

Transitional kindergarten programs expand early education access and boost academic gain, study finds

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Children enrolled in transitional kindergarten programs in Michigan did better in math and English by the time they reached 3rd grade, with

higher test scores than other kids who didn't go through the program, according to a University of Michigan study [published](#) in the journal *AEA Papers and Proceedings*.

"The impacts on 3rd grade test scores are particularly large and consistent with the strong program features of TK that we've documented," said Christina Weiland, a professor at U-M's Marsal Family School of Education and the Ford School of Public Policy. "Our findings identify a new model that has been very successful at improving [student achievement](#)."

The introduction of TK—now serving more than 10,000 children in Michigan each year—significantly boosted the number of children attending state-funded early education programs.

"Some families opted for TK instead of early [kindergarten](#) or the Great Start Readiness Program, resulting in a net increase in children served in public preschool programs," Weiland said. "The swift filling of newly available GSRP spots demonstrates the high demand for state-funded early education programs and its effectiveness in addressing this demand."

The availability of TK also led to more families delaying kindergarten entry, particularly among economically disadvantaged households. This suggests that financial factors are significant when public options are available in early education decisions.

Unlike other early learning programs in Michigan and most U.S. states, TK teachers must meet the same qualifications and be compensated the same as K-12 teachers. More commonly, early education teachers are compensated substantially less, fueling turnover.

Also, the [curriculum](#) used in the program tends to target specific school

readiness skills; few TK programs use the curriculum that public pre-K programs tend to use, which are curricula that other options have repeatedly outperformed.

"The significant academic improvements observed suggest that TK can have lasting positive effects on children's educational trajectories, potentially contributing to better longer-term educational outcomes," Weiland said.

"Next, we're evaluating the effects of Michigan TK on additional outcomes, such as kindergarten readiness and special education placement during early elementary grades. We also plan to continue students as they transition to [middle school](#)."

More information: Jordan Berne et al, The Effect of Early Childhood Programs on Third-Grade Test Scores: Evidence from Transitional Kindergarten in Michigan, *AEA Papers and Proceedings* (2024). [DOI: 10.1257/pandp.20241081](#)

Provided by University of Michigan

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