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Contact: Erin Gabel
916.708.8895

Transitional Kindergarten Students Have Edge in Math and Literacy, New AIR Study Finds

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — California students who attended Transitional Kindergarten were more advanced than their peers in language, literacy, mathematics, and executive function, early results of a study by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) show. The differences amount to as much as a five-month head start in kindergarten.

“Students who attended Transitional Kindergarten are better prepared for kindergarten than those who didn’t the year before kindergarten,” report co-author and AIR senior researcher Karen Manship said.

Transitional Kindergarten grew out of California’s Kindergarten Readiness Act, passed in 2010. Historically, the state required children to be five years old by December 2 to enroll in kindergarten. When the new law moved the cut-off date to September 1, Transitional Kindergarten was created to serve those who turned five years old between September 2 and December 2.

“This research underlines the importance of California’s decision, when moving the kindergarten enrollment date to a more appropriate age, to ensure children with a fall birthday still have access to a quality education,” report co-funder and First 5 California Executive Director Camille Maben said. “The study further shows that while TK quality is locally determined, the state’s investment in TK is paying off in literacy and numeracy gains, and better readiness for kindergarten. I hope this study leads more school leaders to use their Local Control Funding to make early learning investments an achievement gap strategy.”

Key findings from the study, which included more than 2,700 students in 20 districts, include:

- Transitional Kindergarten has a significant impact on students’ preliteracy and literacy skills. After controlling for age, Transitional Kindergarten students are better at identifying letters and words at the beginning of kindergarten than those who did not attend the program. The advantage is equal to about five months of learning. Transitional Kindergarten students also display a greater understanding of the sounds of letters and syllables that make up words, giving them about a three-month learning advantage.
- Students who attended Transitional Kindergarten outperformed their peers in mathematics at the beginning of kindergarten. The program improved students’ knowledge of basic mathematical concepts and symbols. Attending transitional kindergarten also improved children’s mathematics problem-solving skills at the start of kindergarten, such as counting objects, understanding measurement, and completing word problems, which amounts to a three-month learning advantage.

- Students who attended Transitional Kindergarten also have an edge in executive function, but no detectable advantage in teacher-rated social-emotional skills. Students from Transitional Kindergarten have greater executive function (remembering rules, inhibiting impulses, and thinking flexibly). However, they did not achieve higher ratings than their peers in social skills and behavior.

AIR researchers in San Mateo, California have been studying the state's Transitional Kindergarten program since 2011, with support from the Heising-Simons Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and First 5 California. Future reports will examine whether effects persist throughout kindergarten, impacts for different groups of students (such as English language learners), and characteristics of Transitional Kindergarten that affect kindergarteners' skills the most.

To read *Impact of California's Transitional Kindergarten Program* and past papers on the program, visit <http://tkstudy.airprojects.org/about-the-study/reports>.

About First 5 California

First 5 California, also known as the California Children and Families Commission, was established after voters passed Proposition 10 in November 1998, which added a tax on tobacco products to fund education, health, childcare, and other services for children ages 0 to 5 and their families. Its programs and resources are designed to educate teachers, parents, grandparents, and caregivers about the critical role they play during a child's first five years – with the overarching goal of helping more California kids grow up healthy and ready to succeed in school and in life. For more information, please visit <http://www.ccfc.ca.gov/>.

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