

Multilingual Educator

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Dual Language Learners in Transitional Kindergarten

California's UTK Landscape

California's [Universal Transitional Kindergarten](#) (UTK) multi-year expansion is a historic investment to expand access to early learning programs for every 4-year-old in the state. Alongside other early learning and care programs in the mixed-delivery Universal PreKindergarten (UPK) system, TK aims to provide young learners with the foundational experiences they need to thrive as they enter kindergarten and beyond.

The expansion of TK offers a timely opportunity to reimagine how California can better support its youngest and most vulnerable learners—especially dual language learners (DLLs) who make up [nearly 60% of children from birth to age five](#). These children, with their rich linguistic and cultural assets, represent a [vital segment of our student population](#). Centering their needs isn't just a matter of educational equity; it's also a crucial investment for the [future of California](#). In the wake of a federal administration that continues to attack public education and diversity, equity, and inclusion and threatens immigrant communities across the country, California's efforts to build welcoming and safe schools for every child are more important than ever.

The state faces both a pressing challenge and a unique opportunity, addressing the [growing teacher shortage](#) while expanding access to high-quality bilingual pro-



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grams. With a rising population of DLLs, there is an urgent need to strengthen the bilingual teacher pipeline and equip educators to create inclusive, culturally and linguistically responsive classrooms. [Creating school environments](#) where children see their home languages and cultures reflected and affirmed is vital for fostering [emotional safety, a strong sense of identity](#), and long-term academic and social success. The expansion of TK serves as a strategic opportunity to support the development of bilingualism and biliteracy from the earliest years and foster a diverse educator workforce prepared to meet the needs of all students.

The following section showcases the impactful work taking place across California school districts—from university partnerships that support bilingual TK educators to the growth of dual language immersion (DLI) programs, and the creation of inclusive, welcoming environments for all children.

Inspiring Practices Across California

Strengthening the TK Teacher Workforce: Tangible Approaches to Recruiting Racially, Linguistically Diverse, and Qualified TK Teachers

California, like the rest of the country, faces [a teacher shortage](#), which has grown since the pandemic. In the 2022-23 school year, there were [36% fewer new teacher credentials to teach TK](#) and [15% fewer bilingual authorizations issued](#). This decline is especially troubling as the state nears full expansion of TK to include all four-year-olds. In the 2025-26 school year alone, more than 300,000 children are likely to enroll in TK, and California will need between 11,900 and 15,600 additional TK lead teachers [to meet the demand](#).

Some school districts have stepped up to prioritize the recruitment and retention of a qualified and bilingual TK lead teacher workforce. These districts are providing valuable insights into strategies that other communities can use, as well as identifying ways that continual state support will be crucial in ensuring TK expansion truly meets the needs of California students.

Currently, to become a TK lead teacher, candidates must hold a bachelor's degree, have 24 units of credits in or related to early childhood education, and possess a teaching credential, such as the PK-3 ECE Specialist Instruction or Multiple Subject credential. Adding the [bilingual authorization](#) to either credential

option would be ideal when serving the diverse learners of California.

Fresno Unified, the state's third-largest school district, [serves over 70,000 students, 20% of whom are identified as English learner students](#). To meet the needs of multilingual students, Fresno Unified partners with California State University, Fresno, where strong teacher preparation programs, coupled with bilingual authorization certification, already exist. With financial assistance from the [Teacher Residency Grant Program](#), the district is able to leverage various pathways for new TK lead teachers and professional development opportunities for current Fresno Unified educators.

Redwood City School District (RCSD) also had innovative approaches to expanding its TK program from 3 to 16 classrooms in just three years. To address the urgent need for qualified teachers, the district recruited bilingual candidates from diverse sources, including local families and international educators. Many had some qualifications but needed financial support to complete their credentials. RCSD secured Early Education Teacher Development (EETD) and Universal Pre-kindergarten Planning & Implementation (UPK P&I) grants to help cover tuition costs—supporting both new teacher candidates and veteran kindergarten teachers seeking to deepen their early childhood expertise.

Utilizing Transitional Kindergarten (TK) Expansion to Grow Bilingual Programs

The first five years of a child's life are critical for cognitive, social, and emotional development, laying the groundwork for their future success. This is especially true for young DLLs. Dual language learners (DLLs) are defined as children whose first language is a language other than English or children who are developing two or more languages, one of which may be English.

During this fundamental period, early language development plays a vital role in building the foundational skills necessary for biliteracy. Research shows that a strong foundation in a child's home language not only supports English acquisition but also enhances proficiency in both languages. In this context, TK expansion offers a timely opportunity to ensure that children develop fluency in both their home language and English when it matters most.

The Delhi Unified School District (DUSD) has emerged as a model district due to its strategic approach to the development and implementation of high-quality bilingual education. By strategically expanding its DLI program, DUSD demonstrates how TK can be leveraged to support DLLs from the start of their educational journey. Through thoughtful planning, strong community and educator collaboration, and a deep commitment to research-based practices, DUSD has created a model that not only fosters bilingualism and biliteracy but also builds strong partnerships with families and educators.

Key features of DUSD’s approach include a restructured DLI model developed by a dedicated task force, integration of SEALs ([Sobrato Early Academic Language](#)) comprehensive approach in all TK classrooms, and sustained professional development supported by a teacher on special assignment (TOSA). The district’s transition to a 50/50 language instruction model reflects its responsiveness to student needs, particularly for monolingual Spanish speakers. Additionally, DUSD places a strong emphasis on family engagement through orientations and commitment-building practices that help caregivers understand the long-term benefits of bilingual education. With growing enrollment and enthusiastic participation from teachers and families alike, DUSD is setting a powerful example of how TK can serve as a foundation for equitable, inclusive, and linguistically rich learning environments.

How LAUSD is Equipping Early Educators to Create Welcoming Schools for All Children

California is home to the largest number of DLLs ages birth to five in the nation, with over 1.5 million children learning multiple languages at the same time. As Executive Orders continue to threaten immigrant communities across the country, and President Trump designates English [as the official language](#) in the United States, California must remain steadfast in fostering welcoming and safe schools for every child. We must recognize the diversity of home languages and cultures as valuable assets that strengthen our state.

One way to do this is by equipping TK teachers, instructional aides, and their school site principals with the tools they need to provide developmentally appropriate and culturally and linguistically affirming

practices that recognize children’s home languages and cultures as strengths.

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) serves as an example through its comprehensive efforts to support high-quality, culturally responsive TK implementation. The district’s Early Childhood Education (ECE) Division offers extensive professional development—engaging nearly 10,000 educators and staff—to align learning from preschool through third grade. These trainings unite TK teachers, instructional aides, preschool educators, and school leaders to implement evidence-based SEAL ([Sobrato Early Academic Language](#)) strategies and Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Practices (CLRP), fostering collaboration and shared learning.

In partnership with the Multilingual Multicultural Education Department, the Early Childhood Education Division at LAUSD is integrating the updated [Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations \(PT-KLF\)](#), which emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion, and developing aligned resources that help educators create classrooms affirming students’ cultural and linguistic identities. As California moves toward UTK, LAUSD’s work highlights the importance of building safe, welcoming, and developmentally appropriate environments that counter exclusionary policies and celebrate the rich languages and cultures children bring into their learning.

To read the full version of the blog series and access related resources, please visit bit.ly/4jC3sNg. ■

