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Transitional kindergarten gives kids a leg up

By Vivian Po

LOS ANGELES - Ethan Wong, who turned five last November, was experiencing a hard time transitioning from pre-school to kindergarten, mainly because of his young age and delayed speech.

But after transferring to the pilot Transition Kindergarten program at Kingsley Elementary School, Ethan is making big strides.

Ethan is learning how to use prepositions, count in multiples of five, form patterns, sound out letters -- just about everything children learn in regular kindergarten. Except that Transition Kindergarten teachers present lessons at a slower pace and are focused on oral language development.

Launched last August at 36 elementary schools, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) designed the one-year-long transitional kindergarten program for children whose fifth birthday occurs in the fall.

Because children currently must turn five by December 2 to enroll in regular kindergarten, some children born later in this cycle developmentally behind those born earlier in the year.

The program gives parents the option of enrolling their younger children for this additional year of schooling before entering regular kindergarten.

“A Perfect Fit”

“Transition Kindergarten sounded like a perfect fit for my son,” said Ethan’s father, Tong Wong. He had sought a learning environment that better fit Ethan’s learning challenges.

Wong said the homework Ethan now receives is similar to that of kids in regular kindergarten, but less demanding. He said his son is less pressured in class than he used to feel.

Because California has one of the highest kindergarten standards, many children under age five—especially those from lower-income families that lack access to high-quality pre-kindergarten education--find it hard to compete with their peers.

“Kindergarten has become more and more academic,” observed Ruth Yoon, early childhood education administrator at LAUSD. She once taught pre-school and oversaw the design and implementation of the Transition Kindergarten programs in the district.

Yoon noted that their district has discovered over time that children under age five experience greater difficulty in adapting to a regular classroom setting and understanding kindergarten curriculum.

California Senate Bill 1381, passed last year, gradually changes the kindergarten birthday cut-off date from December 2 to September 1, over a three-year period, from 2012 to 2015.

More important, the bill requires schools to offer yearlong transitional kindergarten to children whose admissions are delayed.

“Transition Kindergarten is a gift to these children,” said teacher Ana Quintanilla. Quintanilla has taught kindergarten for 11 years and has a master’s degree in reading and language arts.

She said that if her students were in a regular kindergarten class, they would struggle because younger students tend to have a shorter attention span and face greater difficulty sitting through a 30- to 40-minute session, common in regular kindergarten.

Moreover, the faster pace at which lessons are taught to children in regular kindergarten to prepare them for first grade allows almost no time for review.

“Unfortunately, many times we don’t have time to go back and they [younger children] stay behind,” said Quintanilla.

100 More Schools

Buoyed by the program’s success, LAUSD is now planning to include it in 100 more schools next fall.

Fresno County has a similar program in one of its schools, Washington Elementary. Educators are pleased with its positive impact.

Principal Shirley Esau said that last year, her school worked with the Fresno County Office of Education to launch the Transition Kindergarten program. That has allowed regular kindergarten teachers to give their students more attention.

“If you don’t have to spend as much time doing classroom intervention for the youngest ones, you can definitely push the older ones further,” Esau said.

Even though the program has been well received by educators, not all parents look at it favorably. While more affluent parents laud the program, those from low to moderate-income households, including many parents of color, worry that the program could stigmatize their children.

Principal Renee Fuentes-Campa of Kingsley Elementary said some ethnic minority parents have withdrawn their children from the program.

She said some of them perceive that their children were set back by a year or were seen as being in special education.

“They do not want their kids to be labeled as slow,” Campa said.

Adelina Yescas is one of those parents. Her daughter, Denise Emily Lopez, was recommended for transitional kindergarten even though she was born in January. Yescas reluctantly agreed.

“I was really concerned because my daughter is older. I was afraid that it would put her down,” Yescas said.

However, after she saw the progress her daughter has made in the first few months, Yescas has changed her mind. She said Denise is now more communicative and her retention power has improved.

Yescas believes that better outreach is needed so more parents could take advantage of the program.

Quintanilla noted that earlier, higher income parents have been sending their children to regular kindergarten at age six so they will be more competitive.

“How can our kids compete in a classroom where some kids are already six and some of them haven’t even turned five?” asked Quintanilla.