

● **Pre-K Pivot?**

**How Preschools Shift
to Younger Children in Los Angeles**



Summary

Public schools host a rising count of children in transitional kindergarten (TK) classrooms across Los Angeles County. This school year, 2025-26, marks the first that all children, 4 years of age, are eligible for free TK—a new grade level in the schools.

Policy leaders who crafted *California’s Master Plan for Early Care and Learning in 2020* – endorsed by the governor and state lawmakers – hoped that pre-K providers would serve younger children as TK expanded in the schools. Policy makers set the goal of extending publicly funded preschool to at least two-thirds of California’s 3-year-olds.¹ At present, about one-third of all 3’s gain access to pre-K centers statewide.² Quality centers for infants and toddlers remain even more scarce.

By financing TK for all 4-year-olds, the state freed up dollars to expand early learning and care options to younger children. The governor and lawmakers approved higher per-child allocations for 2- and 3-year-olds, incentivizing public school and nonprofit pre-Ks to serve younger children, for whom costs remain most severe for families. Access to the California State Preschool Program (CSPP) widened to include all families earning under the state median income, more than \$120,000 in 2025 for a family of four—potentially reaching many middle-class households.



This brief examines how the intended shift of preschool programs to younger children is unfolding in Los Angeles County, sparked by the spread of transitional kindergarten serving 4-year-olds. The analysis addresses five questions –

- **Where is TK growing across the county and at what rate?**
- **What’s the rationale for shifting preschool programs to serve younger children as TK expands? What policy incentives (or disincentives) encourage (or discourage) this pivot?**
- **How does preschool supply for 3-year-olds vary across the county? What local disparities in access arise for differing families?**
- **Does TK growth complement or erode the overall supply of preschool slots, perhaps altering the population of preschools that could serve additional 3- and 4-year-old children?**
- **How are some pre-K programs successfully pivoting to serve younger children in this evolving policy and market environment?**

Overall, we find steady growth of TK classrooms, especially in more distant and economically better-off suburbs of L.A. County. The rationale for pivoting to younger children is strong: pre-K programs are scarce for 2- and 3-year-old children. Initial evidence suggests that attending one year of preschool before TK yields stronger gains for children. The expansion of TK is associated with the accelerated decline in the supply of licensed pre-K’s—potentially eroding the long-term vitality of the early-childhood sector.

Our earlier [brief](#) reported flat enrollments in CSPP and declining attendance in federal Head Start centers since the pandemic. Enrollments of 3-year-old children in the state preschool program, of late, are growing slowly. The doubling of child care vouchers since 2021 may contribute to pallid enrollment in CSPP and Head Start, which cannot accept vouchers.

At the same time, a fraction of pre-K programs – including those run by public schools and community nonprofits — are successfully pivoting to serve younger children in the wake of TK expansion. We detail how they are achieving this organizational shift, along with how state and local policies might hurry such success.

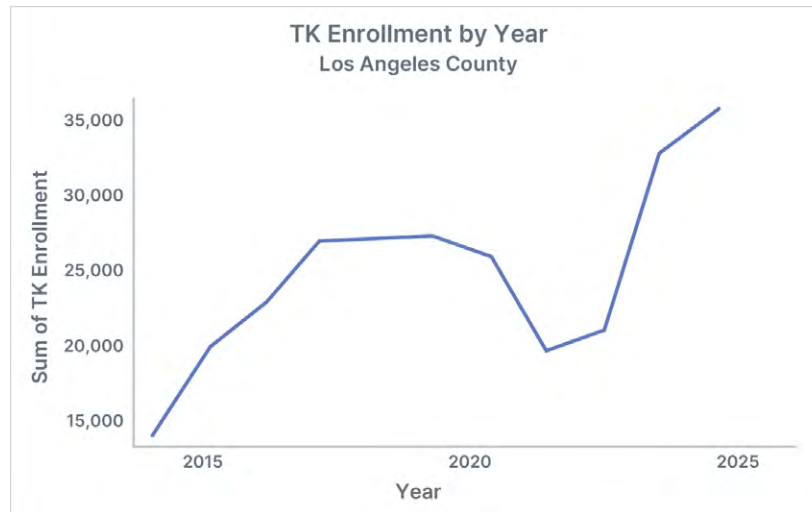
We use the term *pre-K* to refer to local organizations in which early learning for 3- and 4-year-olds is the primary focus. Most 3- and 4-year-olds in California attend pre-K classrooms situated in public schools or nonprofit centers.

1. Los Angeles Grows Transitional Kindergarten

When the state initiated major expansion of TK in 2021, a portion of L.A. County’s public schools were well positioned to enroll additional 4-year-old children. TK enrollments had grown since the 2013 inception of the program, thanks in large part to steady expansion led by the Los Angeles Unified School District.

After a dip in enrollment during the Covid pandemic, TK enrollment has rebounded and now exceeds pre-Covid counts of 4-year-olds (Figure 1). Children have entered TK classrooms across most of the county’s 78 school districts that host elementary schools. The current school year, 2025-26, is the first that all 4-year-olds are legally entitled to a TK seat.

Figure 1. Growth in Transitional Kindergarten Enrollment in Los Angeles County, 2013-2024



Transitional kindergarten provides access to any 4-year-old at no direct cost to the family. TK is offered exclusively by public schools—unlike other publicly funded pre-K options, often run by nonprofit organizations. In L.A. County, these include Head Start, the California State Preschool Program, General Child Care, and tuition-charging preschools that have served 4-year-olds going back a century and a half in California.

Growth in child-care vouchers, more than doubling statewide, has far outpaced the growth of any form of preschool since 2021.



TK is best viewed as one piece of a complex organizational puzzle. In addition to California’s publicly funded preschools, the state budgeted for more than 143,000 child-care vouchers to poor and lower-middle-income families in 2025.^{3,4}

We focus on the dynamics set in motion by TK expansion, the state’s leading-edge initiative – which may nudge preschools to serve younger children, zero to 3 years of age.

TK Growth Varies Across L.A.

Wider access to free pre-K for a growing count of 4-year-olds offers good news for thousands of Southland families. Yet, do all communities and families share in this expansion? Or, might certain neighborhoods benefit more? Lower-income parents, for example, have long benefited from public pre-K for their 3- and 4-year-olds. It’s better-off families who have paid for preschool. TK may be a god-send for the latter group in terms of relieving parents of exorbitant preschool costs.

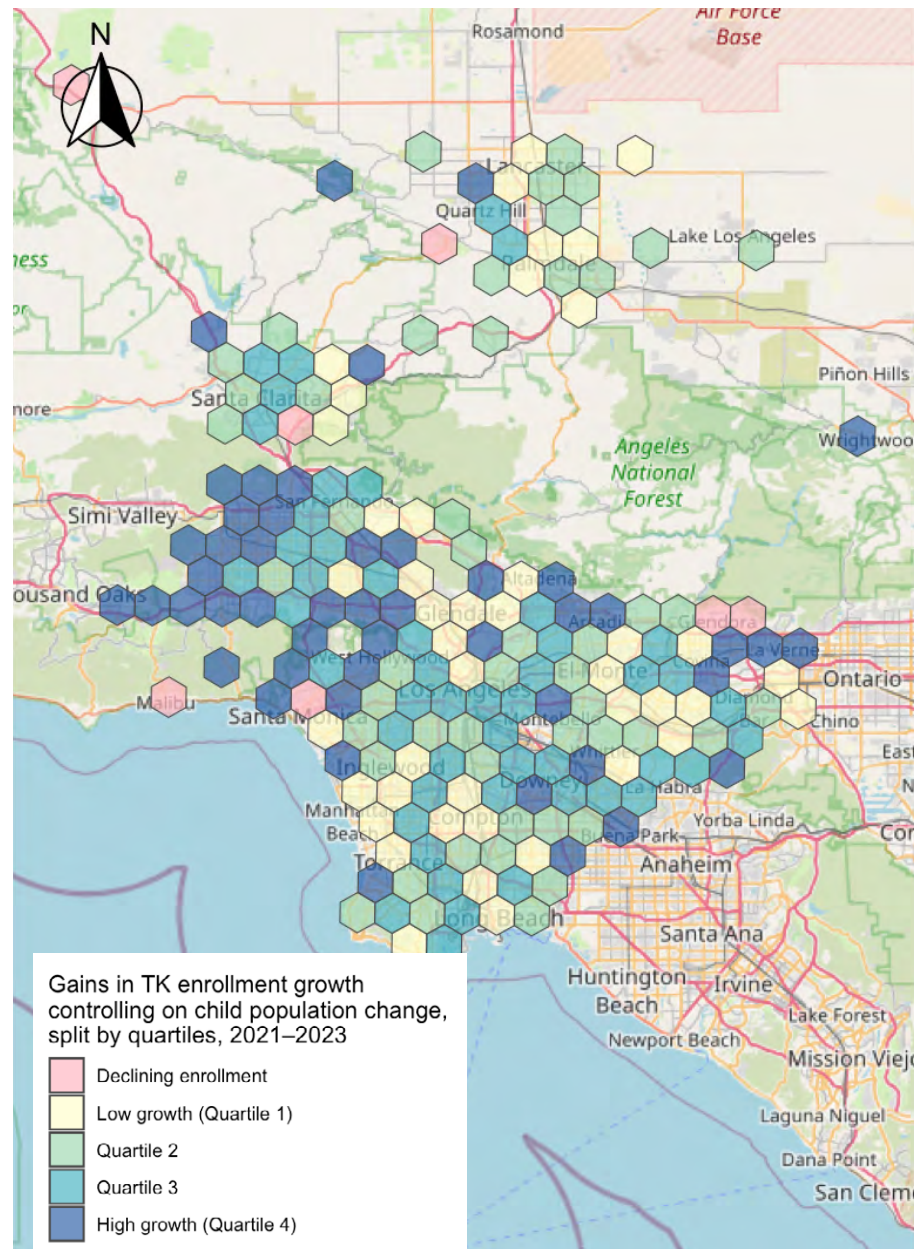
So, let’s examine the rate at which TK has been growing in recent years. We first split L.A. County into small geographic areas, shaped as hexagons, each with a three-mile radius. This allows us to vividly describe where TK is growing, or not. We then estimate the extent to which TK enrollment growth in any given hexagon predicts growth or shrinkage in supply of licensed pre-k centers and spaces.

First, we simply plot the rate of TK growth across these small areas spread across L.A. County (Figure 2). We see that TK growth is most robust in outlying suburbs in the northwest and far east parts of the county. TK expansion has occurred in the Antelope Valley area as well, driven largely by population growth. This map – displaying growth rates after sorting the hexagons into four groups with equal counts (quartiles) – takes into account changes in child population for each small geography. As of 2024, TK enrollment growth in higher-income parts of the county was three times the rate observed in low-income areas relative to 2021.

In general, higher growth rates likely stem from family income and social-class features of local communities. Families realizing the greatest savings by enrolling their child in TK include middle-class and affluent families, many living in these outlying parts of the county. At the same time, school districts in outlying suburbs (or segments of LAUSD in these areas) may have greater organizational capacity to expand TK more rapidly.

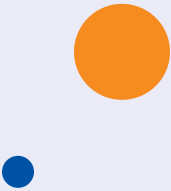
Figure 2. Change in transitional kindergarten enrollment among geographic units, Los Angeles County, Fall 2021 to Fall 2023 (taking into account child population)

Families realizing the greatest savings by enrolling their child in TK include middle-class and affluent families, many living in outlying parts of Los Angeles County.



Blank areas had no TK enrollment in 2022

Box 1. Pivoting to Younger Children at the Los Angeles County Hospital



Getting to the county hospital, finding parking, then whisking a 2-year-old into the child care center – well, it gets your blood flowing early morning. But once through the front door, parent and child breathe a sigh of relief, instant tranquility, met by a warm teacher, eye-catching photos of yesterday’s activities floating by atop the front desk.

Welcome to one of 10 centers operated by the Child Development Consortium of Los Angeles (CDCLA), a robust nonprofit that has served infants, toddlers, and 2’s for decades across L.A. Perched on a hillside overlooking remains of the county’s nineteenth century hospital, children enter colorful classrooms with a blend of engaging activities, pegged to each child’s developmental stage.

The building encircles three play areas where children tackle scooters, play structures, and ever-popular hoola hoops. Many children arrive soon after 6:30 in the morning when the center opens. Some will stay until 6:00 p.m. after their parents – orderlies, nurses, and doctors – get off work.

The hospital center serves about 86 children throughout the year, ranging from two months to 4 years of age. Each classroom enjoys at least three certified teachers or aides, as kids work together at those tiny tables, or circulate to the science corner or costume area, playful activities of their choice.

Welcoming children, age 3 and under, is not new for Lisa Wilkin, CDCLA’s executive director. “We have done this for a long time,” she told us. “We weave together CSPP and CCTR funding along with private tuition to serve a wide range of children.”

And it’s getting easier financially, Wilkin says, with higher reimbursement rates for 2’s and 3’s, along with liberalized income eligibility for families, reaching into the middle class.

L.A.'s Child Development Consortium aims to integrate kids of diverse ethnic and social-class backgrounds.

Wilkin also aims to integrate kids of diverse ethnic and social-class backgrounds. Her centers throughout Los Angeles County serve kids from middle-class and low-income families, a portion who can afford modest copays.

This center – operating adjacent the county hospital for 37 years – just can't shake it's long-term director, Frances Avila. She's in the process of stepping down, "but it hasn't been easy... I'll miss being part of this amazing team, and most of all, watching the children grow and thrive in all areas of their development," Avila said.

CDCLA coordinates a network of 40 family child care homes serving over 150 children, offering coaching to these providers on how to organize learning activities, how to better engage young children throughout the day. Many infants and toddlers first cared for in licensed homes move to attend centers run by the Child Development Consortium.





Pre-K enrollment of 3-year-olds remains much lower than participation of 4-year-olds.

Attracting a Shrinking Count of Children

Declining birth rates offer another key piece of the puzzle. TK enrollments continue to grow, given the economic advantage for families, even as the count of 4-year-olds declines countywide. At the same time, the parallel pre-K programs may suffer from losing 4-year-olds to TK in addition to declining child population. The field has not understood empirically whether TK is serving new families with a 4-year-old, previously unserved, or simply pulling 4's out of existing preschool programs.

Birth rates continue to decline in L.A. The county was home to just over 157,000 births in 2000, falling to under 91,000 by 2023. As educational attainment has climbed for Latina women, their fertility rate has declined from 2.7 to 1.7 births on average since 2000. This decline for African American women equals 1.9 to 1.4 births during the same period.⁵ Overall, the count of 4-year-olds has declined by two-fifths during the past quarter-century countywide.

At the same time, current pre-K enrollment of 3-year-olds remains much lower than the overall enrollment rate for 4-year-olds. Statewide estimates of pre-K enrollment range from 28 to 44 percent.⁶ It's this scarcity of pre-K slots – relative to more abundant seats for 4-year-olds – that brings urgency to the pivot to 3-year-olds, and potentially serving infants and toddlers.

State lawmakers have enriched incentives for CSPP-funded programs to shift to 2- and 3-year-olds since the pandemic. Each 2- or 3-year-old enrolled, for example, yields 80 percent more in per-child funding from Sacramento, compared with each 4-year-old. CSPP eligibility was extended to 2-year-olds in 2024. Outside of these reforms, there has been little legislative action to move the ECE sector toward younger children.

Beyond extending income eligibility, as mentioned above, the state has also allowed for school-run CSPP programs to enroll some children regardless of income. In 2024, the Los Angeles Unified School District opened CSPP enrollment to higher-income families, and a family earning \$144,000 annually now pays just \$93 a month for preschool.⁷

2. Why Pivot Pre-K Centers to Younger Children?

L.A. County is home to thousands of families with 2- or 3-year-old children who cannot find affordable preschool slots. The state aims to lend a hand – approving fresh financing for these children. So, the pivot to younger children would relieve the burdens of time and money for parents seeking to enroll their kids in preschool. (Some parents, of course, will continue to prefer staying at home or use an individual caregiver.) The shortage of high-quality center slots for infants remains even more severe in L.A.

Children benefit more when attending two years, not just one year, of quality preschool. These kids display stronger growth in language skills and cognitive development.

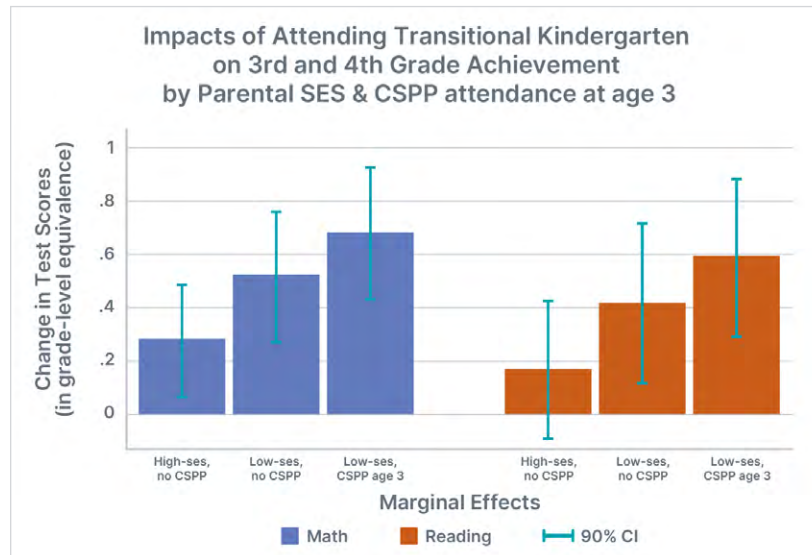
A second justification for pivoting pre-K is that children benefit more when attending two years, not just one year, of quality preschool. These kids display stronger growth in language skills and cognitive development. One review of careful studies finds that two years of pre-K attendance results in greater gains, although the magnitude of benefits is less than twice the effect of the first year.⁸ High-quality child-care homes may yield comparable benefits.

Entering pre-K at 3 years of age may offer a foundation upon which TK teachers can build (the notion of *alignment*). Berkeley researchers have begun to estimate the effects of entering preschool at 3 years of age, then moving through a year of TK.

A local study in Oakland found that TK yielded stronger gains in kindergarten reading skills for children who first attended CSPP at age 3.⁹ Berkeley researchers have replicated these findings for a large statewide sample of children, traced from birth through fourth grade. The study found that TK exerts sizable positive effects on children's test performance in third and fourth grade. For low-income children, those effects appear to be even larger among the subset of students who attended CSPP at 3 years of age, followed by TK at 4 years of age.¹⁰ Figure 3 displays these gains in reading and math scores in third and fourth grades.

In sum, the rationale for widening access to preschool for 3-year-olds is strong and even more convincing as empirical results detail benefits for children. Let's turn to the question of how some 3-year-olds gain access to publicly funded preschool and whether this opportunity is fairly distributed across Los Angeles County.

Figure 3. Impacts of CSPP and TK attendance on test scores downstream



Source: Johnson and Land (2024).¹¹

3. State Pre-K Access Varies for 3-Year-Olds in Los Angeles

Some 63,800 children, 3 years of age, in Los Angeles county have not gained access to pre-K.

We know that many unserved 3-year-olds are out there, distributed among families across L.A. Individual caregivers are lending a hand. But parents will not enjoy real “choice” until affordable pre-K centers become more available. L.A. County was home to about 95,700 children, 3 years of age, in 2025. Estimates of pre-K enrollment among 3-year-olds varies from 26 to 44 percent in L.A. We estimate that about one-third of 3-year-olds enroll in pre-K.¹² Enrollment of 3-year-olds dropped during the Covid era, especially in federal Head Start centers.

But even assuming today’s enrollment rate approximates pre-pandemic levels, about 63,800 children, 3 years of age, in Los Angeles County have not gained access to pre-K. Some parents may prefer less formal care arrangements. At the same time, if pre-K supply is scarce, “preferences” may drift toward individual caregivers, since that’s what is available for children, zero to 3 years of age. Nationally, 3-year-old pre-K enrollment in California ranks 21st among all states.¹³

A related question asks whether publicly funded pre-K enrollment of 3-year-olds is equitably distributed among various parts of the county. Perhaps pre-K organizations in certain communities are better able to pivot away from 4’s to serve additional 3’s.

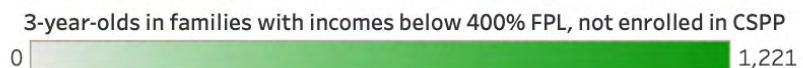
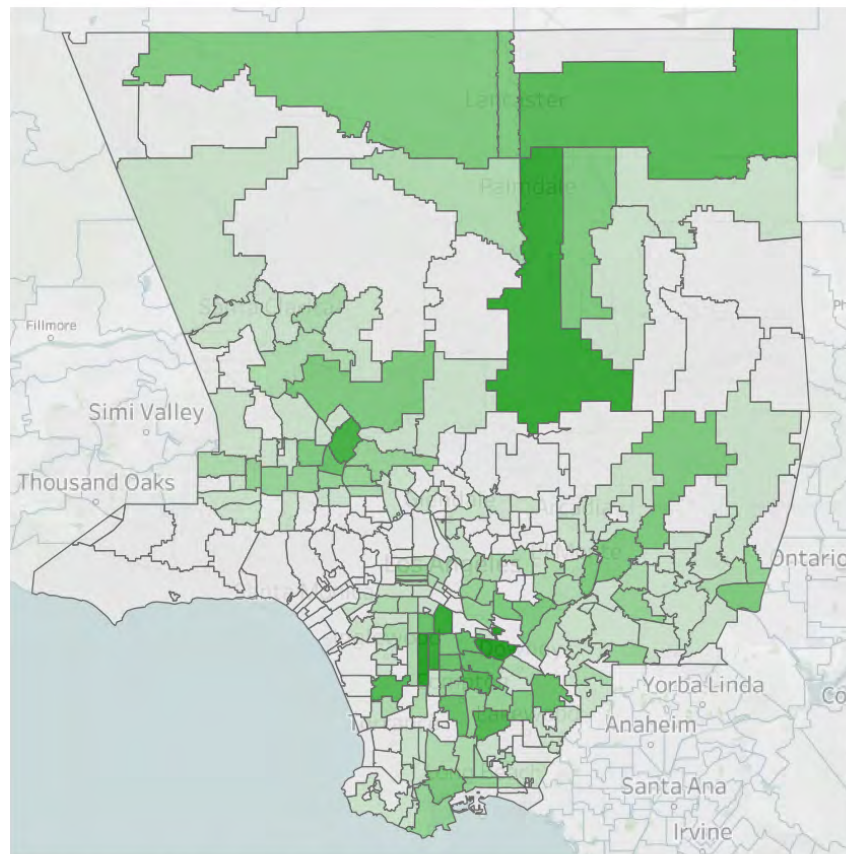


To explore this issue, we examine the distribution of 3-year-old enrollment in CSPP across zip codes. CSPP enrollment accounts for just under two-thirds of publicly funded pre-K enrollment, outside of the voucher system in L.A. County.. Head Start providers serve the bulk of the remaining one-third. General Child Care (CCTR) funds also funds pre-K enrollment in centers and family child-care homes that participate in education networks tied to centers (so-called FCCHENs).

Figure 4 displays the count of 3-year-olds (in income-eligible homes) *not* enrolled in CSPP in October 2024 by zip code.¹⁴ This display does not include 3-year-olds enrolled in Head Start or other settings.

When focusing on 3-year-olds being raised in families earning below 400 percent of the federal poverty line (approximating the state’s median income), we estimate that about 61,000 children were not enrolled in CSPP (2024). Of these, about 4,600 were enrolled in Head Start. These providers—often drawing on CSPP funds as well—enrolled 6,900 3-year-olds in total, or some 38 percent of those in families with incomes below the poverty line countywide. Otherwise, 56,000 3-year-olds eligible for CSPP are cared for by parents, individual providers, family child-care homes, and tuition-charging (private) preschools.

Figure 4. Counts of income-eligible 3-year-olds not enrolled in the California State Preschool Program by ZIP code, 2024



The state preschool program served more than 25,900 children under 4 years of age across California in 2021, a count that climbed to nearly 40,200 by 2024.



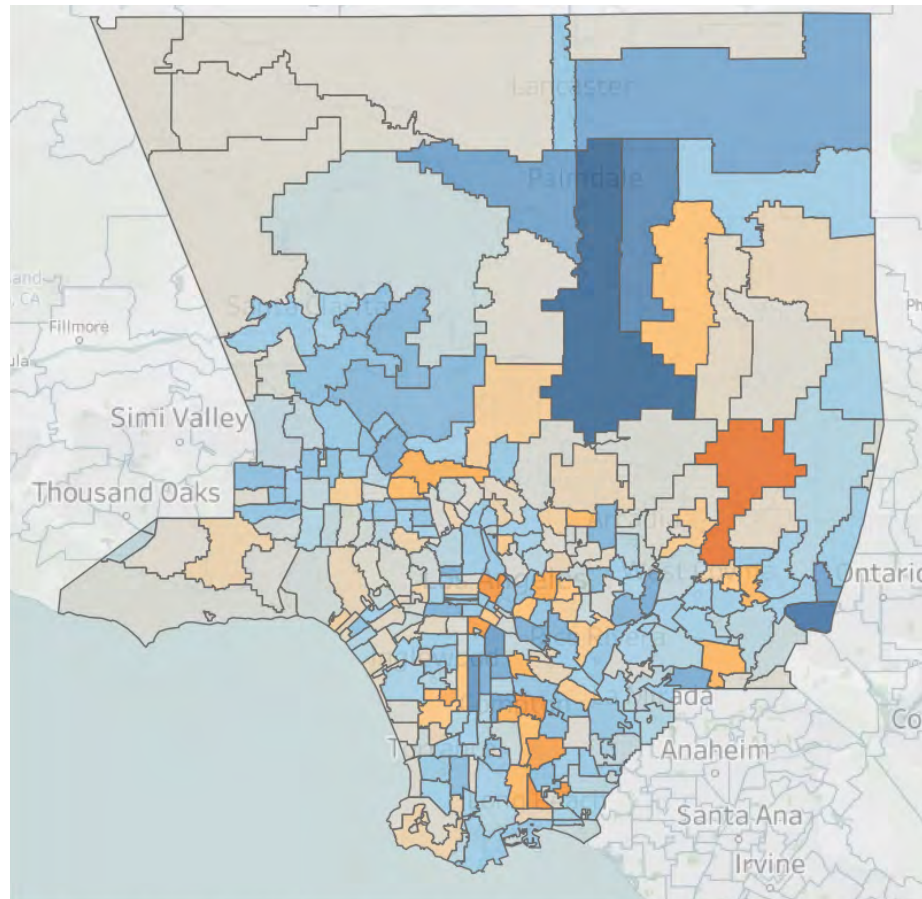
The good news is that a share of local CSPP programs – run by public schools or community organizations – is pivoting to serve younger children. Emerging from the pandemic in 2021, CSPP served more than 25,900 children under 4 years of age in part- or full-day programs statewide. This number climbed to nearly 41,000 by 2024.¹⁴ The count of 4-year-olds declined, as TK bounced back from this program’s Covid-era decline in enrollment. Yet, some local pre-K’s are making the pivot to 3-year-old children.

At the same time, Figure 4 shows how enrollment rates for 3’s vary across the county. This is due in part to CSPP’s income cutoff, above which families do not qualify for publicly funded pre-K. Yet, recall that families earning up to the state’s median income are eligible for the CSPP program. So, those zip codes with very low enrollment rates means that many families are not gaining access. Even when these parents desire the learning potential and benefits of pre-K, they cannot find affordable slots before their child turns 4 years of age.

Where is Access Growing for 3-Year-Olds?

We can also observe the rate at which CSPP providers are shifting to 3-year-olds. Figure 5 shows gains or declines in the count of 3-year-olds enrolled in CSPP between 2021 and 2024 in L.A. County. Three-year-old enrollment in CSPP grew from approximately 8,100 in October of 2021 to 9,100 in 2023 and 10,100 in 2024. Enrollment is growing in some underserved areas, including the north of the county near Lancaster and Palmdale, as well as neighborhoods between Inglewood and South Gate. Enrollment declined in some areas, decreases that appear uncorrelated with changes in the size of the eligible population.

Figure 5. Change in enrollment of 3-year-olds in the California State Preschool Program by ZIP code, 2021-2024



Change in number of 3-year-olds enrolled in CSPP from 2021 to 2024

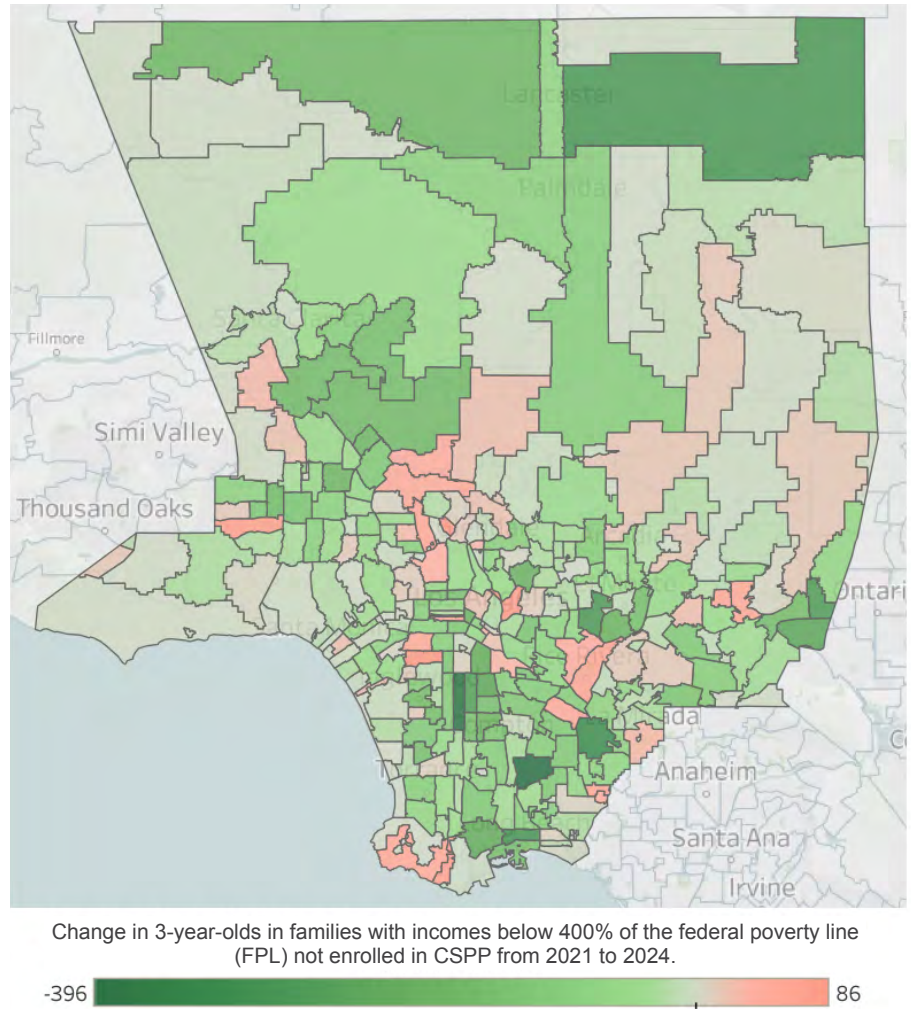


The share of all 3-year-olds enrolled in the state preschool program in L.A. county returned to 2019 levels by 2024, driven by the combination of population decline and enrollment growth.

Figure 6 adds context to the enrollment picture, accounting for change in child population among zip codes. The dark green zips, for example, indicate the count of 3's *not* enrolled in CSPP, declining by up to 396 children. Access in the Palmdale area grew for 3-year-olds, where population changes were modest and unmet need appears high. Overall, the share of all 3-year-olds enrolled in CSPP returned to 2019 levels in 2024, driven by the combination of population decline and enrollment growth.

Pink areas indicate where population growth outpaced the ability of CSPP preschools to serve an additional 3-year-olds. This can be seen in parts of the San Fernando Valley and close to Long Beach and San Pedro.

Figure 6. Change in CSPP enrollment among income-eligible 3-year-olds by zip code, 2021-2024



Allied Partners to Serve 3-Year-Olds

Many other pre-K providers – thinking beyond state preschool – possess the capacity to serve additional 3-year-olds, including Head Start and private centers that charge fees. Indeed, Head Start has been pivoting to serve a younger children for several years. A slice of nonprofits serving poor and middle-class families already serves infants, toddlers, and 3-year-olds. They can now draw additional CSPP or General Child Care (known as CCTR) funding to serve new middle-class families – if they pursue this organizational pivot.

The Child Development Consortium, for instance, operates several pre-K centers in the San Fernando Valley that integrate children from low-income and middling families, some of whom contribute a modest copay. Box 1 reports on the Consortium’s success in pivoting to a wider variety of families and children of various ages.

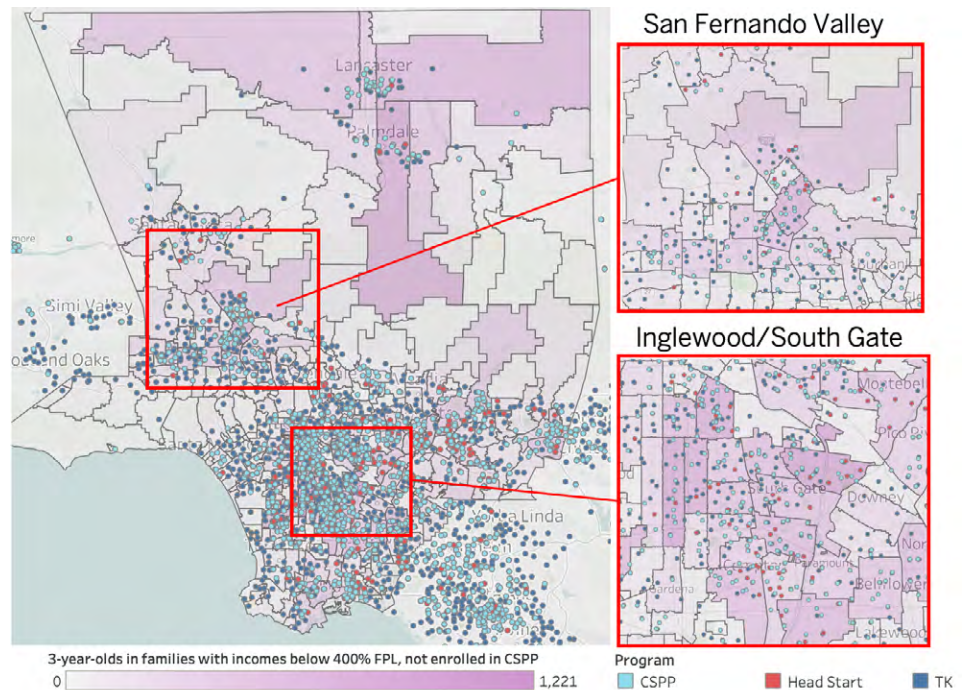


Liberalized family eligibility can pull additional middle-class families into CSPP. This integration along economic and social-class lines could involve tuition-charging centers as well. The state education department, if proactive, could contract with private preschools to widen access for middling families. Recent expansion of Early Head Start allows infants and toddlers to attend center-based programs as well, given the exodus of 4-year-olds to TK.

As L.A. County advances wider access for younger children, the entire ecology of preschools should be considered. Several L.A. school districts and charter schools already open their CSPP-funded classrooms to 3-year-olds; then children move into TK at age 4, an attractive model for many working parents. A fraction of school districts contract with community nonprofits for after-school care for their TK kids — financed with Extended Learning Opportunity Program dollars – a win-win partnership for all parties, including families.

To visualize the organizational capacity to serve young children in full-day arrangements, Figure 7 displays the entire population of CSPP, TK, and Head Start centers in L.A. County in 2024. If we included tuition-charging centers, the map would be even more densely packed.

Figure 7. All public preschool programs centers operating in Los Angeles County, plotted against the count of income-eligible 3-year-olds not enrolled, 2024



In short, L.A. hosts many preschool providers who now suffer from declining counts of 4-year-olds. How this multiplicity of programs shifts to 3's (or infants and toddlers) – and the institutional constraints they encounter – are the topics to which we next turn.

4. Does TK Complement or Undercut Pre-K Capacity?

Shifting this variety of preschools to serve younger children depends on the survival and vitality of these organizations. The expansion of free TK offers a big win for parents who previously paid for preschool. But does the movement of 4-year-olds into new TK classrooms strengthen the overall ecology of early care and education in Los Angeles?

Wider Access or Children Moving between Programs?

Let's keep the policy aim in mind: As TK serves growing counts of 4-year-olds, pre-K programs will effectively pivot to serve younger children, for whom supply remains scarce and pricey for families.

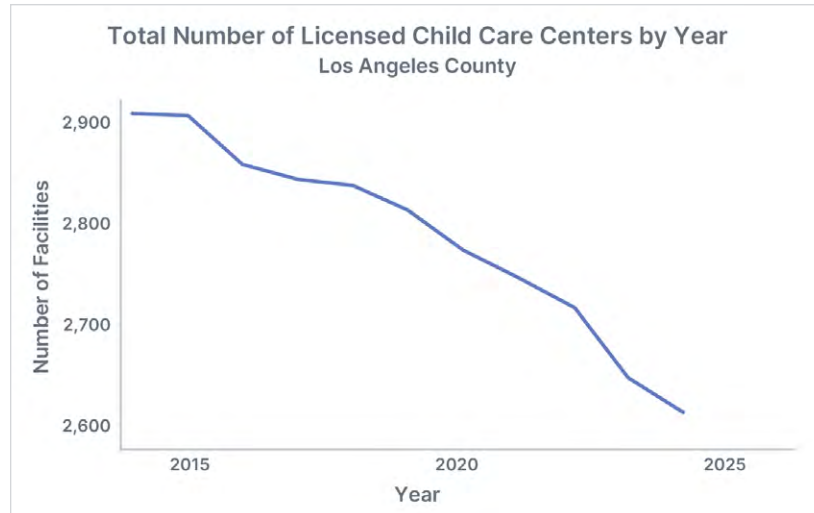
Let's keep the policy aim in mind: As TK serves growing counts of 4-year-olds, pre-K programs should pivot to serve younger children.

Yet, as TK enrollments grow, older preschool programs may be losing 4-year-olds, weakening their organizational vitality. This is often dubbed *substitution*, where a new program inadvertently substitutes for existing programs rather than serving additional families. This may yield unintended consequences as seen in New York City. As free pre-K for all 4-year-olds expanded, a declining count of slots were available for infants and toddlers, who generated less certain revenues for providers.¹⁶

So, in Los Angeles it's helpful to focus simultaneously on TK expansion *and* trends in the overall supply of pre-K centers, whether run by local nonprofits, school districts, or for-profit companies. Our analysis reveals that L.A. County, for example, lost 92 pre-K center licenses between 2014 and 2019, falling from 2,912 to 2,820 centers during this five-year period (Figure 8).

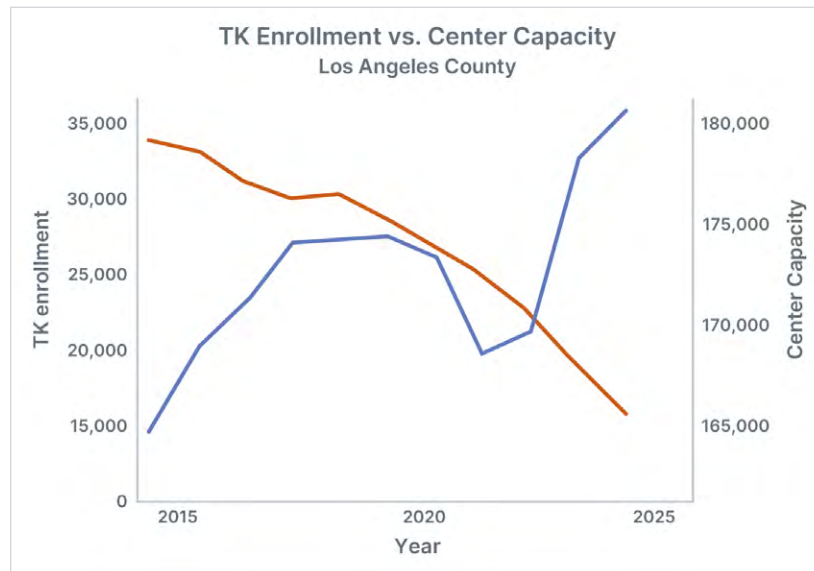
The decline of licensed pre-K capacity accelerated in the subsequent four years (2020 to 2024), declining from 2,784 to 2,617 licenses for centers serving preschool-age children.¹⁷ This likely stems from the pandemic, declining birth rates, and the growth of TK. The subsidized sector in general was growing — prior to and post-Covid — which likely contributed to the death of preschools that charge tuition.

Figure 8. Count of licensed pre-K centers in Los Angeles County, 2014-2024



The eroding supply of pre-K centers licensed to serve 3- and 4-year-olds translates to the loss of more than 12,000 slots for children since 2014, excluding TK in the schools. Figure 9 displays this accelerating decline in licensed capacity, plotted against the rise in TK enrollment countywide.¹⁸ Licensed capacity of the system for 3- and 4-year-olds declined by just two percent between 2014 and 2019, falling to 175,087 licensed slots. Then, since 2020 the count of slots has fallen another five percent to 166,208 licensed spaces for children. (Many pre-K’s cannot fill all licensed slots, given limited classrooms and the scarcity of early-childhood teachers and aides.)

Figure 9. TK enrollment plotted against the count of slots (licensed capacity) for 3- and 4-year-olds in public and private pre-K centers, 2014-2024





Local areas benefiting from the largest growth in TK enrollments also suffered the greatest loss of public and private pre-K centers.

Figure 9 shows the temporary dip in TK enrollment in the wake of schools closing. But TK recovered and expanded steadily after 2021, as enrollment nearly doubled to 35,897 children by 2024. The number of elementary schools hosting at least one TK classroom climbed from 1,091 in 2021 to 1,207 in 2024 countywide.

Does TK Erode Center Supply?

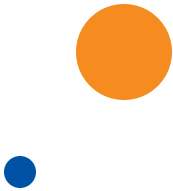
To what extent does the spread of TK in recent years contribute to the shrinkage of child slots in public and private preschools? To empirically inform this question we first divided L.A. County into 198 communities, the small hexagons introduced above. We then asked whether the closure of pre-K centers was greater in areas that experienced steeper growth in TK enrollments. Findings were quite consistent, whether we estimated TK effects on the count of operating (or closed) pre-K's or the licensed enrollment capacity of all preschools.

The statistical estimates (available from the authors) show that local areas benefiting from the largest growth in TK enrollments also suffered the greatest loss of public and private pre-K centers. This association holds after accounting for changes in the size of child population, social-economic features of resident families, and unmeasured (fixed effects) tied to each community.

TK alone is likely not the only culprit. Recall that surging enrollment growth of TK arrived in the pandemic's wake, as eligibility expanded, and the pre-K sector's health was yet to recover fully. It's likely that rising public spending on preschools (going back a quarter-century), the Covid hit on pre-K enrollments, and TK expansion together explain the accelerating closure of preschool centers across L.A. County.

Additional research is required to identify which types of pre-K have been least able to survive. Policy makers have sustained pre-Covid funding levels for CSPP and federal Head Start centers to buoy these local organizations. We know that growth in CSPP has been very slow since the pandemic, despite the scarcity of affordable pre-K slots for 2- and 3-year-olds. The state Department of Education has rolled over or returned at least \$670 million in CSPP funding that exceeded cost estimates or went unspent to expand child slots.¹⁹ That said, tuition-charging pre-K's appear most vulnerable to TK growth.

Continuing 'hold harmless' budgeting may disincent pre-K programs from pivoting to younger children, given they maintain pre-Covid revenues even as their enrollment of 4-year-olds declines.



This may stem from the fact that nearly 70 percent of California’s 4-year-olds attend a center-based program, according to one estimate made prior to the Covid pandemic.²⁰ In comparison, 62 percent of Georgia’s 4-year-old children attend the state’s UPK program; this enrollment rate equals 84 percent in Oklahoma.

At the same time, the governor has agreed with labor groups that pre-K centers (and licensed child-care homes) should be “held harmless” for enrollment declines suffered during the pandemic. This usefully protected child slots and jobs during the Covid shutdown, when the child care industry was recovering. But continuing this provision may disincent pre-K programs from pivoting to younger children, given that they maintain their pre-Covid revenues even as their enrollment of 4-year-olds declines. The legislature has indicated that “hold harmless” will end in the 2026-27 fiscal year, which may encourage pre-K directors to make the pivot to younger children.²¹

A Shifting Definition of “Universal Pre-Kindergarten” (UPK)

California’s governor and state lawmakers have more than doubled the budgeted count of families supported with child-care vouchers since 2021. Vouchers help parents finance child-care options inside pre-K centers or among less formal providers, such as family child-care homes (FCCHs) and individual caregivers. The count of voucher-aided families has also more than doubled in L.A. County since 2022. About one-fifth of these children attend center-based programs.²²

The growth of vouchers unfolds within a historical commitment to parental choice in California’s early-childhood field. County agencies now include family childcare homes and individual providers under the [rubric](#) of *Universal Pre-Kindergarten* (UPK). In most other states, UPK refers to center-based pre-K. Less formal providers are viewed as a separate category of child-care options. To the extent that public policies incent families to utilize individual providers or licensed homes, we may expect further erosion of pre-K centers.

5. How Pre-K's Do Pivot to Younger Children

Box 2. Major findings from pre-K interviews

- Many providers are indeed pivoting to serve younger children.
- Family and community outreach efforts are critical to expanding pre-K for 3-year-olds, but smaller providers often lack the staffing and financial resources required.
- Many CSPP-funded providers offer extended hours well beyond the school day, a major draw for families.
- Outside of school districts, most CSPP-funded preschool is delivered alongside other child-care services and social programs.
- Expanding services for infants and toddlers, who age into CSPP-eligibility is a major component of growth in 3-year-old enrollments outside of school districts
- Staffing challenges—especially low wages, teacher turnover, and applicant scarcity—were reported as the largest challenges to pre-K efforts to serve younger children.

To understand how pre-K providers have adapted to dramatic policy changes, as the state endeavors to expand pre-K access for younger children, we interviewed 10 state preschool organizations.

The early childhood policy landscape has shifted with the expansion of TK, substantial budget growth for CSPP and voucher-funded care, enduring “hold harmless” provisions, first-ever union contracts with family child-care providers, and funding streams spread across two state agencies. To understand how pre-K providers have adapted to these dramatic changes as the state endeavors to expand access to younger children, we interviewed 10 CSPP contractors, including three school districts and seven community-based providers.²³

In L.A. County, CSPP-funded preschool is administered by 42 school districts and 111 community organizations, including city governments, nonprofits, and community colleges. School district programs account for roughly two-thirds of CSPP enrollment and typically situated in elementary schools or LAUSD’s 87 early learning centers. Of the 111 community-based CSPP contractors, only 11 exclusively operate pre-K centers, while 100 offer a range of child-care services and social programs. Both school- and nonprofit-run programs often

draw on several funding sources for early care and education services, including Head Start, General Child Care (CCTR), local philanthropy, and other funders. The same is true for the providers we interviewed, which ranged from small operations with just two locations to large organizations serving hundreds of children—or thousands in the case of LAUSD.

Pathways to Success

All but one of the providers we interviewed were actively pivoting to serve younger children. The exception, Lancaster Unified, operates an innovative blended CSPP-TK program for 4-year-olds. Eight out of the nine other providers (except LAUSD) serve children who are too young for CSPP, each drawing largely on CCTR funding.

A few receive Early Head Start funding or serve private-pay families.

For the seven community organizations—each of which offered no fewer than nine hours of care per day—infant and toddler programs were critical to their efforts to pivot to serving younger children. As one provider put it, CCTR and CSPP funding “fits hand-in-glove”. For these providers, any increase in enrollment of 3-year-olds in CSPP grew from infant and toddler enrollment as they aged into CSPP-eligibility.

These organizations focus substantial marketing efforts on attracting younger children—but not explicitly 3-year-olds—as children seldom disenroll before aging into TK eligibility. Even then, many children stay until they reach kindergarten age, which one provider attributed to the hours they offer. When children do leave, it is typically to attend a district-operated program because they have an older, school-age sibling and parents want to simplify drop-off and pick-up routines. Indeed, this is a major reason why LAUSD school-based CSPP centers coordinate hours with elementary schools, while their early education centers operate from 7:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

LAUSD, the state’s largest CSPP contractor, reported that 2- and 3-year-olds account for over half of enrollment in CSPP-funded pre-K, up from just over a half the enrollment in 2019. They attribute much of this growth to extended hours and major community outreach efforts, noting that extending eligibility to 2-year-olds was also helpful. We spoke with Pomona Unified, where CCTR and Early Head Start funding

All but one of the pre-K providers we interviewed were actively pivoting to serve younger children. These organizations focus substantial marketing efforts on attracting younger children, not limited to 3-year-olds, including new infants and toddlers.

Pomona Unified leaders reported they were fully enrolled last year after converting some preschool programs to accommodate greater infant and toddler enrollment.

Teachers accustomed to preschool classrooms are reluctant to work with younger children, including 3-year-olds. “Toileting is a challenge, and we have had to shift our brains on what is developmentally appropriate,” one provider told us.

have supported a pivot to serving younger children. Pomona reported they were fully enrolled last year after converting some preschool programs to accommodate greater infant and toddler enrollment, noting that other preschool classrooms were converted to TK.

In sum, offering longer hours, marketing and community outreach, and expanding services for infants and toddlers are major drivers of growth in 3-year-old enrollments. However, small providers lack resources for major outreach campaigns (e.g. neighborhood canvassing). Beyond outreach, several providers reported that various innovations—like offering group therapy for parents—were important to new efforts in attracting families, supported by creative fundraising.

Major challenges

Amid uncertainty in a turbulent policy environment and a declining child population, providers face several challenges. We asked about the major constraints they faced in expanding, sustaining, or pivoting operations to serve younger children. We asked about issues pertaining to funding, facilities, staffing, outreach, family needs, and changes in demand.

Staffing — Workforce challenges were the strongest concerns voiced by providers. Several struggle to retain entry-level staff, who can find higher wages at employers like Costco. Many are hesitant to raise wages, citing financial uncertainty. Community-based providers often reported they enjoy below-market rate rental agreements, which may allow for greater staff pay. Some reported losing teachers who left for TK jobs.

Some teachers accustomed to preschool classrooms are reluctant to work with younger children including 3-year-olds. As one provider stated, “Toileting is a challenge, and we have had to shift [our thinking] on what is developmentally appropriate for 3-year-olds.” Providers who might have otherwise served more infants were unable to find teacher candidates with the requisite coursework units.

Facilities — Rents and other facility issues were the second greatest concern for providers. Keeping rental costs low is paramount, and many providers work to negotiate below-market rents with churches and other community groups—but sweetheart deals sometimes come with aging facilities that require improvements. One provider reported



One pre-K provider noted difficulties with outreach to families who prefer to keep their 3-year-olds at home. The notion of enrolling 3-year-olds may be new in communities where preschool access has been limited to 4-year-olds.

that occupancy of a new, leased classroom had been delayed for two years over permitting issues, while another was held up for eight months pending licensing. Some providers reported losing classrooms to TK.

Funding – Relative to other issues, few providers had funding challenges or concerns about per-child reimbursement rates, though uncertainty around enrollment gave smaller providers pause over whether to reopen closed classrooms. Others, who do not serve children younger than 18 months of age, noted that they could not afford to serve infants at current funding levels. “Hold harmless” provisions may explain a general lack of concern over funding.

When asked about funding, several providers worried over ever-changing regulations, now pressed by two separate state agencies. One director was unaware of increases in reimbursement rates. Another stated, “We’re lucky I have an accounting background” in reference to challenges with handling contracts with multiple agencies.

Outreach — Few providers had troubles with outreach. One mid-sized, community-based provider mentioned they struggled with visibility online, and the burden of working with two resource and referral agencies to advertise services. Another provider noted difficulties with outreach to families who prefer to keep their 3-year-olds at home. The notion of enrolling 3-year-olds may be new in communities where pre-K access has been thin, while nationwide about half of all eligible 3-year-olds attend public pre-K.²⁴

Family and child needs — Most providers stated that families served were happy with programs. Some mentioned difficulties with funding for special education, which one provider attributed to difficulty in obtaining individualized learning plans.

Changes in family demand — Few providers reported major changes in interest in the services they offered. Some reported growing interest in options for infants and toddlers. Though several providers expressed worries and uncertainty surrounding future declines in the child population, it was not an imminent concern.

Overall, low wages, staff turnover, and applicant scarcity, along with novel classroom demands tied to serving younger children, offer the greatest challenges to expanding early learning programs.

**Box 3. Windsor Unified –
Pre-K Options Bloom
in a Child Care Desert**

“Since we were brand new, we didn’t have the barriers that older programs have,” instantly serving a growing count of 2’s and 3’s, Windsor Unified leaders told us.

Jeremy Decker, Windsor Unified’s youthful superintendent, was excited to expand transitional kindergarten and serve a growing count of 4-year-olds in this medium-size northern California district. Why not go “all in” and create a brand new pre-K program for 2 and 3-year-olds, as education services director Jessica Borland said.

That’s what Windsor Unified has done in two short years, thanks to first-ever funding from the state preschool program (CSPP). TK now serves 192 children, 4 years of age, until 1:45 in the afternoon, followed by extended-day options for kids from lower-income or private-pay families. For families with 2’s and 3’s, they now benefit from Windsor’s pre-K program from 7:30 to 5:30.

Borland learned to fly as the plane was being built. “When I called CDE, they kindly answered my questions,” she told us. And she was a quick study, with help from district staff, learning about CSPP rules and restrictions, and how to blend TK and supplemental funding from the local resource and referral agency.

“Since we were brand new, we didn’t have the barrier that older programs have,” instantly serving a growing count of 2’s and 3’s, Borland said. The district found TK and pre-K teachers with required units in child development. New efforts by the local community college and Windsor High train and apprentice students interested in early childhood education. “We are trying really hard to grow our own,” Borland said.

Windsor has quickly put the CLASS observation tool in place to advance quality. “It’s taught me what to look for when I enter a [preschool] classroom, and teachers find it helpful in improving practice,” site coordinator Sascha Anschutz said.

The liberalized eligibility cap – up to about \$120,000 for a family of four – is a god-send from middle-class families, previously ineligible

The liberalized eligibility cap – up to about \$120,000 for a family of four – is a god-send for middle-class families, previously ineligible for state preschool.

for state preschool. Unmet family demand remains stiff as housing expands rapidly in this blue-collar and middling suburb outside of Santa Rosa. Some 55 families with 2 or 3-year-olds remain on Windsor’s waiting list.

A \$5 million gift from the Lytton Band, a native tribe, will finance building five new preschool classrooms to keep pace with rising family demand. “They want to ensure their kids attend high-quality schools,” Borland reported.

The local planning council had earlier declared Windsor a “child care desert,” and the state education department took that seriously. Rather than returning unspent CSPP dollars to the state treasury, the education department helped Windsor create an entirely new program for 2- and 3-year-olds, synched with Windsor’s equally robust TK program.



6. Going Forward – Better Policy, Agile Preschools

California endeavored nearly five years ago to widen access to quality preschool for tens of thousands of families with young children. The governor and state lawmakers first focused on enrolling additional 4-year-olds in transitional kindergarten, hosted by public schools. Policy makers also greatly expanded availability of child-care vouchers.

The state's master plan for early care and education urges parallel growth in pre-K slots for 3-year-old children, as billions of new dollars were allocated to school and community-based programs via the state's additional pre-K funding streams (CSPP and CCTR). This brief has detailed how these policy ideals have outpaced a sluggish pivot by pre-K's to serve younger children, those losing 4-year-olds to TK.

The pandemic hampered local implementation. TK enrollments have rebounded in Los Angeles County in recent years. But Covid weakened the early care and education sector overall, a vast and dispersed network of providers negotiating changing markets, turbulent policies, and shrinking counts of young children.

A strong rationale supports widening access for younger children.

An estimated 63,800 children in L.A. County, 3 years of age, do not enter a pre-K program each year. The steady expansion of TK slots for 4-year-olds could potentially free-up spaces for 3-year-olds. But this pivot is unfolding slowly across the county.

Some parents will continue to rely on individual caregivers or licensed homes to care for their 3-year-old. The state has incentivized this pathway by more than doubling the budgeted count of child-care vouchers since 2021. But evidence from California and nationwide shows that entering preschool at age 3 yields stronger language and cognitive growth for kids, compared with entering at 4 years of age. A truly pro-choice system would provide center-based options for these younger children.

Growth in TK enrollments buoys families, while eroding the pre-K sector overall. A rising count of families embraces transitional kindergarten for their 4-year-olds. Our analysis reveals that enrollment growth is strongest in middle-class and affluent parts of L.A. County – where





parents have not historically enjoyed free preschool. These better-off families have the most to gain from free preschool. This pattern replicates how universal pre-K has spread in New York City and other parts of the nation.

Two unanticipated problems then rise over the horizon as TK expands in public schools. First, is the worry over fairness: If TK best serves better-off families, how will it help narrow early disparities in children's development? The state's preschool program (CSPP), focusing on low and middle-class families is growing very slowly, despite rising state appropriations. We know of no state agency that's tracking whether expansion is narrowing or reinforcing early gaps in child development.

Second, our analysis shows how the decline of pre-K centers licensed to serve preschool-age children has accelerated in communities with the fastest growing TK programs. Steady expansion of TK inadvertently shrinks the overall capacity of the early-childhood sector.

Fragmented state policies send mixed messages to local pre-K's. The state's original intent – voiced by the governor and legislative leaders – was to ensure free, high-quality preschool for all 4-year-olds, then reach out to 3-year-olds in lower-income families. That is, to provide preschool in high-quality centers or programs, whether situated in public schools or community nonprofits.

These policy goals have begun to blur, at least based on patterns emerging over the past five years in L.A. County. The count of children supported via vouchers has more than doubled in the county since 2021, including 3- and 4-year-olds served by informal caregivers. The state may be incenting families to not consider pre-K centers.

The legislature has renewed the "hold harmless" provision for another year – ensuring that pre-K programs receive most of their pre-pandemic budget, even as they lose 4-year-olds to TK and fail to pivot to serve younger children. The state has celebrated the goal of universal preschool, then punts when it comes to disincenting pre-K's to serve younger children.

Sacramento policy makers continue to fund programs in fragmented fashion, boosting administrative costs locally and adding to confusion for parents. CSPP now serves children, 2 to 5 years of age. CCTR (“general child care”) serves children, 0 to 13, often in the same pre-K centers or programs. Local schools and nonprofits programs must contract with two separate state agencies, then often with federal Head Start.

Many pre-K programs – whether in schools or local nonprofits – do display organizational agility. Our analysis shows that enrollment of 3-year-olds is climbing modestly within the state preschool program (CSPP). Yet, growth remains uneven among L.A. communities, seemingly driven by which local programs muster the agility to pivot toward younger children. Here too, no one in Sacramento, to our knowledge, is tracking equity implications of episodic growth.

Interviews with pre-K providers reveal specific barriers to making the pivot to younger children – the cost of renovating facilities, finding qualified teachers and aides, and uneven outreach to families unaware of center-based preschool options.

We discovered that more agile pre-K programs already serve infants and toddlers, frequently blending CCTR, CSPP, and Head Start funding streams – engaging families soon after a newborn arrives. Future research might focus on how TK expansion may be freeing slots for these youngest children.

The state could mount assertive efforts to implement its goal of wider access for 3-year-olds. Facilities funding, for instance, has been allocated sporadically from Sacramento in recent years. The governor and lawmakers have hurried implementation of the P-3 teacher credential, which may ease the shortage of qualified staff.

At the same time, the pursuit of disparate policy objectives muddies Sacramento’s original focus on widening access to high-quality center-based preschool. So, many Southland families still cannot find affordable pre-K for their children. Their options remain limited.

Acknowledgments

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UC Berkeley Equity and Excellence in Early Childhood is an interdisciplinary public impact alliance dedicated to understanding and transforming California's early childhood system to ensure all young children and their families flourish. For more information, contact Executive Director Katie Albright at kalbright@berkeley.edu.

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¹⁴ The population of income-eligible 3-year-olds is estimated using 400% of the federal poverty line, which approximates California's median income for all households.

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