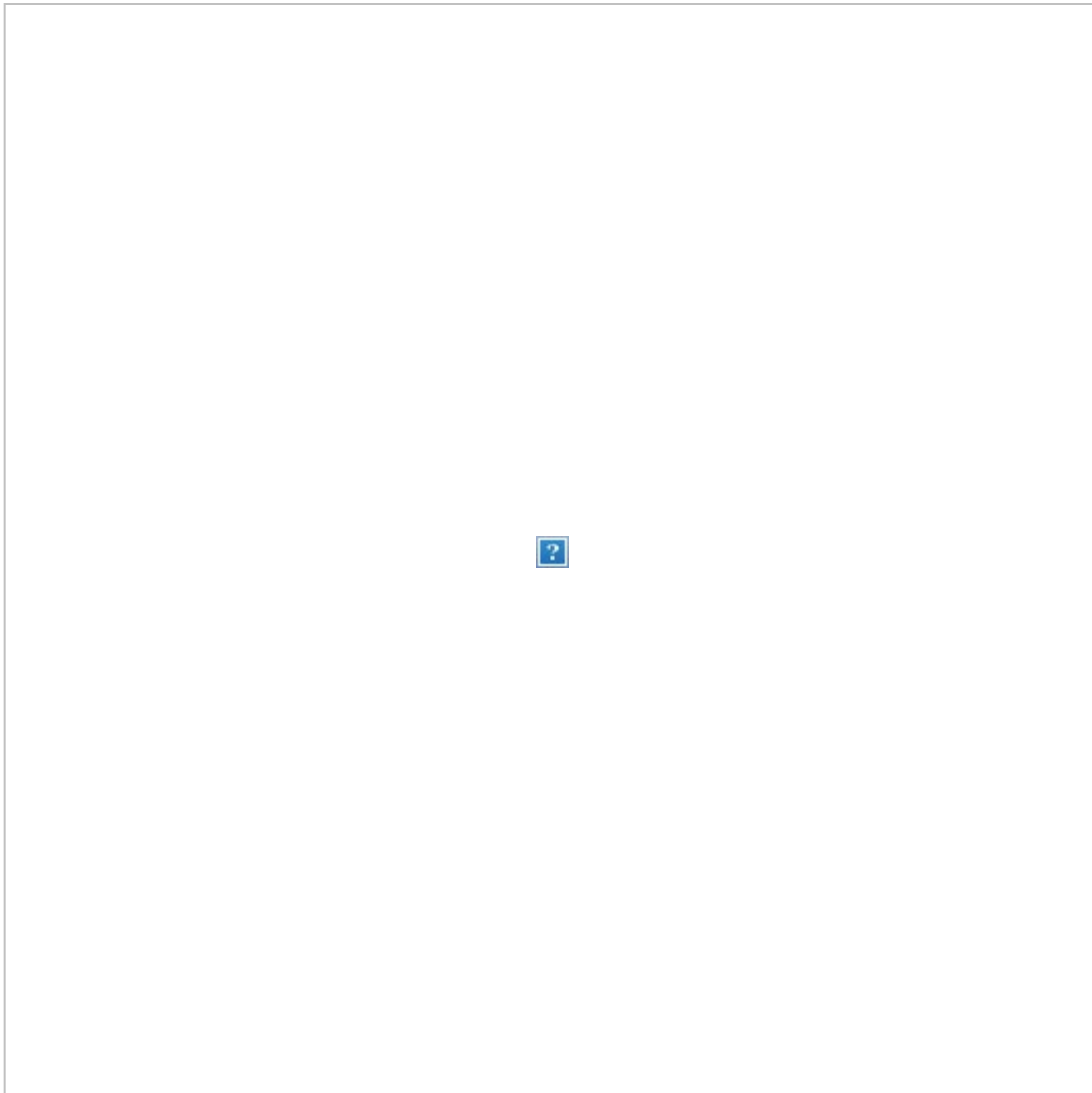
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What California Can Learn From A Tennessee Pre-K Program That Failed Kids

By [Mariana Dale](#)

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California is in the midst of expanding transitional kindergarten eligibility to every 4-year-old in the state.

(Mariana Dale/ LAIST)

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By the time school starts in 2025, every 4-year-old in California will be eligible to attend transitional kindergarten, or TK, at their local public school.

Gov. Gavin Newsom laid out the argument for expanding TK in last year’s budget:

“Evidence is plentiful that children who attend preschool are better prepared to succeed in school than children who do not.”

But a study published last month questions that very premise, as well as years of research that pre-K programs can help kids thrive.

Vanderbilt researchers found that students who participated in Tennessee's public pre-K program tested lower on state assessments and had more behavioral problems compared to those who didn't.

"I think we've lost sight of young children's development and what really helps them," said lead author Dale Farran.

Other researchers are cautious to overgeneralize the study's outcomes, but say there are lessons in the findings.

"We cannot be lulled into thinking long-term benefits will always follow because a pre-K program gets some or even many things right," National Institute For Early Education Research (NIEER) Senior Co-Director [Steve Barnett](#) wrote.

What Happened In Tennessee?

When Tennessee started statewide pre-K in 2005, the program ticked off [nine of NIEER's 10 quality standards](#). Among them: teachers with bachelor's degrees, specialized pre-K training, classes sizes of 20 students or less, and adult-to-child ratios of 1:10 or less.

The Vanderbilt study included nearly 3,000 students from low-income families who applied to pre-K through a lottery system. The control group couldn't enroll because there wasn't enough space. Farran said this created a comparison that was not just apples-to-apples, in terms of similarity between the groups of kids, but "Macintosh-to-Macintosh."

By third grade, the students [fared worse academically and had more behavior problems](#).

The most recent study tracked the students through sixth grade and found the negative impact deepened. Children who didn't attend pre-K scored higher on state tests for

reading, math and science. The pre-K kids also were more likely to be disciplined in school.

I think we've lost sight of young children's development and what really helps them.

— Dale Farran, research professor, Vanderbilt University

Researchers are paying attention because this research method, called a randomized control trial, is considered especially high quality. What's still unclear is what caused these less-than-ideal outcomes.

"There's something going on there that I think we don't understand," said [Karen Manship](#), who's studied early education at the American Institutes for Research.

Lead author Farran said one explanation might be the increasingly academic focus of pre-K.

"I think it speaks to our unwitting perception that these children come to school so poorly prepared, that we need to drill them in basic skills before they get into kindergarten," Farran said. "But the recent emphasis on that sort of approach has not netted good effects."

The concluding paragraph of the study is particularly spicy — well, in terms of academic research.

It calls the findings "disconcerting," and describes something I've seen firsthand: Early educators and those who advocate for them, want the best for kids, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, but this study shows that intention isn't enough to help children thrive.

"If the programs we have created do not produce the desired effects, the findings

themselves should not be dismissed simply because they were unanticipated and unwelcome," the study reads.

Well, What Do We Know About Transitional Kindergarten?

In 2010, California moved the age cutoff for kindergarten to September 1, and required districts to begin offering a new grade called transitional kindergarten to kids with 5th birthdays between September and December of the current school year.

Last year, Gov. Newsom proposed — and the legislature funded — expanding eligibility to every 4-year-old by the 2025-2026 school year.

"Racially, historically marginalized, our children with disabilities, all of them have had less access to inclusive high quality, pre-K experiences," said California Department of Education Deputy Superintendent Sarah Neville-Morgan. "We see this as addressing that opportunity gap."

The only large-scale study of TK we have found that the program helped kids academically — at first.

The American Institutes for Research began studying the program in 2012, and its final report found children who attended TK had stronger language, reading and math skills at the beginning of kindergarten compared to those students that just missed the age cut-off.

A 4-year-old girl in a pink shirt puts together a puzzle with purple pieces on a tablet.



The Los Angeles Unified School District started enrolling younger 4-year-olds in transitional kindergarten ahead of the statewide expansion.

(Mariana Dale / LAist)

The only difference in social skills between the bunch was that teachers reported students who attended transitional kindergarten were “more engaged” than their peers.

Those advantages, however, shrunk — by the end of kindergarten. The only academic skill where TK students still out-performed the control group was in identifying words and

letters, and the effect was smaller.

Principal researcher Karen Manship said it's less that the TK students fell behind than that their peers caught up quickly.

"We wouldn't be surprised if we saw kindergarten teachers spending more time with kids who didn't have as advanced skills and needed more support to get ready for first grade," Manship said.

The Los Angeles Unified School District has independently analyzed some of the outcomes for its TK students and found similar results to the AIR study — TK students had stronger math, reading and writing skills at the beginning of kindergarten than those who didn't attend the program, and the gap between the two groups closed substantially by the end of second grade.

LAUSD's executive director for early childhood education division, Dean Tagawa, said in an interview that TK students also have higher attendance.

"Those equate to a lot more days in school and so we know that that's also a predictor of better outcomes," Tagawa said.

California Is Expanding TK — How Do We Not Mess This Up?

Transitional kindergarten has room for improvement.

The program meets just three of NIEER's quality standards — the program has comprehensive learning standards, supports the implementation of the curriculum and teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree.

Gov. Newsom has pledged to make progress on at least two of these standards — class size and staff-to-child ratio.

But as the Tennessee study shows, success doesn't always follow these standards.

"You could think of them as necessary, but not sufficient for success," said NIEER's Barnett.

Several early education researchers LAist interviewed said the state needs to collect more data about transitional kindergarten.

We are asking families...to trust us, to put their children with us. I think it is incumbent upon states who implement this kind of program to find out whether it's effective or whether it's potentially harmful.

— Dale Farran, research professor at Vanderbilt University

"The good thing is those data can then be used to make the program better, whatever the results are," Barnett said. "If they're great, we'll keep on keeping on. If they're not as good as you'd like, then what improvements need to be made?"

California lacks research as comprehensive as Tennessee's and currently doesn't have a statewide system to assess its youngest students or improve transitional kindergarten.

"We are asking families ... to trust us, to put their children with us," Farran said. "I think it is incumbent upon states who implement this kind of program to find out whether it's effective or whether it's potentially harmful."

And there are ways to measure the growth and development of young kids. California already uses a system like this in its state preschool program that relies on a teacher's observations.



Tagawa says LAUSD's transitional kindergarten prioritizes interactions between teachers and students with one adult for every eight kids in the classroom.

(Kyle Stokes

/

LAist)

“Having a clear and explicit expectation for what teachers should be able to do and what children need to be able to do by the end of TK, I think is really important,” said Learning Policy Institute Senior Researcher [Cathy Yun](#). “In the past I think a lot of districts just kind of made it up as they went that makes for a lot of inequity and a lot of inconsistency in TK

classrooms.”

Currently, transitional kindergarten looks a little different in every school district. It might be part- or full-day, include younger children or even be combined with kindergarten.

The California Department of Education recommends the state create an implementation study to look at what’s currently happening in TK classrooms and what’s needed to grow the program.

LAist asked who should fund such a study.

*We're gonna stay neutral on that,” said Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction Sarah Neville-Morgan. “I just say we think that it needs to happen, there needs to be funds. And however that comes about.”

In the meantime, individual school districts have been tasked with creating a plan by the end of June for [how they’ll roll out transitional kindergarten](#) for all 4-year-olds.

“I understand the impetus to move quickly,” Barnett said. “Today's four-year-olds will not have another chance ... but rushing and in a way that requires you to cut corners and sacrifice quality doesn't benefit kids.”

What questions do you have about early childhood education and development? What do you want to know about kids ages 0-5 and those who care for them in Southern California?

Decades of research indicates early childhood education significantly boosts children’s readiness to learn. Mariana Dale wants families, caregivers and educators to have the information they need to help children 0-5 grow and thrive by identifying what’s working and what’s not in California’s early childhood system.

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A classroom of students in early transitional kindergarten.



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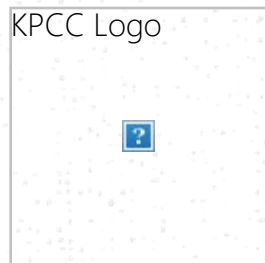


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