

# Innovation in Action: Expanding Pre-K Access in San Diego County

*Local school boards face daunting challenges when it comes to planning for their own universal transitional kindergarten (UTK) programs. How can they open high-quality TK classrooms while integrating the new grade with the district's existing elementary education programs? How can they engage families and educational partners with pre-K nonprofits to ensure year-round access to early care and education? Leading educators in San Diego County offer inventive lessons for both questions.*

## San Diego Unified School District: Consolidating Early Education Programs

Family demand for transitional kindergarten has grown steadily in San Diego Unified, with enrollment of 4-year-olds doubling to over 2,500 just prior to the pandemic in TK classrooms spread across 56 school sites. Previously unused classrooms have been renovated and new teachers have been found or reassigned to TK, each with a multiple-subject credential.

Yet, San Diego Unified's robust expansion was unfolding amidst a mélange of fragmented efforts, says Stephanie Ceminsky, director of early learning at San Diego USD. Like many districts, a variety of early childhood initiatives have sprouted since the 1960s, including California State Preschool Program (CSPP), run largely apart from the elementary education division. Federal Head Start and the local YWCA have long operated pre-Ks on district campuses as well.

Ceminsky carefully began to integrate her department into allied district units. This included integrating human resources operations, special education, enrollment options, and labor contracts—all while blending child-development aims for 3- and 4-year-olds with elementary-level learning goals—without losing the social-emotional essentials of pre-K. Ceminsky has also joined with the district facilities team, aided by demographers, to identify neighborhoods where parental demand for TK will likely grow.

Equally important, Ceminsky began meeting with site principals, talking about the pivotal importance of early learning, along with developmentally appropriate practices. She went about “creating a common language” and integrating TK into the daily rituals of schools. The program leveraged shared expertise, where vertical articulation between grades became the norm, and the educational continuum truly aligned to be kindergarten-ready.

“Leadership was thrilled with the initiative, but the level of confidence in the knowledge, skills, and foundation associated with the change required development,” said Ceminsky. Leadership development led to the use of frequent and focused feedback. The dynamic learning environment increased teacher motivation, well-being, and a personal sense of accomplishment. These conditions were enhanced by peer models, goal setting, student choice, and attention to carefully measured student outcomes.

Ceminsky is building a pipeline with educator preparation institutions, such as the University of La Verne; California State University, San Diego; and local community colleges, ensuring an inflow of newly credentialed teachers. The district agreed to support a priority application and a guaranteed TK position for a valued early childhood education teacher with many years of classroom experience when they earn their elementary credential. In addition, the University of La Verne developed opportunities for district leadership to expand their skillset by co-teaching the early learning courses with ULV faculty.

## Vista USD: Joining with a Pre-K Nonprofit

The accelerated spread of TK classrooms unfolds in complex landscape of childcare and pre-K providers. Cooperative efforts ensure that parents benefit from full-day and year-round pre-K.

One district in north San Diego County, Vista Unified, collaborates with a CBO to offer pre-K for children 2 to 4 years of age. The district hosts pre-K programs run by Educational Enrichment Systems (EES), a San Diego-based nonprofit financed largely through the California State Preschool Program. EES employs teachers and support staff, enrolls children and families, equips classrooms, and brings ample expertise on developmentally appropriate learning activities for young children. To achieve universal pre-K within Vista Unified, this partnership will expand TK enrollments while simultaneously serving families with toddlers and 3-year-olds.

The collaboration between Vista Unified and EES holds rich benefits for the district—sustaining a broad-based strategy for families rather than focusing exclusively on 4-year-olds, along with teacher preparation and quality-enhancing efforts led by EES. Funding streams from each program also flow together, fostering tight collaboration between the district and nonprofit community, rather than stoking a competitive environment that may squander public funds.