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California gears up for extra year of kindergarten

By Erin Brownfield

School districts around the state are gearing up to offer an additional year of “preppy kindergarten,” a term that could become an integral part of the California education lexicon.

It’s not a special class for five-year-olds in plaid pants. It’s the name for the “preparatory” or “transitional” kindergarten classes that all school districts in California will be required to offer next year in advance of regular kindergarten for younger students who only turn five between September and December.

Taught by credentialed teachers, it will mark the first time that a new grade has been introduced into California schools since 1891. That was when regular kindergarten was introduced into the Golden State.

It will also relieve California parents of children who are still four when they enter kindergarten of a long-standing dilemma: whether their children are emotionally or cognitively ready to enter traditional kindergarten.

Under current law, students who turn five anytime before December 2 are allowed to attend kindergarten. But under the Kindergarten Readiness Act (SB1381), approved by the Legislature last year, these younger children will no longer be eligible to attend regular kindergarten. Beginning in 2012-13, the law will be phased in gradually over the next several years.

Transitional kindergarten, to use its more formal name, has been offered by a handful of California school districts, such as Long Beach, Los Angeles Unified, and Palo Alto. Some districts—most notably Los Angeles Unified and Long Beach—have expanded their programs in anticipation of the

implementation of the new law next year. (Check out a list of some of the existing programs serving young five-year-olds compiled by Preschool California, an advocacy organization.)

Some 2,000 classrooms will house transitional kindergarten programs across the state next year, and eventually that number will rise to 6,000, according to Scott Moore, senior policy advisor for Preschool California.

One justification for transitional kindergarten—or TK as it is often referred to by education insiders—is that research shows that children who start school later do better academically as measured on math and reading scores by the time they enter 1st grade. As a RAND research report concluded, “delaying kindergarten has a positive effect on test score gains in the early years.”

Currently parents with kids born between September and December, who are still 4-year-olds or young 5-year-olds when the school year starts, face a tough choice trying to decide whether their child is really ready to succeed in regular kindergarten. And if he or she isn’t, parents are faced with having to pay for yet another year of child care or private preschool. This has long been a dilemma in California, whose December 2 cut off date is one of the latest for traditional kindergarten entry in the country.

Earlier kindergarten classes are also a recognition that regular kindergarten has become much more academically oriented, and is no longer just a way to get children accustomed to the more structured world of first grade. They actually have to learn something—and many kindergartners, especially the youngest ones, are not necessarily prepared to do so.

What exactly does transitional kindergarten look like? All have to have credentialed teachers, which sets them apart from the state's current pre-school program. Beyond that, the California Department of Education gives districts considerable flexibility, with no mandated statewide curriculum. So there is variation in how school districts that have already adopted transitional kindergarten are implementing the program.

But common themes appear to be an emphasis on learning social and emotional skills, early literacy and math, and working in small groups. Advocates are hoping TK means the youngest kindergartners will be getting more time for play-based learning and physical development, and understanding basic concepts like shapes, colors, and letter sounds—kind of what kindergarten once used to look like before it began to focus more and more on academics.

There's one very practical question: How will a cash-strapped California pay for this? According to the Legislative Analyst's Office, the state will save an estimated \$700 million each year that it would normally have spent on its kindergarten class that included 4 year olds. But as the bill's author Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, noted, those funds will be largely "redirected" to pay for the new transitional kindergarten classes.

As a result, there will be no immediate cost to the taxpayer, but eventually there will be—when the first transitional kindergarten class enters their senior year in high school 13 years later. That's because the state will be offering and paying for 14 years of public schooling for these students rather than the 13 most public school students get. In today's dollars, that could cost between \$700 million and \$900 million by the time next year's transitional kindergarten class makes it into their last year of high school in 2025.

But supporters of transitional kindergarten say that the program will end up costing the state much less than that. Based on research on the long-term effects of high quality pre-school, well-run transitional kindergarten classes will reduce the number of children who end up in more expensive special education programs. Fewer children will end up repeating grades, and more will graduate. That will result in long-term financial returns for the state, said Preschool California's Moore. "In the long run there will be significant cost savings to the state," he said.

Want to see the difference between transitional kindergarten and regular kindergarten? Check out how the Central Valley's Kingsburg Charter Elementary School District distinguishes between the two.

Planning a transitional kindergarten program? Preschool California offers resources for curriculum development as well as monthly conference calls. (See www.tkcalifornia.org).

For answers to many questions on transitional kindergarten, check out the California Department of Education FAQ.

Is your district implementing transitional kindergarten or preparing to do so? Do you have a child in transitional kindergarten? Do you think three months makes a big difference in kindergarten readiness? Let us know.