Assessing Transitional Kindergarten’s Impact on Elementary School Trajectories

November 16, 2023

Julien Lafortune and Laura Hill

Supported with funding from Sunlight Giving
Transitional Kindergarten in California

- Extra year of schooling, part of K–12 system
  - Launched in 2012–13 with limited eligibility
  - Universal for all four-year-olds by 2025–26

- Age-appropriate curriculum
  - At least three hours a day; some full-day programs
  - Some classrooms mix TK with kindergarten
  - Lower staffing ratios than early elementary grades

- One of multiple options for four-year-olds
  - California State Preschool (CSPP), Head Start, private care, etc.
What do we know about TK?

- Evaluations of initial TK cohorts in California have found improved kindergarten readiness

- National findings on early childhood education are generally positive
  - Multiple short- and long-run benefits, including improved test scores, high school graduation, college attendance, earnings
  - Test score gains sometimes fade out in later grades
We focused on TK student trajectories in five districts

We study early TK cohorts five large urban California districts
▪ Cohorts were enrolled in TK before the COVID pandemic
▪ We follow these cohorts through elementary school

We examine several issues
▪ Dual-Language/English Learner (DLL/EL) identification; reclassification
▪ Identification of special education needs
▪ Standardized test scores; social-emotional learning (SEL) scores
▪ Differences across demographic groups
How can we identify TK’s impact?

- How can we get at causal estimates of TK?
  - **Problem**: parents choose whether to opt in

- **One solution**: leverage birthdate cutoff (December 2)
  - Those born on/before Dec. 2 were eligible; those born after were not
  - Compare outcome changes across birthdate cutoff
  - Note: impact is *relative* to alternative options
TK enrollment decreases sharply after the Dec. 2 cut-off

Note: each dot shows average share enrolled in TK for a given birthdate. Horizontal axis in days to Dec. 3 (Dec. 3 = 0)
EL identification more common in TK than in kindergarten
TK led to earlier EL identification at higher rates
Special education needs were identified earlier among TK students
Key findings for dual-language and special education students

- Earlier identification as EL/DLL
  - But no difference by grade 2
  - Increase in students ever identified as ELs

- Earlier identification of disabilities
  - No impact on ever being in special education
  - Earlier identification centers on autism, speech/language
  - Earlier autism identification notable for students with non-English home languages (earlier by >1 grade level)
TK had small, insignificant test score impacts

Note: vertical axis in standard deviation units.
TK’s social-emotional learning impacts are modest, statistically insignificant

Note: vertical axis in standard deviation units.
Social-emotional learning effects found among English-only but not multilingual TK students

Note: vertical axis in standard deviation units.
Summary of findings and discussion

- Earlier identification of special education needs suggests promising area to improve services—and outcomes.
- Earlier EL identification could be beneficial—but could also be overidentification.
- Initial test score benefits of TK fade out in elementary school
  - Important: *relative* to alternatives.
- Suggestive evidence of SEL benefits is limited to “English only” students
  - Absence of positive impact (and even some negative effects) on multilingual students suggest areas for improvement.
Notes on the use of these slides

These slides were created to accompany a presentation. They do not include full documentation of sources, data samples, methods, and interpretations. To avoid misinterpretations, please contact:

Julien Lafortune (lafortune@ppic.org)
Laura Hill (hill@ppic.org)

Thank you for your interest in this work.