

Universal Prekindergarten and Family Choice

Decades of research demonstrate that an early and strong foundation for learning matters. Children who have effective learning opportunities before kindergarten have an advantage in school, and in life, over children who do not, especially children with adverse childhood experiences. Children who attend quality prekindergarten programs are more prepared for school in terms of their early literacy, language, and math skills, their executive function, and their social-emotional development. In some cases, prekindergarten participants are less likely to be identified for special education services or to be held back in elementary school than children who do not attend developmentally-informed preschool programs that include strong educational components.

By school year 2025–26, California is poised to realize universal prekindergarten (UPK) through a combination of approaches and services. UPK consists of universal transitional kindergarten (UTK) as well as other programs and services that families can choose from to meet their needs and simultaneously ensure rich early learning opportunities for all three- and four-year-old children during the year or two years prior to kindergarten.

Importantly, UTK is a component of UPK, but not the only component. Other programs include the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), which the California Department of Education (CDE) operates; along with other prekindergarten (pre-K) programs serving three- and four-year old children, including the federal Head Start Program, subsidized programs that provide a preschool learning experience and are operated by community-based organizations (CBOs) (including family child care), and private preschool. Statute indicates that families with four-year-old children will have the choice to send their four-year-old child to any program for which their child is eligible. Both UPK and transitional kindergarten (TK) are optional.

Universal Prekindergarten Expanded Definitions and Programs:

- **Universal Prekindergarten (UPK):** UPK will bring together programs across early learning and kindergarten through twelfth grade; relying heavily on UTK and CSPP, as well as Head Start, early education special education, CBOs, and private preschool to ensure every four-year old child—regardless of background, race, zip code, immigration status, or income level—has access to a quality learning experience the year before kindergarten. Families can choose from among these options to select early learning opportunities for all three- and four-year-old children during the year or two years before kindergarten. In high-needs neighborhoods, the CDE strongly encourages local educational agencies (LEAs) to consider pairing TK programs with access to Head Start and CSPP for age- and income-eligible three- and four-year-old children to further

bolster program quality, either through the LEA's own Head Start or CSPP program or via a contract partnership with a CBO that administers a Head Start or CSPP.

- **Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK):** UTK refers to the expansion of TK by school year 2025–26 to serve all four-year-old children by September 1, of each year, regardless of income, providing a year of rich learning opportunities the year before kindergarten that families can choose from as part of California's public education system. TK means the first year of a two-year kindergarten program, serving four-year-old children regardless of income, that uses a modified kindergarten curriculum that is age- and developmentally-informed (California *Education Code [EC]* Section 48000 [d]).
- **California State Preschool Program (CSPP):** CSPP is the largest state-funded preschool program in the nation. CSPP includes both part-day and full-day services to eligible three- and four-year-old children. CSPP provides a core class curriculum that is developmentally, culturally, and linguistically informed for the children served. The program also provides meals and snacks to children, parent education, referrals to health and social services for families, and staff development opportunities to employees. The program is administered through LEAs, colleges, community-action agencies, local government entities, and private nonprofit agencies.
- **Head Start:** Head Start is a federally administered program that provides grants directly to organizations in local communities to provide programs that promote the school readiness of infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children from low-income families. Services are provided in a variety of settings including centers, family child care, and children's own homes. Head Start programs also engage parents or other key family members in positive relationships, with a focus on family wellbeing.
- **Early Learning and Care:** Early learning and care is both a component of UPK and goes beyond UPK. It refers to the continuum of programs serving children from birth to preschool or school entry, as well as extended care to support school-age children with before- and after-school care and vacation schedules. This includes general child care, Early Head Start and Head Start, community-based early learning and care programs, as well as family child care providers, and family, friend, and neighbor care.

Full implementation of UPK will also include partnerships with extended learning and care programs **to create** the continuum of programs and services (early learning and

care options and expanded learning options) available in addition to the normal school day and school year. Creating this continuum will include partnerships with the Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELO-P) that provides children enrolled in TK through sixth grade a full-day program aligned with the needs of parents, as well as existing expanded learning programs, and early learning and care providers. LEAs are encouraged to plan a model of UPK service delivery that meets the needs of families and honors their choices and extended learning and care opportunities may be administered by the LEA or by local CBOs.

Early Learning and Care Expanded Definitions and Programs:

- **Extended Learning and Care:** This refers to the continuum of programs and services (early learning and care options and expanded learning options) available in addition to the normal school day and school year operations, to provide access to full-day and full-year care that meets the needs of working families whose children are enrolled in TK or kindergarten. A full-day is defined as in-person, before- or after-school programming or care that, when added to daily instructional minutes, provides no fewer than nine hours of combined instructional time and extended learning opportunities per instructional day. A full **year** includes a minimum of 30 days of programming in the summer and intersession for no fewer than nine hours of in-person expanded learning opportunities per day. Funding to support extended learning and care for children enrolled in TK includes the ELO-P and the CSPP, as specified in guidance provided by the CDE, Early Education Division. Additional subsidized care opportunities may be available to families who qualify, such as child care vouchers offered through an alternative payment program and participation in the general child care program.
- **Expanded Learning:** This includes before-school, after-school, summer, or intersession learning programs that focus on developing the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs and interests of pupils through hands-on, engaging learning experiences. It is the intent of the Legislature that expanded learning programs are pupil-centered, results driven, include community partners, and complement, but do not replicate, learning activities in the regular school day and school year.
- **Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELO-P):** ELO-P provides funding for after-school and summer school enrichment programs for TK through sixth grade. The ELO-P is defined as services provided in addition to the normal school day and school year operations, to provide full-day and full-year expanded learning programs to meet the needs of working families whose children are enrolled in TK through sixth grade and also provide expanded learning enrichment programming for students. A full-day is defined as in-person before- or after-school expanded learning

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opportunities that, when added to daily instructional minutes, are no fewer than nine hours of combined instructional time.

- Expanded Learning Programs such as the **After-School Education and Safety (ASES)** and **21st Century Community Learning Centers** can also be used to provide extended learning and care opportunities for UPK.
- Additionally, the **Head Start, CSPP, and Early Learning and Care** providers described above also contribute to this fabric of extended learning and care.

Other sections of guidance describe models for providing UPK services through a combination of approaches and partnerships.