



Getting Down to **FACTS**



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION Section 5: P-3 Instructional Continuity

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California has made a significant investment in early childhood education, most prominently by expanding transitional kindergarten (TK) to all four year olds, but also by increasing support for preschool. The goal is to create a strong foundation for learning for *all* children. Research on the effects of preschool, however, has shown that investments in early childhood education do not always yield long-term benefits. Studies have shown that the advantages of preschool attendance sometimes diminish or even disappear over the first few years of elementary school – referred to as “fade out.”¹ Advocates of greater P-3 continuity propose that fade-out is to some degree a consequence of elementary schools’ failure to build on the benefits of high-quality preschool/TK.²

To ensure the sustained benefits of preschool/TK, the investment in early childhood education (ECE) needs to be accompanied by an equal investment in creating continuity between instruction in preschool and the early elementary grades – a central element of what many refer to as “P-3 continuity.”³ P-3 continuity means that children have a seamless educational experience as they move

¹ Gibbs, C., Ludwig, J., & Miller, D. L. (2013). Head Start origins and impacts. In M. J. Bailey & S. M. Danziger (Eds.), *Legacies of the War on Poverty* (pp. 39–65). Russell Sage Foundation.

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Cohen-Vogel, L., Little, M., Jang, W., Burchinal, M., & Bratsch-Hines, M. (2021). A missed opportunity? Instructional content redundancy in pre-K and kindergarten. *AERA Open*, 7, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211002171>

² Bogard, K., & Takanishi, R. (2005). PK–3: An aligned and coordinated approach to education for children 3 to 8 years. *Social Policy Report*, 19(3), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2379-3988.2005.tb00044.x>

Little, M. (2023). The alignment agenda: Examining the movement to bridge the early childhood and K–12 sectors. *AERA Open*, 9, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584231177308>

McCormick, M., Mattera, S., & Hsueh, J. (2019). *Preschool to third grade alignment: What do we know and what are we learning?* MDRC.

³ Advocates of “P-3 continuity” (also referred to as alignment or coherence) often refer to a broader array of policies, including universal access to high-quality preschool, full-day kindergarten, small class size, creating comprehensive data systems that follow children from preschool into elementary school, and expanding access to child and family support. Most

from preschool through the early elementary grades. Instruction in each grade begins where instruction from the previous grade left off, adjusted to individual children’s developmental and skill levels. Assessments are continuous, to reflect children’s progress from preschool through grade three and parents are similarly engaged.

In addition to helping sustain the benefits of preschool, P-3 alignment improves children’s learning outcomes overall.⁴ Children learn best when the content of instruction is aimed just beyond what they already know. If children repeat what they learned in the previous grade, they do not make progress. Similarly, if instruction requires skills children have not developed, they will not benefit from the instruction. Research indicates that kindergarten teachers frequently teach skills that children mastered in preschool,⁵ and the more the overlap the less children gain in kindergarten.⁶ Maximum learning occurs when instruction is continuous -- builds on and extends previous learning.

P-3 alignment also requires continuity in instruction, teachers using similar pedagogical practices across these grades, adjusted only as needed for the content. With P-3 continuity in instruction, teachers do not need to waste time teaching children completely different ways of engaging in school tasks. Similar teaching approaches across grades also give children a sense of familiarity and self-confidence, and reduces the time it takes to re-socialize children to a different way of learning. Moreover, high-impact, research-based instructional practices do not change fundamentally with grade, although they may look slightly different when applied to more or less advanced content. Effective instruction in TK has a great deal in common with effective instruction in

of these elements of P-3 are discussed elsewhere in this report. We focus here on policies and practices that will support continuity in teaching and learning.

⁴ McCormick, M. P., MacDowell, C., Weiland, C., Hsueh, J., Maier, M., Pralica, M., Maves, S., Snow, C., & Sachs, J. (2024). Instructional alignment is associated with PreK persistence: Evidence from the Boston Public Schools. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 67, 89–100.

McCormick, M., Mattera, S. K., & Hsueh, J. (2023). Instructional alignment is associated with Pre-K persistence: Evidence from the Boston Public Schools. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 67, 89–100.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2023.11.008>

⁵ Reynolds, A. J., Magnuson, K. A., & Ou, S.-R. (2010). Preschool-to-third grade programs and practices: A review of research. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(8), 1121–1131. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.10.017>

⁶ Engel, M., Claessens, A., & Finch, M. (2013). Teaching students what they already know: The (mis)alignment between mathematics instructional content and student knowledge in kindergarten. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 35(2), 157–178. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373712461850>

⁶ Engel, M., Claessens, A., Watts, T. W., & Farkas, G. (2016). Mathematics content coverage and student learning in kindergarten. *Educational Researcher*, 45(5), 293–300. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16645357>

third grade. In brief P-3 instructional continuity means that each grade builds on what was learned in the previous grade using similar, effective instructional strategies as children move from preschool through the early elementary grades -- continuity as well as consistent quality.

Providing children in their classrooms with a seamless, continuous, and consistent educational experience has important implications for policies and practices at the state, district, and school levels. We discuss these implications below. Specifically, we address the following questions:

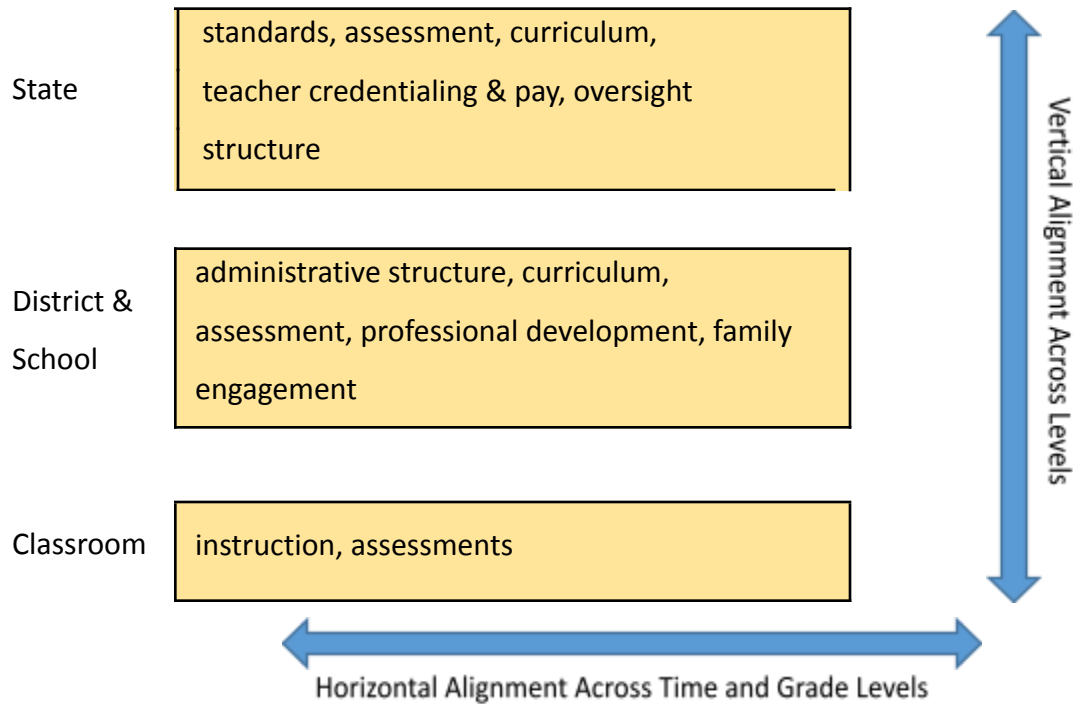
1. What state policies affect P-3 continuity?
2. What district and school policies affect P-3 continuity?
3. What is California's P-3 initiative?

Policies to Support P-3 Alignment

Figure 1 summarizes the policies and practices that need to be aligned at each level – both within a grade (vertical alignment) and across grades (horizontal alignment). Although continuity across grades is more directly related to P-3 continuity, policies and practices also need to be aligned within grade. District and school levels are combined because there is variation in whether decisions about curriculum, assessment and so on are made at the district or the school level.

Lack of vertical alignment can undermine any effort to achieve continuity across grades as well as meaningful improvement within grades. For example, a disconnect between the assessments selected by the district or school and the state learning standards gives teachers mixed messages. Should they teach content relevant to the state standards or to the assessment instrument? A disconnect between the professional development (PD) offered at the district or school level and the curriculum teachers use will confuse, not help teachers. Teachers have difficulty navigating between instructional practices they learn in PD and a curriculum that does not support those practices. We discuss next policies and practices that promote continuity across grades.

Figure 1: Policies to Support P-3 Alignment



State Level Policies

Standards

The Common Core, which California uses for kindergarten through third grade and beyond, was designed to be aligned across grades. California also endeavored to align the new Preschool/TK Learning Foundations (PTKLF) for language and literacy (ELA) development and for math with the kindergarten standards, in the sense that the PTKLF standards for TK are sufficiently rigorous to prepare children to achieve the kindergarten standards (the gap is not too large), but the TK standards do not overlap with the kindergarten standards. The content subdomains within ELA and math in the PTKLF and the kindergarten common core are also meaningfully aligned.

The state has also been proactive in creating resources to support teachers’ and administrators’ focus on children’s P-3 learning trajectory. For example, the Preschool through Third Grade (P-3) Learning Progressions show the correspondence between the PTKLF and California Common Core State Standards along with practice examples that illustrate how educators can use similar playful, inquiry-based teaching practices to engage children in developmentally appropriate learning

experiences through this span.⁷ CDE could do more to advertise and support the use of this and other P-3 resources.

There are, however, differences in domains covered by the PTKLF and K-3 standards. The Common Core standards for K-3 address only ELA, math, and Next Generation Science Standards. The standards that apply to children in preschool and TK address a broader set of developmental domains. In addition to language and literacy (which includes both foundational- and English-language development), math, and science, the PTKLF includes standards for approaches to learning, social-emotional development, physical development, history-social science, health, and visual and performing arts.

It would be overly burdensome to include all of these domains in standards for K-3. But children continue to develop in all of these domains and some are particularly important for academic learning. In particular, research has shown very strong associations between academic achievement and approaches to learning and social-emotional development.⁸ Creating standards for these two domains for K-3 could increase attention to these two important domains of development and give teachers guidance on what they should promote.

A few states have expanded the standards for the early elementary grades beyond the domains of math and ELA. For instance, in 2015 Ohio added three dimensions (social and emotional development, physical well-being and motor development, and approaches to learning) to its state standards for kindergarten through third grade, to be consistent with the dimensions included in its preschool standards.⁹

Although California has not created standards for approaches to learning and social-emotional development beyond preschool/TK, as discussed below, assessments of these two dimensions have

⁷California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Preschool through third grade (P–3) learning progressions*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/p3/documents/p3learnprogressionsintro.pdf>

⁸Durlak, J. A., Domitrovich, C. E., & Mahoney, J. L. (Eds.). (2024). *Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

Muir, R. A., Howard, S. J., & Kervin, L. (2023). Interventions and approaches targeting early self-regulation or executive functioning in preschools: A systematic review. *Educational Psychology Review*, 35, Article 27.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-023-09740-6>

Robson, D. A., Allen, M. S., & Howard, S. J. (2020). Self-regulation in childhood as a predictor of future outcomes: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 146(4), 324–354. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000227>

⁹Ohio Department of Education. (2015). *Ohio's new learning standards: Kindergarten through grade 3*. Author.

been created for kindergarten through third grade, and documents that describe the P-3 developmental trajectory for these two domains have been developed. **Assessments**

California has adopted the DRDP to assess children’s progress from preschool through TK, although its use is required only in Title 5 programs which does not include TK. The DRDP includes many important domains of development and it is well aligned with the PTKLF. One limitation, as noted in Section 4, is that it does not line up with the PTKLF in a way that allows administrators to calculate the proportion of children that are “on grade level” (who, have met the standards), as many assessments that are aligned with the Common Core allow.

Table 1 summarizes the results of a recent LPI study finding that California districts adopted a wide variety of assessment instruments for TK in 2022-23 and 2023-24.¹⁰ This miscellaneous assortment does not support P-3 continuity, and some of the assessments districts chose are not designed to assess students’ progress toward meeting standards. For example, CLASS assessments are for classrooms, not children, and Brigance is designed primarily to screen for special needs. A single assessment instrument used P-2 would make it far easier for the state to monitor student progress and would reduce the load on districts which currently need to choose from a wide range of instruments.

¹⁰ Wang, V., Leung-Gagné, M., Melnick, H., Parker, S., & Wechsler, M. (2025). *California’s universal prekindergarten implementation progress, 2023–24*. Learning Policy Institute.
<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/ca-universal-prekindergarten-implementation-progress-2023-24-report>

Table 1: Assessment Instruments Used in TK in 2022-2024

TK assessment	2022-23	2023-24
LEA-based grade-level benchmarks and a report card	66%	43%
Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP)	20%	25%
Educational Software for Guiding Instruction (ESGI)	n/a	18%
STAR Early Literacy	n/a	16%
Work Sampling System	13%	13%
Ages and Stages Questionnaire	6%	8%
BRIGANCE Early Childhood Screen	7%	7%
Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)	n/a	4%
Teaching Strategies (TS) GOLD	2%	3%

To support P-3 continuity the new 2025 DRDP extends beyond preschool/TK through third grade for two dimensions: approaches to learning and social and emotional development. Although there are no accompanying standards for K-3 for these dimensions, the assessment itself articulates the skills and behaviors that reflect appropriate development for children in these grades. As such, they serve as a guide for teachers endeavoring to support children’s development on these two important dimensions. Presumably teachers who use it will be able to track children’s progress and gauge where children need additional support related to their development. Because the DRDP is not required in TK or in the early elementary grades, it will be important to determine whether it is used in these grades and whether it has the expected effects on teaching and child development when it is used.

A significant assessment gap in California is in kindergarten through second grade. The Smarter Balance Assessment System is not administered until third grade, and science assessments are not given until fifth grade. Although beginning in the fall of 2025 California mandated a reading Risk Screening in kindergarten through second grade, districts and schools are otherwise left to adopt or design assessments, which are not necessarily aligned with the DRDP and the Smarter Balance Assessment System, or with the standards.

Other states vary hugely in assessment policies for kindergarten through second grade.¹¹ Some states require administration of achievement assessments in K-2, more often in literacy than math. Iowa administers the Iowa Assessments to students in kindergarten through eighth grade as part of their Statewide Testing Program. Michigan has developed an online Early Literacy and Mathematics Benchmark Assessment for children in kindergarten through second grade.¹² Beginning in 2021, Michigan law mandated benchmark assessments in both reading (ELA) and mathematics to all students in grades K through 8, at least twice, once within the first nine weeks of school and again before the end of the school year. In 2023, the legislature repealed the mandate and no longer requires benchmark assessments for districts to receive state aid. Funding is available, however, for districts that continue to administer an approved benchmark assessment (i-Ready, NWEA MAP, or Renaissance Star, or Michigan’s own Early Literacy and Mathematics Benchmark Assessments for K–2). Although not mandated, in 2023-24, about 90% of Michigan districts administered benchmark assessments in these grades.¹³ Arkansas implements the Arkansas statewide comprehensive assessment system (ATLAS) to track literacy and math growth in kindergarten through 8th grade.¹⁴ Georgia requires the Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS), a year-long performance-based assessment similar to the DRDP used in California, but aligned to the Georgia state content standards for kindergarten. For first- and second-grade students, Georgia requires districts to administer a formative assessment instrument that also has a summative component, aligned to performance indicators in English

¹¹National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). *Table 2.23. State-level assessments required in grades kindergarten through grade 3, by state.* https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab2_23.asp

¹² Michigan Department of Education. (2025–2026). *Benchmark assessments: Early literacy and mathematics.* https://www.michigan.gov/mde/-/media/Project/Websites/mde/OEAA/Early-Literacy-and-Mathematics/Early_Literacy_and_Mathematics_TAM.pdf

¹³ Dellinger, H. (2023, November 16). Gaps in Michigan student achievement remain wider than pre-pandemic norm, report finds. *Chalkbeat Detroit.* <https://www.chalkbeat.org/detroit/2023/11/16/michigan-students-make-slow-progress-benchmark-assessments-2023-show/>

¹⁴ Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education. (n.d.). *Assessment: Historical timeline.* <https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Offices/public-school-accountability/assessment-historical-timeline>

Language Arts (ELA)/reading) and mathematics. Districts can choose from among existing assessments or develop their own that meet the state’s criteria.¹⁵

In brief, although most states do not require assessments in kindergarten through second grade, some do, and they provide guidance about which assessment tools districts can choose from. At the very least, California could provide guidance on which of the extant assessments for TK through second grade are the most aligned with California standards and support P-3 continuity. Even better, California could invest in identifying, adapting, or developing an assessment tool that could be required or at least recommended.

Curriculum

In California the State Board of Education (SBE) is responsible for adopting instructional materials (textbooks) for grades K–8. They are required to adopt at least five options per subject area—including language arts, mathematics, science, social science, bilingual education, and others—every six to eight years. LEAs are not required to use state-adopted materials. They can choose materials aligned with the state’s academic content standards, even if they are not on the state’s adoption list. When LEAs choose non-adopted materials, they must ensure teacher-led review processes with classroom teachers from relevant subjects participating.¹⁶

There are no state-adopted materials for CSPP or TK. CSPP programs must follow developmentally appropriate curriculum based on the California Preschool Learning Foundations and the California Preschool Curriculum Frameworks, which accompany those foundations. These resources encourage strategies such as integrating learning into play, planning interactions, and customizing activities to children’s needs. But districts are on their own to identify curriculum materials that meet these criteria.

¹⁵Justia US Law. (2024). *2024 Code of Georgia, Title 20 – Education, Chapter 2 – Elementary and secondary education, Article 6 – Quality basic education, Part 12 – Effectiveness of educational programs, § 20-2-281: Student assessments.* <https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-20/chapter-2/article-6/part-12/section-20-2-281/>

¹⁶ California Department of Education, Instructional Materials FAQ. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/Ci/cr/cf/imfrpfaq1.asp?utm>

Table 2 below shows the curricula districts reported they used in California TK from 2022-to 2024.¹⁷ The data are remarkable for their variability in which subject matter they used a curriculum for. The specific curricula adopted also varies hugely. Only four curricula were used by at least 100 LEAs: Second Step Early Learning, a social-emotional curriculum (318 LEAs); Heggerty Phonemic Awareness PreK (210 LEAs); Eureka Math PreK (124 LEAs); and World of Wonders PreK, a literacy curriculum (102 LEAs).

Table 2: Curricula Used in TK in 2023-24

TK assessment	2022-23	2023-24
Social-emotional curriculum	56%	50%
PreK literacy-specific curriculum	52%	46%
PreK math-specific curriculum	30%	37%
Whole-child or comprehensive PreK curriculum	41%	34%
District or teacher-developed math units for TK	45%	27%
Kindergarten curriculum (not PreK)	26%	20%
Whole-child approach or philosophy for PreK	13%	13%
Other	6%	14%

Analyzing extant curriculum for their developmental appropriateness, compatibility with the Foundations and Curriculum Frameworks, and appropriateness for the populations served is time consuming and requires a fair amount of expertise. A committee (UPK Curriculum Project - Advisory Committee) was created to create guidelines and rubrics to evaluate and make decisions about TK curricula, which will be a valuable resource. Among the guidelines that will be included is alignment with the PTKLF. Insomuch as the PTKLF is aligned with the kindergarten common core, the guideline should support P-3 alignment. But P-3 alignment requires more than alignment between curriculum and standards. It also requires alignment in teaching practices across these grades, and different curricula engender different teaching strategies. Districts should be encouraged to include in their

¹⁷ Wang, V., Leung-Gagné, M., Melnick, H., Parker, S., & Wechsler, M. (2025). *California’s universal prekindergarten implementation progress, 2023–24*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/ca-universal-prekindergarten-implementation-progress-2023-24-report>

review of curricula for the youngest children an assessment of their alignment between the teaching strategies the curriculum encourages and those promoted by curricula used in subsequent grades.

The UPK Curriculum Project Advisory Committee is not reviewing extant curricula, and TK is not included in the State Board of Education instructional materials adoption process, although it should be. The adoption process, however, is not much help to districts for any grade. Currently, for example, there are 22 math curricula for grade K-3 on the state adoption list--far too many for individual districts to meaningfully evaluate.¹⁸

The state could pare down the number of adopted curricula through a more thorough and discerning review process. Equally helpful would be for the state to provide an analysis of each adopted curriculum based on a rubric. Both efforts would save districts and programs a huge amount of time and should lead to better curriculum decisions than leaving districts to analyze an impossibly long list of curricula on their own. The analysis would need to be updated on a regular basis, as curricula are revised and new curricula become available. But centralizing such reviews is much more efficient than having districts and programs do their own analysis. Some other states provide this support to districts. For example, In Massachusetts a panel of teachers who teach in the content area and grade bands of the materials being reviewed do a thorough review of eligible curriculum using a detailed rubric.¹⁹ The Curriculum Ratings by Teachers (CURATE) provide detailed analyses of extant curriculum for each grade on several dimensions, including alignment with standards (e.g., content standards and organization, grade-appropriate practices, approach to instruction), and classroom application (e.g., accessibility for students, usability for teachers, effect on learning). Louisiana does a similarly thorough evaluation of curricula to help local school systems and educators make informed decisions regarding which materials to adopt and purchase locally.²⁰ California could provide a similar resource for districts and

¹⁸California Department of Education. (2025). *2025 mathematics instructional materials adoption report*.
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/math/beadoprpt2025>

¹⁹Center for Instructional Support. (n.d.). *CURATE: Rubrics & resources*.
<https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/curate/rubrics-resources.html>

²⁰Louisiana Department of Education. (n.d.). *Guidance for instructional materials reviews*.
https://doe.louisiana.gov/docs/default-source/curricular-resources/school-system-textbook-policy-guidance.pdf?sfvrsn=7a818d1f_5

schools. The choice of instructional materials could be left in the hands of local administrators, but the state could ensure that they can make well-informed decisions.

Teacher Credentialing and Professional Development

Teachers of transitional kindergarten through third grade in California are required to have either a multiple credential, with additional training or experience in early childhood education, or a PK-3 credential. TK teachers thus have training and pay that is similar to the training and pay of teachers in the early elementary grades.

The major discontinuity in teacher credentialing is between preschool teachers under Title 5 or Title 22 and TK through grade-3 teachers. As discussed in Sections 2 and 3, there is a huge difference in both training and pay between, for example, CSPP teachers and TK teachers, even though they both teach four year olds. The difference complicates efforts to create aligned instruction. CSPP teachers, for example, have not had the level of preservice training, especially related to instruction, that TK-3 teachers have had, so cannot be expected to implement the same instructional strategies. Professional development that combines them, which is ideal, can be difficult because of the differences in training.

Some states have endeavored to reduce this gap by requiring similar training for preschool teachers, especially those in public preschools, and teachers in the early elementary grades. As mentioned in Section 2, most (45) states and the District of Columbia have an early childhood teacher credential that encompasses varying ages, the two most common being birth through third grade and preschool through third grade²¹ Clearly having the same preparation for teachers in preschool through third grade is ideal for supporting P-3 continuity. California has recently created this credential, but it is not required of either preschool, TK, or the early elementary grades. Studies of the effects of this new credential on the quality and continuity of instruction P-3 could provide useful information to districts and schools making hiring decisions.

There is also a disconnect between the professional development offered to preschool and K-3 teachers, with TK teachers linked to either preschool or K-3 teachers. The benefits of combining

²¹ Schachner, A., Wang, V., Yun, C., Plasencia, S., Mauerman, C., McJunkins, C., & Stipek, D. (2025). *Preparing early childhood teachers: State credentialing and preparation program design*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/ece-credentialing-preparation-programs-four-states-report>

teachers across these grade levels should be considered in any state effort to provide teacher professional development. It allows teachers in any given grade to learn about standards and teaching practices in the grade before and after. This is important both because teachers in any grade likely have children who are working on standards from the grade before or after, and because teachers have an opportunity to see how similar high-leverage teaching practices can be adapted to support children working on standards across grade levels.

Oversight Structure

State oversight of preschool and TK-3 involves an array of agencies in California. As of July 1, 2021, many CDE-administered childcare and development programs were transferred to the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). CDE, however, continues to administer CSPP and TK. Policies related to teacher credentials or permits for both preschool and TK are made and overseen by yet another agency--the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. Having responsibility for P-3 programs reside in different state agencies clearly complicates efforts to align preschool and the early elementary grades.

Even within CDE, however, the organizational structure and culture does not support P-3 continuity. For example, policies related to UPK fall within the Opportunities for All Branch (OFAB) of CDE. Responsibilities for K-3 are divided among different branches and divisions – including OFAB; the Instruction, Measurement, and Administration Branch (IMAB); the Information and Technology Branch; the Student Support Services Branch; and the Student Achievement Branch. Other than OFAB, these branches do not have responsibility for preschool and TK is a new responsibility. A detailed study of the agencies in California that have some responsibilities related to P-3 made the following recommendation:²²

Invest in internal agency capacity and expertise dedicated to P-3 within the CDE and CTC, including integrating staff with PreK/TK expertise across agency branches. Effectively implementing this strategy will require ongoing, intentional shared professional learning

²²Kauerz, K., Tarrant, K., & Olmore, S. (2023). *Great Start California: Advancing the California Department of Education's P-3 vision* (p. 21) [Report]. National P-3 Center, School of Education & Human Development, University of Colorado Denver. https://www.colorado.edu/cp3/sites/default/files/attached-files/GreatStartCA_NP-3C_FINAL_2023.pdf

for agency leaders and staff to deepen their understanding of how to support alignment and continuity across a mixed-delivery UPK program and TK-12.

Consistent with this recommendation, the report suggests developing more regular opportunities for cross-branch and cross-division professional learning with a focus on P-3 alignment as well as integrating a P-3 focus into CDE inter-agency workgroups. What is clear is that any effort to improve the coherence and alignment of policies P-3 will require expertise within and collaboration among all of the state branches overseeing preschool and TK-12.

Districts and Schools

Making TK essentially a new grade within elementary schools and under the supervision of the principal clearly facilitates P-3 continuity, although districts and schools need to take proactive steps to realize that potential. It is much more difficult to create continuity between preschools and the early elementary grades when the preschool is not on the elementary school campus and managed separately from the district within a different funding and accountability structure. Some districts have endeavored to make connections with community-based preschool programs and include them in professional development opportunities, but the connections are voluntary and typically superficial. We discuss here strategies for creating connections between preschool/TK and the early elementary grades where deeper connections are possible.

Administrative Structure

In a recent LPI study, 25% of LEAs reported operating CSPP classrooms in 2023-24, 5% reported operating at least one Head Start classroom, and 18% operated another early learning program, such as locally funded or district-funded preschool.²³ Administering these programs through the public school system can facilitate coherence between preschool and the early elementary grades. It also allows districts to draw on local funds or “in-kind” resources in the form of administrative and other support services for the preschool.

²³Wang, V., Melnick, H., Leung-Gagné, M., Parker, S., & Wechsler, M. (2025). *California’s universal prekindergarten implementation progress, 2023–24*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/600.551>

Having a preschool administered by the district does not, however, guarantee alignment with the early elementary grades. The preschools are not always located on an elementary school campus, and children attending the district-administered preschool do not necessarily matriculate into the same district's kindergarten. Although TK is part of elementary schools, some districts still struggle with integrating it fully into the elementary school program.

The disconnect between preschool and even TK and the early elementary grades is in part a consequence of how districts are organized. Personnel in the district office are commonly organized in a way that separates information and decisions related to preschool programs and the elementary grades. The director of early learning, for example, may have little knowledge of issues and decisions made for K-3, and vice versa. The organizational structure also sometimes separates TK from K-3 by putting TK under the early learning director and K-3 under the associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction, or their equivalent.

However supervision is organized, districts need to ensure ongoing communication and shared decision making related to P-3 curriculum, assessment and instruction. The early learning director, for example, could participate in the superintendent's cabinet so they are aware of issues beyond preschool/TK and K-12 administrators are aware of issues in preschool/TK. The early learning director and the assistant superintendent or director of curriculum and instruction should meet regularly to ensure coherence in policies and practices and messages to principals and coaches. If there is a disconnect in the district office, there will be a disconnect in the districts' schools and in children's learning experience, but this can be avoided.

The administrative structure at the school level can also affect P-3 continuity. For example, schools that have a teacher leadership team which works collaboratively with school administrators should include a representative of preschool/TK to ensure ongoing communication across the grades.

Curriculum

California districts have complete discretion in what curricula they use, which they sometimes pass on to individual schools. There are many considerations in selecting curriculum, including, for example, alignment with the standards and appropriateness for the student population served. P-3 alignment should be one of those considerations.

Misalignment can occur because of beliefs about what is appropriate for children of different ages. Many early childhood educators warn against a focus on academics for preschool children, arguing that play should predominate, and the focus should be on social-emotional development and other nonacademic dimensions of development.²⁴ But those concerns apply to kindergarten and beyond as well. Children do not emerge from preschool or TK (or kindergarten) with social-emotional and other nonacademic skills fully developed. The same domains addressed at the preschool/TK level need continued attention through the early grades. Furthermore, 3- and 4 year olds can develop foundational language and literacy and math skills and early opportunities to develop subject-matter skills are important, especially given the significant achievement gap that exists in California at kindergarten entry.²⁵ The focus should shift more toward academic skills as children move through the early grades, but the shift should be gradual and throughout P-3, attention needs to be given to all of the important dimensions of development in early childhood. A single curriculum generally cannot effectively cover all domains, but the educational program should include all of them.

Continuity across grades is also sometimes complicated by specific beliefs about the role of play.²⁶ Play has long been considered a central part of early childhood education--not as much in elementary school. But play is just as important for children in the early elementary grades as for children in preschool, and playful instruction—engaging, meaningful instruction that actively involves students -- is more effective for children throughout the P-3 span.

Regarding choice of curricula, districts first need to decide for what domains they use published curricula. Some “whole child” curricula, designed to cover many social and academic domains, exist for preschool. But beginning in kindergarten, most curricula are domain specific, and domain-specific curricula exist for preschool as well. As mentioned above, a published curriculum is not required to cover every important domain of development for children in preschool through third grade, but

²⁴Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis. *Child Development, 82*(1), 405–432.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>

Miller, E., & Almon, J. (2009). *Crisis in the kindergarten*. Alliance for Childhood. <https://allianceforchildhood.org/>

²⁵ Reardon, S. F. (2013). The widening income achievement gap. *Educational Leadership, 70*(8), 10–16.

²⁶ Elkind, D. (2007). *The power of play: Learning what comes naturally*. Da Capo Lifelong Books.

Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R. M., Berk, L. E., & Singer, D. G. (2009). *A mandate for playful learning in preschool*. Oxford University Press.

children should have access to activities and opportunities that support their development in all domains.

When curricula are used, districts need to ensure alignment across grades. There are many published curricula that cover kindergarten through third grade and beyond, fewer that also include preschool/TK. To achieve P-3 continuity districts and schools typically need to make judgments about how well curricula from different publishers align, especially between preschool/TK and kindergarten.

Two dimensions related to continuity for ELA and math need to be assessed. The first concerns whether the content is aligned. Does the kindergarten curriculum build on and expand what was covered in the preschool or TK curriculum? Too much overlap produces instruction in kindergarten that covers content children have already mastered. Kindergarten that does not build on and extend what children learned in preschool or TK would mean lost learning opportunities. Curricula that are continuous across preschool, TK, and kindergarten and beyond make it easier for teachers to ensure continued learning, regardless of a child's starting point.

Because children in any classroom are at varying places in their learning trajectory, building on their skills and understanding requires flexible use of curricula. Variability in kindergarten is especially great given that the children who enter a kindergarten classroom may come from different preschool programs or have had no preschool experience. Teachers who adhere steadfastly to the order and pacing of the curriculum are not likely building on each child's extant skills. Some children may be repeating material already mastered and for those who lack prerequisite skills, instruction may be inaccessible. To ensure continuity in learning experiences for all children, without deviating too much from the scope and sequence, the curriculum needs to serve as a guide and resource, not as a recipe to be strictly followed. And for some children, the curriculum needs to be supplemented with additional opportunities to learn. Targeting instruction at where children are on their learning trajectory will help them deepen their skills and understandings and move to the next level.

Continuity in instructional practices is as important as continuity in content. Shifting significantly the nature of instruction can be disrupted for children. Consider, for example, a child moving from a classroom where math instruction is mostly captured by one column in Table 3 to a classroom that is mostly captured by the other column.

Table 3²⁷

From a classroom in which:	To a classroom in which:
Manipulatives are commonly available and used to represent ideas (as “thinking tools”)	Manipulatives are used infrequently, often for “demonstration” only and most of children’s work involves paper and pencil
Children frequently work in dyads or groups	Children work alone
The teacher asks children to figure out different ways to solve problems	The teacher stresses using a particular method for generating answers to problems
The teacher expects children to explain why an answer is correct and how they found their answers	The teacher focuses only on the correctness of answers
It is important to be able to solve problems correctly but also to be able to analyze incorrect answers and invalid reasoning	Getting the right answer is emphasized
Speed is less important than reasoning (but fluency is core skills is developed)	Speed is emphasized

Abrupt shifts in instructional approaches may create challenges for some learners. For example, children who have been taught in one grade to use only the procedure they were taught to solve math problems will be confused if they move to a teacher who asks them to create their own solution.

Fortunately, what is developmentally appropriate and effective for 4 year olds is not significantly different from what is developmentally appropriate and effective for 5 year olds and beyond. Research suggests that effective teaching practices in preschool and the early grades are the same, although specific strategies and the level of difficulty change.²⁸ For example, manipulatives have been shown to be a very effective approach to teaching math throughout P-3.²⁹ Young children can learn basic counting principles, such as one-to-one correspondence and cardinality, and the order of counting

²⁷Stipek, D., Clements, D., Coburn, C., Franke, M., & Farran, D. (2017). *PK–3: What does it mean for instruction? SRCD Social Policy Report*, 30(2), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2379-3988.2017.tb00079.x>

²⁸ National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. (2014). *Principles to actions: Ensuring mathematics success for all*. Author.

²⁹ Franke, M., Kazemi, E., & Turrou, A. (2018). *Choral counting & counting collections: Transforming the PreK–5 math classroom*. Stenhouse Publishers.

words while counting objects like beads, bears, or buttons. As children move through the early elementary grades and their knowledge advances, they can use manipulatives to develop a deep understanding of addition, subtraction, and grouping. Later, children can use objects to solve multiplication and division problems. The math becomes more advanced, but the instructional approach is similar.

Research on literacy teaching also demonstrates the effectiveness of practices that apply across preschool and the elementary grades, although they can differ in their implementation depending on children’s age and skill levels. For example, reciprocal teaching—asking students to predict, summarize, clarify, and ask questions of a text—can apply to preschoolers who are being read to or older children who are reading to themselves (Pressley, 2006).³⁰ The practice is the same; the specific form and difficulty level vary.

Curricula do not necessarily dictate instruction, but most imply specific approaches to instruction. How well a curriculum supports continuity in effective instructional approaches across the grades is an important consideration in selecting a curriculum. In addition to ensuring that effective practices are being implemented across this age span, continuity has the added value of reducing time students waste learning how to “do” school differently from what they are used to.

Whatever curriculum is selected, teachers feel pressured to cover the entire curriculum, although they rarely are able to do this. Districts can provide guidance about what parts of the curriculum are most important. For example, since most published curriculum will not align perfectly with the PTKLF and common core standards, districts can reduce the pressure on coverage by doing an analysis of the curriculum and identifying which material is most aligned and should be given priority.

Assessments

Third-grade assessment instruments for ELA and math are determined by the state, and Title 5 preschool programs are required to use the DRDP. But districts, and in some cases schools, have discretion in what they use in TK through second grade, and as formative assessments in third grade. Ideally assessment instruments are continuous, so that the assessment for each grade level picks up from where the assessment for the previous grade level left off. Similar to curriculum, extant assessments are typically keyed to specific grade levels and standards. An assessment instrument that

³⁰ Pressley, M. (2006). *Reading instruction that works: The case for balanced teaching*. Guilford Press.

assesses only kindergarten standards will miss the progress made by kindergarteners who started the year significantly behind but made progress toward meeting the preschool/TK standards. Likewise, an assessment that focuses only on preschool/TK standards will not show the continued progress of children who had already met those standards at the beginning of the academic year and were working on kindergarten standards. To track children’s progress from preschool through second grade effectively the assessment instrument needs to be continuous, allowing children to demonstrate their skills wherever they are in their learning trajectory.

Professional Development

Principals. Creating an effective and continuous P-3 experience for children requires support for school leaders as well as teachers. Most elementary school principals do not have an ECE background and many feel ill-equipped to support instruction for young children. An interview study of 25 California districts and a longitudinal study of two California districts endeavoring to improve preschool through Grade 3 continuity revealed that many principals limited their formal responsibility for preschool to administrative or operational oversight.³¹ Elementary school principals who were not confident in their ability to support teachers of young children, especially preschool and TK, deferred to the teachers themselves or the district’s early learning director. When principals are not involved in supporting preschool and TK teachers, these teachers do not receive the same support or hear the same messages about effective instruction that teachers of subsequent grades receive.

The failure of leadership to offer similar guidance and oversight to teachers in different grades thus contributes to incoherence in instruction in these grades.³² Providing principals with training and building their self-confidence related to ECE is critically important to their being able to promote instructional continuity. Their involvement doesn’t preclude the involvement of the early learning director or others, but principals should be able and willing to provide guidance to teachers P-3.

³¹Koppich, J., & Stipek, D. (2020). *PreK–3 alignment: Challenges and opportunities*. California Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University.

Stipek, D., Borsato, G., & Coburn, C. (2002). Bringing early childhood education into elementary school: School leaders are key. *Development and Research in Education (DREME)*. <https://dreme.stanford.edu>

³² Little, M., Drakenorth, T. A., Cohen-Vogel, L., & Eaglenorth, J. (2022). When school doesn’t start at age 5: Elementary principal leadership of pre-K programs in schools. *Elementary School Journal*, 123(1), 176–202. <https://doi.org/10.1086/720563>

Principals are often responsible for teacher evaluations, and they need to be looking for and giving feedback related to the same effective teaching practices that the early learning director has encouraged.

P-3 instructional continuity can also be enhanced by considering what and how principal learning opportunities are delivered. PD for administrators that is focused on subject matter should include examples of how effective practices look for very young children in addition to children in later grades. For example, principals need to know how effective instruction designed to support comprehension is similar and how it is different in these grades. They should know how teachers can adapt the same math teaching strategy to teach counting and all of the operations that children learn preschool through third grade. They need to learn how the strategies that are effective in developing young children's social-emotional development can be adapted for children through the third grade.

Teachers. The goals of P-3 alignment can best be achieved by P-3 teachers receiving the same PD and having the same coach. When teachers across these grades have the same learning opportunities they are better informed of standards, assessments, and instruction in the grades before and after the grade they teach, which is important given the broad span of skill levels in any given grade. Knowing what and how children were taught in the previous grade enables teachers to build on children's skills using practices that are familiar to them. Knowing what children will be working on in the next grade helps teachers prepare students to succeed when they advance to the next grade.

In addition to formal PD, nearly all schools offer teachers opportunities to collaborate, typically in grade-level meetings. These meetings are commonly used to analyze the results of assessments, plan instruction, discuss challenges, and so on. Grade-level groupings can be valuable, but they shouldn't occur at the exclusion of cross-grade collaboration. Like cross-grade PD, cross-grade collaborations offer teachers opportunities to learn about the curriculum, standards and teacher practices of the grades before and after their grade. It gives teachers in the earlier grades a better understanding of the kind of instruction they are preparing children for in subsequent grades, and it gives teachers in the later grades an understanding of the foundational or prerequisite skills that their children need to have mastered. Given that many children are not working exactly at grade level, teachers can also benefit from learning strategies for supporting children who are working on skills from the grades before or after theirs. Teachers who work together across grades are more likely to see learning on a continuum,

with children in different places on the learning trajectory. Researchers who have studied the effects of collective participation of teachers across grade levels find that it also supports the professional culture and helps sustain the new practices teachers learn.³³

Family Engagement and Communication

Schools can contribute to children’s experience of a coherent education by engaging and communicating with families similarly as they move from preschool into the early elementary grades. Caretaker involvement is typically stressed more in preschool than in elementary school because of the age of the children. Informal communication is facilitated by drop-off and pickup routines, which often require caregivers to walk into the preschool. In contrast, most children in the elementary grades walk into the school on their own. Given the benefits of caregivers’ involvement in children’s education, schools could endeavor to emulate preschool in their strategies to engage parents by giving them more opportunities to share and receive information about their children, if not at drop-off and pick-up at informal gatherings.

Formal reports on learning progress are also typically different in form as well as content. For example, caretakers may receive more information about their children’s social-emotional development on preschoolers than children in the elementary grades. Reports sent home may be narrative in preschool but show progress toward meeting standards in the later grades. Caregivers, like children, benefit from continuity. Rather than requiring caregivers to interpret different information given in a different form as children advance in school, schools could use the same or similar formats across these grades.

California’s P-3 Initiative

California has created a vision for improving the quality and coherence of learning opportunities from age three through grade three, referred to as “Great Start California”. The California State Department of Education made a commitment to support “coherence across grades and systems to improve coordination of policies and practices in preschool, across transitions to Transitional Kindergarten (TK) and Kindergarten, and through third grade and beyond.”³⁴ Two major initiatives

³³ Burchinal, M., Hyson, M., & Zaslow, M. (2008). Competencies and credentials for early childhood educators: What do we know and what do we need to know? *National Head Start Association Dialog Briefs* 11 (1).

³⁴ California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Preschool through third grade (P–3) alignment*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/p3/>

undertaken by the state should contribute significantly to this goal—the expansion of TK, creating an institutional connection between preschool and K-3, and creating a Pk-3 teaching credential, which gives teachers across those grades the same preparation and allows them to focus on young children in their teacher preparation programs.

The state has also created a website with many resources for districts and schools endeavoring to improve P-3 alignment. Perhaps the most useful of the resources created are the *Preschool through Third Grade (P-3) Learning Progressions*, which show the correspondence between the *Preschool-Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations* and *California Common Core State Standards*. In showing the progression from the PTKLF to the common core standards (for math and ELA, the *Next Generation Science Standards* for science) this document puts in clear relief the knowledge and skills children are expected to develop over the P-3 continuum. The document also provides examples of teaching practices that can be used to engage children in developmentally appropriate learning experiences across these grades. Importantly, P-3 Learning Progression documents have also been developed for approaches to learning and social and emotional development by extending the PTKLF in those domains through third grade.

Analysis

The two major initiatives—TK and the Pk-3 teaching credential—can go a long way toward supporting greater P-3 instructional continuity. Whether they help realize that goal will depend first on how well TK is integrated into the elementary school program and efforts are made to ensure continuity in instruction. The effects of the Pk-3 credential on P-3 continuity will depend on the quality of the training and the number of P-3 classes taught by teachers with this credential.

The P-3 Learning Progressions and other resources are also valuable. But there is more that could be done to address core issues related to continuity over these grades. Below is a summary of some of the suggestions above:

- Develop K-3 standards in social-emotional development and approaches to learning;
- Develop or adapt an extant assessment instruments to allow the state, districts and schools to track children’s progress toward meeting standards and requiring or at least incentivizing their use.

- Add TK to the curricula approval process, reduce the number of approved curricula, and engage experts and practitioners to create an annotated guide with information related to each approved curriculum;
- Support and encourage teacher PD that combines teachers P-3;
- Offer district leaders and elementary school principals professional learning opportunities that emphasize P-3
- Develop P-3 expertise and improve coordination among the various state offices that oversee Preschool and TK-3;

Any support the state provides districts endeavoring to improve teaching and learning in early childhood could emphasize continuity of instruction from preschool through third grade, as described in Section 2. The support needs to be intense and enduring, and address district structures, policies and practices to have a meaningful impact.

The efforts California has taken already should help sustain the benefits of preschool and transitional kindergarten. Broadening and deepening efforts to increase the quality and continuity of instruction as children move from preschool through the early elementary grades should go even further in improving children’s learning and development.