

Innovation in Action: Palermo Union Grows Early Learning

Palermo Union School District is a small district that thinks big when it comes to early education. With five schools, Palermo Union has long operated a state pre-K program, serving just over 120 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families — a mix of Latino, Hmong, Filipino, and white children — 64 miles north of Sacramento, outside Oroville.

Kimberly Butcher, the district's director of preschool programs, reported that Palermo's school board recently added "one and one-half preschool classrooms." The half-classroom hosts 3- to 5-year-old children, most of whom are 4-year-olds. Given the positive reception to these additional classrooms, Butcher believes that Palermo's working parents will welcome an expansion of TK, which will open classroom spaces for additional 4-year-olds, regardless of income.

Butcher believes TK expansion can benefit local teachers. "It's great that [this] will create more jobs" for area teachers, she said. For example, given wage disparities for early childhood educators, new TK teachers have the opportunity for pay comparable to kindergarten teachers. Butcher also highlighted the professionalism that accompanies working in the K-12 system.

But where to find these new teachers is a question being asked by district leaders, said Butcher. Her district's five incumbent pre-K teachers hold a Child Development Permit and a couple have attained a bachelor's degree. But they are not eligible to teach TK, since they must work toward a multi-subject teaching credential, Butcher said. In order to obtain a qualified workforce and help early childhood educators realize the benefits of increased pay and professionalism, districts and counties must create attainable pathways to transition into TK positions.

Butcher worried about her already underpaid pre-K teachers when shifting her pre-K program to toddlers and 3-year-old children. They have little experience in serving toddlers. In Palermo's current mixed-age preschool classrooms, teachers "rely on the older 4- and 5-year-old students to model appropriate behavior and attentiveness for the handful of 3-year-old students." When preschool classrooms shift to being composed of 20 or more 3-year-old students, "teaching looks much like herding kittens." Under those conditions, Butcher warned, "People may flee the early childhood career. When one starts crying, everyone begins to cry," she said.

Her teachers hold "strong competencies after teaching pre-K for 20 years or more," Butcher said. How to incorporate that knowledge into qualifications toward a credential poses a huge challenge for coordinating well-staffed TK programs. Otherwise deeply experienced teachers, often women of color, will never be "promoted" into school district positions without additional education.



Butcher's pre-K program has devised flexibilities not always seen in K-12. For example, her 3- and 4-year-olds can stay at one of three campuses until 5:30 p.m., convenient for working parents. But TK kids must be picked up at 2:30 p.m. at Palermo Union sites. While individual caregivers and two community-based programs help fill this gap, students must be transported throughout the day, which can cause stress and impact students' routines.

District managers confront other institutional constraints. In some districts, union contracts assure each K-12 teacher their own classroom, including TK instructors. According to Butcher, "lack of facility will be the biggest challenge to expanding TK to all 4-year-olds." In Palermo, a difficult challenge moving forward is where to find sufficient space for all 4-year-olds across Palermo's five elementary schools—the district is already using all available classrooms. Butcher explained Palermo is struggling to make a feasible plan for space given that Assembly Bill 130 prohibits the use of funding for the purchase or installation of portable classrooms.

As echoed across the state, staffing remains worrisome. "It's rare we find instructional aides with an associate's degree," Butcher reported. "We can find a few warm-body aides," but that undercuts classroom quality. TK classrooms will require instructional aides, too. "In our small community, there aren't enough workers," Butcher worried.

Butcher believed UTK can benefit the children and families of Palermo. This expansion will require strategic decisions for successful implementation; these same decisions are being made in districts across the state. Board members should keep in mind that adequate classroom space is crucial for expanding TK. Beyond facilities, it is critical to find teachers and staff to facilitate early childhood learning. Districts should consider pathways for credentialing educators to ensure well-staffed TK programs. Another consideration is how to partner with community-based supports after the school day ends to meet the needs of working parents.