

Title: Transitional kindergarten (TK) and academically focused pre-k programs

Date: October 2016

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Question: Is there any research on potential drawbacks to transitional kindergarten (TK) programs and academically focused pre-k programs on student outcomes?

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### Response:

We have prepared the following memo with information on transitional kindergarten (TK) programs and academically focused pre-K programs. To date, there is little research on the drawbacks of TK.

Citations include a link to a free online version, when available. All citations are accompanied by an abstract, excerpt, or summary written by the author or publisher of the document. We also include relevant organizations. We have not done a methodological evaluation of these resources, but rather provide them for your information only.

### **References**

Bassok, D., Latham, S., & Rorem, A. (2016). Is kindergarten the new first grade? *AERA Open*, 1(4), 1–31. Retrieved on September 29, 2016, from [http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/20\\_Bassok\\_Is\\_Kindergarten\\_The\\_New\\_First\\_Grade.pdf](http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/20_Bassok_Is_Kindergarten_The_New_First_Grade.pdf)

*Abstract:* Recent accounts suggest that accountability pressures have trickled down into the early elementary grades and that kindergarten today is characterized by a heightened focus on academic skills and a reduction in opportunities for play. This paper compares kindergarten classrooms between 1998 and 2010 using two large nationally-representative datasets. We show substantial changes in each of the five dimensions considered: kindergarten teachers' beliefs about school readiness, time spent on academic and non-academic content, classroom organization, pedagogical approach, and use of standardized assessments. Kindergarten teachers in the later period held far higher academic expectations for children both prior to kindergarten entry and during the kindergarten year. They devote more time to advanced literacy and math content, teacher-directed instruction and assessment, and substantially less time to art, music, science and child-selected activities. Changes were most pronounced for schools serving high proportions of low-income and non-white children.

Carlsson-Paige, N., McLaughlin, G. B., & Almon, J. W. (2015). *Reading instruction in kindergarten: Little to gain and much to lose*. New York, NY: Alliance for Childhood. Retrieved on September 29, 2016, from [http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/Reading\\_Instruction\\_in\\_Kindergarten.pdf](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/Reading_Instruction_in_Kindergarten.pdf)

*Excerpt:* In the United States there is a widespread belief that teaching children to read early — in kindergarten or even prekindergarten — will help them be better readers in the long run. Unfortunately, there is no scientific evidence that this is so. How then did this idea take hold so strongly? ... Many children are not developmentally ready to read in kindergarten. In addition, the pressure of implementing the standards leads many kindergarten teachers to resort to inappropriate didactic methods combined with frequent testing. Teacher-led instruction in kindergartens has almost entirely replaced the active, play-based, experiential learning that we know children need from decades of research in cognitive and developmental psychology and neuroscience. When children have educational experiences that are not geared to their developmental level or in tune with their learning needs and cultures, it can cause them great harm, including feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and confusion.

Curwood, J. S. (2007). The rise of transitional kindergarten. *Instructor*, 117(1), 33–34. Retrieved on September 28, 2016, from <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/rise-transitional-kindergarten>

*Abstract:* This article examines whether five-year-old children are socially and emotionally ready for kindergarten. To address the needs of these children, some districts are offering transitional kindergarten classes, which promote positive socialization, hands-on learning, and emergent literacy. Across the U.S., September 1 is the most common date by which children need to turn five in order to start kindergarten. This means that some children may start kindergarten before their fifth birthday.

Falk, B. (2012). *Defending childhood: Keeping the promise of early education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

*Book description:* This book brings together a group of educators and scholars who offer important insights about what we can do to defend childhood from societal challenges. The authors explain new findings from neuroscience and psychology, as well as emerging knowledge about the impact on child development of cultural and linguistic diversity, poverty, families and communities, and the media. Each chapter presents experiences and suggestions, from the perspectives of different disciplines, about what can be done to ensure that all children gain access to the supports they need for optimal physical, social, intellectual, and emotional development.

Frey, S. (2015). *Classes combining kindergarten, transitional kindergarten pose challenges*. Oakland, CA: EdSource. Retrieved on September 28, 2016, from <https://edsource.org/2015/classes-combining-kindergarten-transitional-kindergarten-pose-challenges/76826>

*Excerpt:* As a result of a new state law, California schools instituted transitional kindergarten to give 4-year-olds who were previously eligible for kindergarten an extra year to adjust to school and experience a less academically-oriented curriculum. But many thousands of those children are in classrooms with kindergarteners, leaving teachers to figure out how to accommodate the new approach for 4-year-olds while preparing the 5-year-olds for 1st grade.

### **Relevant organizations to consult**

**American Institutes for Research  
Study of California’s Transitional Kindergarten Program**  
<http://tkstudy.airprojects.org>

*From the website:* The Heising-Simons Foundation, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and First 5 California are partnering with American Institutes for Research (AIR) to study the impact of

transitional kindergarten (TK) in California on children’s academic and social-emotional skills in kindergarten, and how these impacts are related to program quality characteristics. The study builds on the study of TK implementation study in the first year, completed in 2013. The second phase of the study will continue through 2015.

**California Department of Education  
Transitional Kindergarten FAQs**

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/em/kinderfaq.asp>

*From the website:* The California Department of Education (CDE) and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson fully support the transitional kindergarten (TK) program. Here are the frequently asked questions (FAQs) regarding California state law relating to kindergarten.

**Defending the Early Years (DEY)**

<https://deyproject.org>

*From the website:* Defending the Early Years (DEY) was founded in 2012 to rally educators to take action on policies that affect the education of young children. DEY is committed to promoting appropriate practices in early childhood classrooms and supporting educators in counteracting current reforms which undermine these appropriate practices. The principal goals of the project are: To mobilize the early childhood community to speak out with well-reasoned arguments against inappropriate standards, assessments, and classroom practices; To track the effects of new standards, especially those linked to the Common Core State Standards, on early childhood education policy and practice; To promote appropriate practices in early childhood classrooms and support educators in counteracting current reforms which undermine these appropriate practices.

**Early Edge California**

<http://www.tkcalifornia.org/about-tk/about-tk.html>

*From the website:* Early Edge California (formerly Preschool California) and a panel of experts worked together to develop TKCalifornia to serve the needs of teachers and administrators as they implement transitional kindergarten. TKCalifornia is the result of a content creation and a review process led by 20 experts from across the state, including local school districts, county offices of education, researchers and state-level decision makers. Their expertise spans the areas of language and literacy development, early math, social emotional development and executive function, culturally responsive education and dual language acquisition.

## **Methods**

### **Keywords and Search Strings Used in the Search**

Search round 1: (“transitional kindergarten” OR “TK programs”) AND (“drawback” OR “negative effects” OR “negative impact”)

Search round 2: (“Academically focused”) AND (“preK” OR “pre-school” OR “early education” OR “early childhood education”) AND (“drawback” OR “negative effects” OR “negative impact”)

Search round 3: (“Play-based learning” OR “play”) AND (“preK” OR “pre-school” OR “early education” OR “early childhood education”)

### **Search of Databases**

EBSCO Host, ERIC, PsychInfo, PsychArticle, Google, and Google Scholar

### **Criteria for Inclusion**

When REL West staff review resources, they consider—among other things—four factors:

- **Date of the Publication:** The most current information is included, except in the case of nationally known seminal resources.
- **Source and Funder of the Report/Study/Brief/Article:** Priority is given to IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols.
- **Methodology:** Sources include randomized controlled trial studies, surveys, self-assessments, literature reviews, and policy briefs. Priority for inclusion generally is given to randomized controlled trial study findings, but the reader should note at least the following factors when basing decisions on these resources: numbers of participants (Just a few? Thousands?); selection (Did the participants volunteer for the study or were they chosen?); representation (Were findings generalized from a homogeneous or a diverse pool of participants? Was the study sample representative of the population as a whole?).
- **Existing Knowledge Base:** Although we strive to include vetted resources, there are times when the research base is limited or nonexistent. In these cases, we have included the best resources we could find, which may include newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, organization websites, and other sources.

This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by educators and policymakers in the West Region (Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd. This memorandum was prepared by REL West under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Contract ED-IES-12-C-0002, administered by WestEd. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.