



Boosting Kindergarten Readiness Among Underserved Early Learners by Restoring Transition to Kindergarten Programs

2027-29 Biennium Operating Budget Decision Package

Agency: 350 Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

Budget period: 2027-29

Budget level: PL

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

Established in 2023, Transition to Kindergarten is a proven, high-quality preschool program operated by school districts that prioritizes serving four-year-olds with the highest needs. Last year, funding for the program was significantly reduced, despite strong and consistent positive outcomes for students. This reduction to state funding diminished service in every community that benefited from Transition to Kindergarten. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) seeks \$45.5 million in the upcoming biennium to restore the program to the prior funding levels.

FISCAL DETAIL

Operating Expenditures	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030	FY 2031
Fund 001-1 (Program 05T)	\$15,000,000	\$30,500,000	\$31,200,000	\$32,000,000
Total Expenditures	\$15,000,000	\$30,500,000	\$31,200,000	\$32,000,000
Biennial Totals	\$45,500,000		\$63,200,000	
Staffing	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030	FY 2031
FTEs	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Average Annual	0.0		0.0	
Object of Expenditure	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030	FY 2031
Obj. N	\$15,000,000	\$30,500,000	\$31,200,000	\$32,000,000
Revenue	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030	FY 2031
Fund 001-1	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Total Revenue	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Biennial Totals	\$0		\$0	

PACKAGE DESCRIPTION

Transition to Kindergarten (TK) is a legislatively established and authorized early learning program for children who are at least four years old by August 31 of the year attended, and have been identified, through a screening process, as needing additional preparation to be successful in kindergarten the following school year. Authorized under [RCW 28A.300.072](#), Washington's TK programs must comply with Minimum Standards and Requirements which establish best practices for site readiness, developmentally appropriate curricula, and professional development to support high-quality programming.

Washington assesses children's readiness for kindergarten using the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS), administered during the first two months of kindergarten. Data published by OSPI in February of 2026 shows that young learners who previously attended a TK program outperform their peers in every metric of Kindergarten Readiness tracked: social emotional readiness, physical readiness, language readiness, cognitive readiness, literacy readiness, and mathematical readiness. These results are particularly striking when considering that kindergarten readiness is a strong predictor of whether students will meet the college readiness proficiency standard on the third-grade state assessments in math and English language arts (ELA). Strong outcomes are particularly important when it comes to how TK benefits children identified as needing special education services, and those from multilingual families, with TK operating not only as a proven kindergarten preparation strategy for young learners, but as an early intervention strategy helping to close persistent and longstanding opportunity gaps for specific groups of students.

What is the problem, opportunity, or priority you are addressing with the request?

Despite the importance of early learning, many Washington preschoolers lack access to affordable, high-quality options. Child care costs are so steep that in many cases a parent chooses between dedicating most or all of an entire paycheck to this singular expense, or withdrawing from the workforce to care for the child at home. Even with state subsidies, many families struggle to afford child care, an affordability crisis made more acute by the overall financial pressures facing American families today. In Washington state, only 28% of three- and four-year-olds are enrolled in state-funded preschool, ranking the state 34th nationally for four-year olds' access to preschool. TK plays a critical role within Washington's mixed-delivery early learning system, alongside, and sometimes integrated with, ECEAP, Head Start, and community-based programs, with TK being, in some communities, the only state-funded or subsidized preschool option available. Moreover, need stretches further than income alone. Whether it be a student with a disability, a student with no access to prior early learning experiences, or any other circumstance, TK is designed to be a need-based program that assesses individual student and family need in order to make sure every child is prepared to thrive in kindergarten and beyond.

In acknowledgement of the need to expand high-quality, affordable preschool programs, the 2023 Legislature formally codified TK, a program that had existed less formally for years in scattered school districts across the state. The new law also establishes additional requirements

and criteria for operating TK within the larger early learning landscape. OSPI continues to work in collaboration with the legislature and state early learning partners to support high-quality TK programming statewide. Despite the criticisms and lack of legislative commitment, the overall success of TK in driving excellent outcomes for early learners is undeniable. Because school districts are legally required to provide educational services for students with disabilities, including young learners, and because districts employ staff with specialization and endorsements in areas such as special education and multilingual education, families whose children need staff with this specialized knowledge and training don't have to worry about their child being denied a spot or receiving care and services from staff unprepared to meet their unique needs.

Facing consecutive biennia of tight budgets, lawmakers have significantly divested from TK, despite strong support from communities and families for whom this option has helped alleviate critical financial, educational, and systemic pressures. Recognizing the foundational value of a good preschool education in setting students – and Washington's future workforce – up for K-12 and postsecondary success, economic stability, and equitable opportunities, it is counterintuitive for a state committed to these exact outcomes to effectively shut down a proven program through lack of funding.

What is your proposal?

OSPI proposes that the Legislature restore funding for TK programs to the levels established in 2025 allowing districts to restore programs that have been reduced or eliminated in the 2026-27 school year. Additionally, this proposal adds an inflation factor, ensuring the purchasing power does not regrade year over year

Understanding that state budget pressures are expected to persist into this next budget cycle, OSPI's proposal does not close the gap entirely in the 2028 fiscal year, instead phasing in funding to make the program whole over the coming biennium.

How is your proposal impacting equity in the state?

Please describe in detail how this proposal is likely to benefit communities and populations who have historically been excluded by governmental decisions. Include both demographic and geographic information about communities.

TK is designed to prioritize services to families most in need, with funding directed first to districts serving higher percentages of low-income families. Because Washington ranks 34th nationally in preschool access for four-year-olds, with only 28% of three- and four-year-olds enrolled in state-funded preschool, the students most affected by this access gap are concentrated in communities, often rural and smaller districts, where TK operates as the only state-funded or subsidized preschool option available. Because TK spots are prioritized based on student characteristics, restoring funding benefits students with disabilities, students from low-income families, and students who need additional support for kindergarten readiness.

Describe how your agency engaged with communities and populations, particularly those who have been historically excluded and marginalized by governmental decisions?

OSPI developed this proposal in the context of the significant cut in funding compared to prior years. Districts and families regularly expressed concern that the loss of these opportunities left families, particularly those with children with disabilities or from low-income households, without a state-funded preschool option in their community.

Feedback consistently emphasized two points: TK's targeted eligibility model reaches students who most need early intervention, and inconsistent funding has made it difficult for districts to sustain programs year to year. This directly shaped the proposal — restoring funding to 2025 levels so districts can rebuild reduced programs, — and adding an inflation factor, so funding keeps pace with costs over time.

What input did your agency receive, and how was it incorporated into your proposal?

The TK program came up numerous times in the K-12 Funding Equity Workgroup discussion (required by House Bill 2049 from 2025) as a priority that is essential to closing opportunity gaps and ensuring all students have early access to services and interventions so they can thrive. The strong interest from schools, families, and partners across the state informed this request.

Explain why and how these equity impacts will be addressed, i.e., consider communities or populations excluded or disproportionately impacted by the proposal.

TK's eligibility and prioritization structure directs resources to the students and communities most affected by gaps in early learning access. Because funding is allocated first to districts serving higher concentrations of low-income students, restored funding will disproportionately benefit the populations who lose the most when programs are cut.

Geographically, this impact will be greatest in rural and smaller districts, where TK is often the only state-funded or subsidized preschool option available, unlike urban areas, where ECEAP, Head Start, and private options provide coverage. Restoring funding here prevents families in these communities from losing their only viable path to preschool.

Because funding is phased in over the biennium rather than restored all at once, OSPI will prioritize the highest-need districts and programs first, front-loading the equity impact even as the overall funding gap closes gradually.

What are you purchasing and how does it solve the problem?

This proposal would phase in additional funding for TK, fully restoring the funding to the FY 2026 level by Fiscal Year 2029. This restored funding would allow roughly 2,000 more students across the state to access the program. Additionally, the inflationary increase would ensure that

the purchasing power of the investment does not drop each year. This prevents fewer students from being served year over year and prevents the labor-intensive work of reallocating funding to school districts each year

What alternatives did you explore and why was this option chosen?

State funding dedicated to TK is the only option available for continuing these programs. While budget cuts have pushed school districts to consider creative solutions such as charging families, the additional dollars requested in this proposal are the only way to close the gap in service caused by recent state divestment.

What resources does the agency already have that are dedicated to this purpose?

OSPI administers TK funding through appropriations in the state operating budget, most recently in Senate Bill 5998, Sec. 520. These are the only dollars the agency has to do this work.

ASSUMPTIONS AND CALCULATIONS

Expansion, reduction, elimination or alteration of a current program or service:

This proposal represents and expansion of current levels of service through TK programming. Prior biennial funding amounts are as follows:

- FY24 \$48,718,000
- FY25 \$85,733,000
- FY26 \$94,152,000
- FY27 \$72,178,000

Detailed assumptions and calculations:

OSPI proposes restoring Transition to Kindergarten to the 2025-26 school year funding level, by phasing in the funding increase over two school years.

For State Fiscal Year 2028, OSPI recommends increasing the allocation by \$15 million, or 50% of the funding gap. For State Fiscal Year 2029, OSPI proposes restoration of funding by increasing the allocation by an additional \$15.5 million. OSPI recommends that this allocation be increased based on state funded salary and benefit increases in future years – OSPI assumes a 2.4% increase for State Fiscal Years 2030 and 2031.

The total cost of this proposal by state fiscal year is as follows:

FY 2028 – (Total: \$15,000,000)

- Program 05T Transition to Kindergarten \$15 Million

FY 2029 – (Total: \$30,500,000)

- Program 05T Transition to Kindergarten \$30.5 Million

FY 2030 – (Total: \$31.200,000)

- Program 05T Transition to Kindergarten \$31.2 Million

FY 2031 – (Total: \$32,000,000)

- Program 05T Transition to Kindergarten \$32 Million

Workforce assumptions:

N/A

Historical funding:

Fiscal Year 2028

- FTE = 0.0 FTE
- Total Funds = \$65.5 million
- Near General Fund = \$65.5 million
- Other Funds = \$0 million

Fiscal Year 2029

- FTE = 0.0 FTE
- Total Funds = \$65.5 million
- Near General Fund = \$65.5 million
- Other Funds = \$0 million

STRATEGIC AND PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

Strategic framework:

Governor Ferguson's Priorities

This request supports one of Governor Ferguson's strategic goals.

Goal 1 – Education

Strengthening K-12 education in the state of Washington, which includes plans to invest a higher percentage of the total budget in K-12 education to ensure a strong start for Washington's younger residents. This priority references the Washington State Constitution, which declares that "It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, colors, caste, or sex."

OSPI Strategic Goals

This proposal directly supports two of [OSPI's four strategic goals](#), with primary alignment to the agency's commitment to "eliminating opportunity gaps and supporting students furthest from educational justice."

Goal 1: Equitable Access to Strong Foundations

There is nothing more foundational to K-12 education than early learning and kindergarten readiness. This proposal supports additional accessible options in communities across the state using a proven model driving strong outcomes for participating children.

Goal 2: Rigorous Learner-Centered Options in Every Community

TK operates in communities across the state and is particularly needed in communities where childcare and preschool options are limited or difficult to access. This proposal supports maintenance and in some cases expansion to prior levels of service for TK programs in numerous Washington communities.

Prior Legislative Commitments

2023 House Bill 1550, RCW 28A.300.072

This proposal supports TK programs codified in [2023 House Bill 1550](#).

Performance outcomes:

Funding provided for TK programs must be expended only for the support of operating a TK program, ensuring that these funds are used solely for the education and supports of children who are in need of additional preparation to be successful in kindergarten the following year. With recent data showing that TK students outperform their peers on every measure of kindergarten readiness, paired with a recent OSPI study that found that students who were kindergarten-ready in Literacy and in Math were more than 1.5 times as likely than their peers to meet the college readiness proficiency standards on the third grade ELA and math assessments, OSPI anticipates strong positive outcomes for more students over many years as new TK funding allows the program to reach more early learners.

OTHER COLLATERAL CONNECTIONS

Intergovernmental:

None.

Stakeholder impacts:

None.

Legal or administrative mandates:

This request aligns with the intent laid out in [RCW 28A.300.072](#).

Changes from current law:

None beyond additional budget appropriations.

State workforce impacts:

None.

State facilities impacts:

None.

Puget Sound recovery:

N/A

Governor's salmon strategy:
N/A

OTHER SUPPORTING MATERIALS

1. [2025 TK Minimum Standards and Requirements \(https://ospi.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/2025-05/tk-minimum-standards-and-requirements_am.pdf\)](https://ospi.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/2025-05/tk-minimum-standards-and-requirements_am.pdf)
2. [As Legislature Considers Cuts to Transition to Kindergarten Program, Data Show Students Continue to Enter School More Ready to Learn \(https://ospi.k12.wa.us/about-ospi/news-center/news-releases/legislature-considers-cuts-transition-kindergarten-program-data-show-students-continue-enter-school\)](https://ospi.k12.wa.us/about-ospi/news-center/news-releases/legislature-considers-cuts-transition-kindergarten-program-data-show-students-continue-enter-school)

Information technology (IT):
N/A