



## Big changes for kindergarten

The youngest students will now be offered a 2-year program.

This year, schools across California will begin to implement the Kindergarten Readiness Act, a 2010 state law that rolls back the start date to ensure that children are 5 years old when they start kindergarten. It also creates a new program – called transitional kindergarten – for the children born between September and December affected by the new entry date.

Those students, who would have been the youngest in their traditional kindergarten classes, will instead be offered a two-year program. The first year, they will be in classrooms that are better geared to their developmental stage: The learning is hands-on, and they are introduced to kindergarten standards through play and songs. The following year, those students will be in a traditional kindergarten classroom.

“California has historically started kindergarten earlier than any other

state,” says Deborah Kong, spokesperson for Preschool California, a nonprofit children’s advocacy group that supports the new law. “This is a big change for school districts. It creates a bridge from preschool to kindergarten. This will give our youngest students the benefit of time, an opportunity that will ultimately benefit all children.”

Research shows that students who were 4 at the time they began kindergarten are more likely than older kindergarteners to be retained or referred to special education classes, says Christie Baird, a coordinator with the Orange County Department of Education, which is working with districts as they develop their transitional kindergarten programs.

Baird, a former kindergarten teacher herself, says that transitional kindergarten classrooms will have separate stations that encourage hands-on play: library and science stations, for example, as well as

areas that encourage kids to engage in dramatic play and handle building blocks, among other activities.

These activities will be scheduled into time periods, to account for shorter attention spans. Transitional kindergarten will be taught by credentialed teachers and is free to parents.

“This is something we’ve always talked about as kindergarten teachers,” Baird says.

Educators have pushed for this change, as kindergarten has become more academic in focus through the years. California standards mandate that, at the end of kindergarten, students should be able to read 50 sight words, count 30 objects and write in a complete sentence, says Kong.

“Kindergarten is far more academic than it once was,” she says. “It’s what first grade used to be.”

The School Readiness Act gradually phases in the new entry date for



kindergarten. This year, students must be 5 years old by Nov. 1 to enroll in traditional kindergarten, while in 2013 they must be 5 by Oct. 1. Starting in 2014, all students must be 5 by Sept. 1 to enroll in traditional kindergarten, bringing California in line with the majority of states, which already require children to be 5 when they start kindergarten.

Adding transitional kindergarten – which will affect about 125,000 children across the state – marks the first time that California has added a grade level to its public schools since kindergarten was added in 1891.

While the entry date change is certain, a few uncertainties about transitional kindergarten remain. In his January budget proposal, Gov. Jerry Brown proposed to permanently eliminate funding for transitional kindergarten, a move to save \$223.7 million this fall and \$672 million at full implementation in 2014-15.

Children's advocates decry this move, saying it undermines the new law and punishes the children who would have been eligible for kindergarten before the cutoff date changed.

"The 125,000 children who would have gone to kindergarten now have nowhere to go," says Kong. "Kicking 125,000 kids out of kindergarten is a lose, lose, lose." Kong added that legislators, including Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, have said they would not support Brown's budget proposal.

Funding questions aside,

Baird says, districts are moving forward to create their transitional kindergarten programs, since that is what is required under current law. The Placentia Yorba Linda Unified School District began offering transitional kindergarten during the 2011-12 school year, and it has been wildly popular with parents.

"They thought they would have three classrooms, but they ended up having nine," says Baird.

Legally, the only students that a district must serve in next fall's transitional kindergarten classes are students born between Nov. 1 and Dec. 2, 2006. It is up to individual school districts to decide whether they will allow older students born before Nov. 1 whose parents decide not to enroll them in kindergarten this year.

Baird says that most Orange County districts have indicated they intend to open transitional kindergarten to other students whose birthdays fall before Nov. 1, and they are setting up processes to determine which children will be eligible. Districts are not required to offer transitional kindergarten at every school site, so parents who enroll their children may have to travel to other schools to participate.

Parents who want more information about their local transitional kindergarten program should contact their district, Baird says. For more information about the law, the California Department of Education has a frequently asked questions page at [cde.ca.gov](http://cde.ca.gov). 

