

# Preschool Suspension and Expulsion: Defining the Issues



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Each year in the United States, thousands of preschool children are suspended or expelled from their early childhood care and education programs. Early childhood programs or settings are defined as programs that provide early care and education to young children birth through age five, including but not limited to, private and public child care, Head Start, and public, private, and faith-based Pre-K/preschool programs.<sup>1</sup> According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC),<sup>2</sup> each year over 8,700 three- and four-year-old children are expelled from their state-funded preschool or prekindergarten classrooms. This practice impacts young children and their families, and the practice is documented even for very young children, including infants and toddlers. There are many definitions for the practice of expulsion and suspension. State definitions or parameters for suspension of K-12 students can vary greatly, ranging from 3 to 20 days; the rest of the semester; and according to local discretion.<sup>3</sup> At the preschool level, there are fewer formal definitions or parameters, and some states disallow expulsion. According to the Education Commission of the States (ECS), states are increasingly addressing this issue through state level legislation. Generally, recent legislative efforts to address school discipline policies have focused on: restricting expulsion and suspension by grade level and infraction; limiting the length of exclusion; implementing and enhancing reporting mechanisms; and strategies to re-engage the student and family.<sup>4</sup>

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Over half of the states either explicitly allow expulsion or pass it to the local level; eight states require documentation; and four states require family assistance or referrals for assistance. In addition, there is no supporting evidence that expulsion is an effective discipline strategy.<sup>5</sup>

Early research published in 2005 found that preschool children are expelled at three times the rate of children in Kindergarten through 12th grade.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, the majority of these young children, at least 42 percent of preschool children suspended, are identified as African American boys.<sup>7</sup> These racial and gender disparities are evident as early as preschool, where black students are 3.6 times as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension as their white classmates. Additionally, while boys represent 54 percent of preschool enrollment, they constitute 79 percent of all suspended preschool children. Research indicates that a child's early educational experiences greatly influence their development and outcomes later in life, making these data particularly consequential.

More than 10 years later, federal data indicate that a disproportionate number of male students representing minority populations are expelled, along with English Language Learners and students with disabilities, all of whom could benefit from daily attendance in preschool programs.<sup>8</sup> Since the first reported research on preschool expulsion and suspension in 2005, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of cases of preschool suspension and expulsion documented in the professional literature.<sup>9</sup> The practice of expulsion and suspension of young children impacts the child, their families, and society in general. The effect of suspension and expulsion on the child is immediate

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and can have long-term implications for the child’s overall emotional and social development as well as the likelihood of permanent school dropout in the later years.<sup>10</sup> Researchers and policy makers are sharpening their focus on the causes, consequences, and outcomes of early childhood expulsion and suspension for the developmental trajectory for the child – emotionally, academically, and socially. In addition, the trend in early data of disproportionately high suspensions among boys and minority children has continued in later sources,<sup>11</sup> thus contributing to societal issues of discrimination and lack of equal access to early care and education services.

*“Young children are being expelled from preschool and child care programs at an astonishing rate, often because of challenging behaviors such as aggression, tantrums, and noncompliance.”*

*- Zero To Three Foundation*

This *Institute for Child Success Brief* is written to provide current research-based information for administrators, teachers, parents, policy-makers, and others who are engaged in developing and implementing policies and practices and to support high quality early care and education for young children in the United States. Included in the brief are the following:

- Statement and scope of the problem;
- Rationale for research and policy on preschool expulsion and suspension;
- Review of salient research on preschool suspension and expulsion;
- Impacts of this practice on preschool children, families, and society;
- Overview of current policy initiatives addressing the issue of preschool suspension and expulsion – state, national, and global perspectives;
- Discussion of future research and policy needs at the state and national levels to address this alarming practice in the United States;
- Research-based resources for use by early childhood professionals and policy makers.

### **(scope and complexity of the problem)**

Preschool suspension and expulsion is a complex issue with implications for the following:

- mental health and emotional well-being of preschool children;
- access to assessment and appropriate services for children with special needs;
- teacher preparation and professional development;
- parenting education, especially in the areas of social and emotional development;
- unbiased and equal access to education and care for culturally diverse young learners in the United States.

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In an effort to grapple with the scope and complexity of this issue, researchers are beginning to refine their efforts to understand this challenging phenomenon and the reasons that lead to early expulsion and suspension. In the next section we will review salient research literature on preschool suspension and expulsion.

The rationale for addressing this important topic and for providing an *ICS Brief on Preschool Expulsion and Suspension* has been articulated by several professional organizations serving the early childhood population, including NAEYC, ZERO TO THREE, and the U.S. Department of Education and Health and Human Services.<sup>12</sup> Reasons for the focus on preschool expulsion and suspension, based on the Federal policy guidelines established by the Departments of Health and Human Services and Education, include the following:

- The formative years of a child's life are critical for building the early foundation of learning, health, and wellness needed for success in school and in later life development.
- The experiences of suspension and expulsion are stressful and negative experiences that can potentially influence adverse outcomes across later child development, health, and education.
- Young children who are expelled or suspended are as much as 10 times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure and grade retention, hold negative school attitudes, and face incarceration than those who are not. Expulsion or suspension early in a child's education *predicts* expulsion or suspension in later school grades.
- Often the children most in need of intervention are the ones expelled from the system.
- Some estimates have found that rates of suspension in early childhood programs are significantly higher than in K12 settings.
- All estimates have found large racial disparities, with young boys of color being suspended and expelled at disproportionately high rates.
- Preschool expulsion and suspension is a complex issue that includes factors related to the individual child's development; the learning environment and classroom variables; and teacher factors related to perceptions and biases about gender, race, physical size, and ethnicity.<sup>13</sup>

With so many young children from diverse racial, language, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds enrolled in childcare, Head Start, private preschool, and public school preschool programs in the U. S., the topic of preschool expulsion and suspension requires critical consideration, especially with data reflecting disproportionate numbers of male preschool children from minority populations being targeted for this practice.

## **(background)**

Limited research has been conducted on preschool suspension and expulsion, and there is a need to further study this phenomenon. In addition, there is a need to determine the factors associated with the policy and practice of preschool expulsion and suspension. In this section, we review several important research studies that provide understanding and insight into the causes for the escalation of preschool suspensions and expulsions in the U.S.

In a landmark study by the Yale Child Study Center researchers Walter Gilliam and Golan Shabar<sup>14</sup> investigated rates and predictors of preschool expulsion and suspension in a randomly selected sample of Massachusetts's preschool teachers in a variety of settings (N = 119). During a 12-month

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period, 39 percent of teachers reported expelling at least one child, and 15 percent reported suspending. In this study, the rate of preschool expulsion was 27.42 per 1000 enrollees, more than 34 times the Massachusetts K-12 rate and more than 13 times the national K-12 rate. In contrast, suspension rates for preschoolers were less than for K-12. An important finding of this study was the identification of variables associated with preschool expulsion and suspension. These variables – larger classes, higher proportion of 3-year-olds in the class, and elevated teacher job stress – were predictors of the increased likelihood of expulsion. In contrast, location of the preschool program in a school or a Head Start center and teachers’ positive feelings of job satisfaction predicted decreased likelihood of expulsion. Expulsion was relatively rare in classes where both class size and teacher job stress were low. A higher proportion of Latino children in the class and lower teacher job satisfaction predicted an increased likelihood of suspension. Implications from this study were discussed regarding policy, prevention, and future research. This foundational study was the first to provide data on the rates of expulsion and suspensions for preschool children in comparison to the K-12 student population. In addition, this study described the factors in a preschool classroom or setting that were likely to lead to increased or decreased rates of preschool expulsion or suspension. From this early study, researchers began to delve deeper into the phenomenon of expulsion and suspension, the impact on children’s overall health and development, factors contributing to this practice, and diverse strategies to reduce and eliminate this practice.

A second important study focused on discipline policies and the issue of challenging child behaviors utilized in typical preschool settings in the United States.<sup>15</sup> This study is relevant to contemporary early childhood classrooms as an increasing number of children with behavioral issues are reported in early childhood settings. In addition, research confirms that children with challenging behaviors are also more likely to be suspended or expelled. In response to this data, Longstreth and colleagues conducted a study of discipline practices in early childhood care and education settings in the U.S. This research included a study of the development, validity, and reliability of the *Early Childhood Discipline Policy Essentials Checklist (ECDPEC)*<sup>16</sup> designed to evaluate the quality of discipline policies, and a second study that assessed discipline policies from state-licensed early childhood care and education programs, based on data from licensed service providers in Arizona. The study sought to assess the extent to which existing early childhood program discipline policies implemented the essential features for developing high-quality, system-wide (program- and school-wide) discipline policies. Using the *ECDPEC*, investigators assessed the quality of 65 discipline policies from state-licensed early childhood care and education programs. Results from this study revealed that most early childhood program discipline policies fail to sufficiently address those essential features known to contribute to reducing challenging behavior and promoting pro-social behavior in young children. This study provided helpful information on specific practices within preschool classrooms that are likely to lead to decreased or increased rates of preschool expulsion and suspension. This study also confirmed the importance of environmental factors and positive teacher-child interactions in reducing rates of preschool expulsion. This study serves to validate the importance of providing program support in the areas of social and emotional development as well as focused interventions for children with special needs and/or mental health issues.<sup>17</sup>

In a 2016 study which received widespread media attention, Dr. Walter Gilliam and colleagues from the Yale Child Study Center focused on implicit teacher bias in preschool settings. Researchers found that many preschool teachers have personal perceptions or biases about children and their behaviors based on gender, race, and physical size. This teacher bias appears to be associated, in part, with the teacher’s own race, and leads to the discrimination of boys, especially boys who are Black and physically larger.<sup>18</sup> Findings from this study document that Black and Hispanic boys,

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beginning at a very young age, are more frequently suspended and expelled from early childhood programs than other children. Given the large number of young children from minority populations in the United States enrolled in part- and full-time preschool programs, the scope of this problem is made clear: many male children with *African-American and Hispanic heritages are at risk for being identified as “problematic,”* thus increasing the likelihood of their suspension or expulsion. From this study we learned that teachers of young children are important agents in addressing the problem of preschool suspension and expulsion and that teacher education and in-service professional development can play an important role in reducing implicit teacher bias toward young children, thus reducing the risk for certain children to be suspended or expelled. The findings from this study contribute to our understanding of effective interventions to reduce and prevent preschool suspension and expulsion.

These studies, and others, reflect the complexity of preschool expulsion and suspension. The variables associated with this practice are found:

- within the child’s race, physical size, gender, and overall development, including physical and mental health;
- within the learning environment, including classroom factors such as class size, teacher-child ratios, age range, and access to assessment and services for children with special needs and disabilities; and
- within the personal perceptions, biases, and professional experiences of the teachers and other professionals who work directly with young children and their parents.

The research confirms that preschool expulsion and suspension is a complex issue; reducing and eliminating this practice will require equally complex solutions that address individual child needs and development; environmental factors and systemic resources; and pre-service and in-service teacher training in social and emotional learning, to address the causes of preschool expulsion and suspension.

This is a brief overview of salient research on preschool expulsion and suspension. Other studies have focused on analyzing existing policies in preschool settings related to disciplinary action, resources to support children with mental health and behavioral challenges, and overall factors contributing to teacher stress in early childhood settings. There is a need for more refined research on preschool expulsion and suspension and the nuances that are associated with higher and lower rates of expulsion. In addition, further research will inform future policies and practices related to expulsion and suspension. Developing and implementing solutions for reducing and eliminating this practice are complex and challenging but are informed by research.

### **(impacts of expulsion and suspension on children, families, and society)**

The immediate and long-range effects of preschool expulsion and suspension impact not only the young child but also the parents, family, and society in general. According to the joint policy statement on expulsion and suspension policies in early childhood settings, authored by the US Health and Human Services and US Department of Education,<sup>19</sup> the beginning years of any child’s life are critical for building the early foundation of learning, health and wellness needed for success in school and in adulthood. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model explains the dynamics of preschool expulsion and suspension within the dynamics of the child’s microsystem.<sup>20</sup> *During these early years,*

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*children's brains are developing rapidly, influenced by the experiences that they share within their microsystems: their families, caregivers, teachers, peers, and in their communities, both positive and negative.* The early years, then, set the trajectory for the relationships and successes they will experience for the rest of their lives, making it critical that children's earliest experiences truly foster – and not harm – their development.

Recent research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) heightens our awareness of the impact of early trauma on the child's later development and the relationships between early trauma and associated health conditions, both physical and mental.<sup>21</sup> As such, expulsion and suspension practices in early childhood settings – *two very stressful and negative experiences young children and their families may encounter in early childhood programs* – should be prevented, severely limited, and eventually eliminated.<sup>22</sup> There is a need to further our research on the possible relationships between early childhood expulsion and suspension and later indications of trauma for the child as an adolescent and adult. Preschool expulsion and suspension, at the very least, impacts and interrupts the child's sense of security, social acceptance, and academic routines. Furthermore, the child's parents are often left to find immediate childcare or another early childhood setting, frequently without support or facilitation by the previous program of attendance. Because many young children are expelled or suspended based on challenging behaviors, parents are often in need of referrals or assistance to secure assessments for their child in order to better understand possible mental health or medical conditions. Unfortunately, many young children who are expelled or suspended from early childhood programs do not receive adequate developmental assessments while still in the originating program.

Parents are frequently impacted emotionally by their child's expulsion or suspension. They are challenged to maintain their own employment and daily routines as a parent while seeking some kind of assistance to seek another placement and to address the needs of the expelled child. As the study by Longstreth, Brady, and Kay indicates, the majority of early childhood programs do not provide adequate resources to address challenging child behaviors or to promote positive social-emotional environments that encourage and model pro-social child behaviors.<sup>23</sup> Preschool expulsion and suspension impacts the greater community and society because of the large number of children and families who are impacted by this practice. In the long run, the negative effects of early expulsion and suspension will play out in middle and secondary education settings, future employment settings, and, in some cases, the criminal justice system.

As research affirms, high-quality early childhood programs provide the positive experiences that nurture long-term positive learning and development.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, the practice of suspension or expulsion can influence a number of adverse outcomes across the child's development, health, and education. Young students who are expelled or suspended are as much as 10 times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure and grade retention, hold negative school attitudes, and face incarceration than those who are not.<sup>25</sup> Not only do these practices have the potential to hinder social-emotional and behavioral development, they also remove children from early learning environments and the corresponding cognitively enriching experiences that contribute to healthy development and academic success later in life. Expulsion and suspension practices may also interfere with the process of identifying and addressing underlying issues, which may include disabilities or mental health issues.

Some of these children may have undiagnosed disabilities or behavioral health issues and may be eligible for additional services, but in simply being expelled, they may not receive the evaluations or referrals they need to obtain services. For example, the source of challenging behavior may be communication and language difficulties. These are skills that can be improved through early assessment and intervention services. In these cases, appropriate evaluation and follow-up services are critical, but less likely if the child is expelled from the system. In many cases, families of children who are expelled do not receive assistance in identifying an alternative placement, leaving the burden of finding another program entirely to the family. Even in cases where assistance is offered, often there is a lapse in services that leaves families, especially working families, in difficult situations.<sup>26</sup>

### (overview of current policy initiatives)

As described earlier, a document summarizing federal policy recommendations and the profiles of innovative policies adopted by States and local leaders around the U. S. was released in 2014 by the Departments of Health and Human Services and Education in a Joint Policy Statement. While each of the States that was profiled still considers its work “in progress” and not yet finalized, we can learn a great deal from these initial efforts to implement policies to address preschool expulsion and suspension. Their innovative ideas and valuable lessons learned serve to facilitate and guide other entities that are similarly alarmed by- and committed to addressing- this issue.

From a Webinar series provided at the Federal level,<sup>27</sup> the following principles for developing preventive guidance and discipline practices related to preschool expulsion and suspension were recommended – these are recommendations for local programs, agencies, and early childhood programs developing their own practices and policies to prevent preschool expulsion and suspension:

**Figure 1: Recommendations to Guide Policy Development**

Preventative Guidance and Policy Practices	Expulsion and Suspension Policies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social-emotional and behavioral health promotion practices should be the first focus;</li> <li>• Developmentally appropriate discipline and intervention procedures – including specific guidance on what to do when a child demonstrates a challenging behavior – should be articulated;</li> <li>• Practices and procedures should be used as learning opportunities to guide children’s behavioral development – teachers should serve as pro-social models and facilitators;</li> <li>• Developmentally appropriate behavioral expectations are critical and should be articulated;</li> <li>• Clearly communicated policies and practices should be available to all staff, families, and partners;</li> <li>• Policies and practices should be implemented without bias or discrimination – gender, race, language, ethnicity, and ability.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish policies that eliminate or severely limit expulsion, suspension, or other exclusionary discipline;</li> <li>• Exclusionary measures should be used as a last resort in extraordinary circumstances where there is a determination of a serious safety threat that cannot otherwise be reduced or eliminated by the provision of reasonable modifications;</li> <li>• Appropriate transitions should be implemented, if the need arises and carried out as a team;</li> <li>• Additional procedural safeguards provided for children with disabilities and special needs should exist;</li> <li>• Ensure that policies developed and implemented are in accordance with applicable State and Federal statutes.</li> </ul>

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Additionally, the ACF webinar provided the following recommendations for practice in early childhood education programs:

- Access technical assistance in Workforce Development to build capacity in:
  - Promoting children’s social-emotional and behavioral health;
  - Appropriately addressing challenging behavior;
  - Forming supportive and nurturing relationships with children;
  - Developmental and behavioral screenings and follow-up;
  - Collaborating with community-based service providers;
  - Forming strong relationships with parents and families;
  - Having a strong understanding of culture and diversity;
  - Employing self-reflective strategies to correct all biases; and
  - Eliminating all discriminatory discipline practices.
- Access to specialized support from consultants
- Promote teacher and staff wellness and well being

Since the release of data reflecting the growing incidence of preschool expulsion and suspension<sup>28</sup> a number of states, cities, and other entities, have developed policies to reduce and prevent this practice. According to ACF, the following states have been innovators in developing effective policy initiatives to address preschool expulsion and suspension: Arkansas, Chicago, Colorado, Connecticut, Maine, New York City, Ohio, Washington, and Washington, DC.<sup>29</sup> A brief synopsis of efforts in several locales identified by ACF as being policy innovators – Arkansas, Colorado, Chicago – is presented here.

### ***State of Arkansas***

Arkansas provides a positive policy model, especially for states with similar demographics relative to geographic location, rates of poverty, and state-level resources dedicated to early childhood education. In 2013, Arkansas had the second highest poverty rate in the country, with about 29 percent of its children living below the poverty line. About 16 percent of children screened in Arkansas’ public pre-K program had significant behavior concerns, and among children ages 2-17, 22 percent had one or more emotional, behavioral, or developmental concerns.<sup>30</sup> Despite the need, most mental health providers in the State were not trained in evidence-based interventions for young children. Increased nationwide awareness of early expulsion and suspension, combined with Arkansas’ child poverty rate, ongoing social-emotional and behavioral health concerns for Arkansas’ youngest, and promising results from the State’s early childhood mental health consultation program (Project PLAY), set the stage for the State to take action on expulsion and suspension.<sup>31</sup>

In response to concerns about rates of preschool expulsion and suspension, Arkansas developed an expulsion prevention policy for its state-funded pre-K programs that outlines procedures that must be taken before exclusionary practices can be considered. A sample of these procedures is shown in Figure 2.

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**Figure 2: Approaches to Utilize Before Exclusionary Practices**

Observation by a professional
Focus on teaching social-emotional skills
Engage in discussions with parents
Document incidents
Implement environmental modification
Seek support services from specialists

Arkansas also has over 2,000 licensed childcare centers and family childcare homes in the State, of which approximately 1 percent is nationally accredited. In 2015, Arkansas’ Minimum Child Care Licensing Requirements were revised, in part, to enhance their support for children’s social-emotional development. For example, the new rules lowered teacher-child ratios for children less than 36 months of age and required childcare programs to use curricula that promote social-emotional development.

Arkansas’ ABC Pre-K Expulsion Policy States:

“No child shall be dismissed from the program for behavior without prior approval from the Arkansas Department of Human Services/Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education (DCCECE).”<sup>32</sup>

In the fall of 2015, along with these policy efforts, the State used Child Care and Development Funds (CCDF) to double funding for Project PLAY, the State’s early childhood mental health consultation program. The State targeted expansion sites using a data-driven approach. Centers with high needs – defined by licensing violations related to behavior guidance and the area’s access to high-quality child care for children in poverty – were given support first.

Upon the release of the 2014 joint statement from HHS and ED, Arkansas’ Director of the Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education convened a workgroup tasked with addressing suspension and expulsion, with participation from leaders representing the State preschool program, the CCDF program, child care licensing, the quality rating improvement system, Project PLAY, and other early childhood professional development initiatives in the State. The group was charged with identifying how Arkansas can improve its approach to addressing each of the six areas outlined in the policy statement: establishing fair policies, setting goals and tracking data, promoting strong family partnerships, focusing on developmental and behavioral screening, ensuring access to specialized consultation and ensuring a highly skilled workforce. Arkansas’ workgroup to address expulsion and suspension plans to continue the important progress made to date. In particular, they committed to rolling-out several new initiatives in 2016, including:

- Embedding new non-suspension/expulsion policies in the participant agreement for childcare centers accepting childcare vouchers to align with ABC’s existing policy;
- Adding content on expulsion/suspension prevention in the annual CCDF policy test that providers are required to take;

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- Requiring parent notification of non-expulsion policies;
  - Hosting a series of statewide training events on the theme that ‘Quality Programs Support All Children’ to promote a better understanding of the issue by the teachers/workforce;
  - Providing child care program directors with training resources to build teacher capacity;
  - Developing and disseminating tools for centers that wish to voluntarily adopt stronger non-suspension/expulsion policies, such as sample center-level policies and self-assessment tools;
  - Providing the workforce with a stronger professional development path in the social-emotional domain, including training on the Pyramid Model for Supporting Social-Emotional Competence; and
  - Launching a new suspension and expulsion data tracking and technical assistance system for the State ABC preschool program.<sup>33</sup>

### ***State of Colorado<sup>1</sup>***

Colorado embraced a message of “Being Ready” in which Colorado’s path to reducing childcare suspension and expulsions was the main focus. The state of Colorado was already partnering with several federal early childhood programs and initiatives, including *Race to the Top*,<sup>34</sup> so it seemed logical to review and support the Federal focus on preschool expulsion and suspension. Colorado began to embrace early childhood education at the state level; in 2012 Colorado established an Office of Early Childhood within the Department of Human Services. The purpose of this new office was to align, coordinate, and improve the outcomes for young children birth-8 years of age, and their families. In addition, Colorado developed a statewide network of Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) consultants, with one FTE assigned to each of the 17 Colorado community mental health centers.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the state established a task force to study and make policy recommendation for the state aimed at reducing and preventing preschool expulsion and suspension. The task force was made up of stakeholders in the early childhood community, and the task force met and made recommendations for public presentation and feedback. From this process, the state worked to articulate program level guidelines to effect change in practices at the program and center levels, highlighted in Figure 3.

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<sup>1</sup> For further details on both the State of Colorado and Chicago Public Schools programs to address preschool expulsion and suspension, please see Webinar #2 in the Webinar Series provided by the Federal government in 2015: [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecl/expulsion\\_webinar\\_2\\_policies\\_slides\\_21115.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecl/expulsion_webinar_2_policies_slides_21115.pdf)

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### Figure 3: Colorado Recommendations

Professional development of staff related to social and emotional development, mandating that 3 of the 15 required annual hours focus on social-emotional development of the young child.
Highlighting protection for children with special health care needs, including those with or at risk of developmental, behavioral or emotional conditions.
Identifying departmental-approved trainings that are equivalent to college level courses in social-emotional development and providing that information to early childhood professionals.
Relationships at the core: cultivate positive culture between children, staff and families.
Utilize social and emotional intervention supports for children that include understanding, developing, and implementing a team approach.
Developing written plans for accessing mental health consultants, if necessary.
Implement teaching strategies supporting positive behavior, pro-social behavior, peer interactions and promote overall social and emotional competence.

State leaders viewed this effort as an opportunity to seize the moment and to address a growing problem. In the end, state leaders embraced a multi-pronged approach leading to increased awareness of the problem, mandated professional development training, clearly written plans of action to address challenging behaviors of young children, the use of community health consultants as resources for childcare centers, and awareness of and adherence to state and federal legal mandates for serving children with special needs, disabilities, and trauma-informed backgrounds. Colorado also called upon state government, mental health agencies, and higher education to provide leadership roles.

### ***Chicago Public Schools***

The Chicago Public Schools initiated a study of their own practices related to managing behavioral challenges in the classrooms from 2012-2015 in all Pre-K through Second grade classrooms. This analysis came within the context of rapidly expanding programs for the preschool age child population in the Chicago Public Schools. In their study of practice trends in their preschool classrooms related to managing child behaviors, they found that in the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 academic years, there were more out of school suspensions than restorative responses. However, beginning in the 2013-2014 academic year, restorative responses – practices that help children respond to and work through challenges rather than disciplining them for acting out – outnumbered the out of school suspensions and in 2014-2015, there were 2,273 restorative responses compared to only 77 out of school suspensions. This shift in practice clearly denotes a major change in how the school district chose to address behavioral challenges and reflects a commitment to expand programs for preschool children and to enhance the quality of the classroom experience in those classrooms. Chicago’s effort to address early childhood discipline policies has spanned multiple years, as shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Chicago's Timeline of Efforts**



It is important to note that an Office of Social and Emotional Learning, within the Chicago Public School System, provided leadership for these changes in practice and policy. In addition, Stakeholder Engagement was carried out through multiple avenues, including the following entities:

- District-wide committee: Social & Emotional Learning, Early Childhood Education, Safety & Security, Office of Diverse Learner Supports & Services, Law and Labor Relations
- School staff focus groups (including deans, principals, teachers, counselors, social workers, etc.)
- Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), Chicago Principals and Administrators Association (CPAA)
- Network chiefs & deputies
- Citywide collaborative
- Community forums
- Student focus groups

The Chicago Public School initiative to address preschool expulsion and suspension in this very large school district can be characterized as collaborative, comprehensive, inclusive, and ongoing. In a few short years, there has been significant progress in addressing the problem of preschool expulsion and suspension. In order to sustain the positive changes, a number of ongoing initiatives are in place. Chicago will continue a number of ongoing initiatives which include: behavioral health and social emotional experts on staff; stronger incorporation of social-emotional and social skills in the curriculum; professional development for principals, teachers, and support staff; district-wide support for teachers and students in the form of resource guides, assessment and behavior plans for students with challenging behaviors, and small group social skills intervention for Pre-K through 2nd grade students.

### **(future policy and research recommendations)**

While progress is being made to address the practice of preschool expulsion and suspension, there is still much work to do. In this section, recommendations are made for future policy and research development at the local and program level. Preschool expulsion and suspension is a national issue that plays out at the state and local levels. In terms of policy development, the federal government has taken the lead to provide data on this practice, support to states seeking to reduce or eliminate this practice, and to reinforce the understanding of the federal Individuals with Disabilities

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Education Act (IDEA) to protect the rights of children with special needs or disabilities to an education without discrimination.

As discussed earlier, a disproportionate number of suspended or expelled preschool children are likely to be males from minority populations, English Language Learners, or children with disabilities or special needs.<sup>36</sup> Thus, if administered in a discriminatory manner, suspensions and expulsions of children may violate Federal civil rights laws. The Departments of Education and Justice recently issued guidance explaining the obligation of recipients of Federal financial assistance to administer student discipline without regard to race, color, or gender. Early childhood programs must comply with the legal requirements governing the discipline of a child for misconduct caused by, or related to, a child's disability, including, as applicable, implementing reasonable modifications to policies, practices, or procedures to ensure that children with disabilities are not suspended or expelled because of their disability-related behaviors. Exceptions can be made only if a program can demonstrate that making these modifications would result in a fundamental alteration in the nature of a service, program, or activity. In addition, preschool children aged three through five with disabilities who are eligible for services under the IDEA are entitled to the same disciplinary protections that apply to all other IDEA-eligible children with disabilities, and may not be subjected to disciplinary change of placement.<sup>37</sup> A list of recommended resources for those interested in learning more to improve policies and practices can be found in Appendix A.

*“We know that young children thrive in the context of stable, supportive relationships with adults who love, teach, and care for them. Expulsions and suspensions in early childhood education both threaten the development of these positive relationships and are a result of the lack of positive relationships between educators, families and children.”*

*- NAEYC Joint Statement on  
Preschool Expulsion and suspension*

### ***Policy Recommendations***

Based on a review of the policy literature, the following recommendations are made for policy development at the state and local levels. Preschool expulsion and suspension is not an appropriate practice for any preschool program – private or public – and should be replaced with developmentally appropriate responses. To this point, the following policy recommendations – drawing heavily from the work of the Administration for Children and Families – are made for state and local leaders developing policies related to early childhood discipline and to providers within early childhood programs:

- 1. Establish Fair and Appropriate Policies and Implement them Without Bias:*** States, schools, and early childhood programs should establish developmentally appropriate expulsion and suspension policies. Policies should eliminate or limit exclusionary practices, to be used only as a

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last resort in extraordinary circumstances where there is a serious safety concern that cannot be reduced or eliminated with reasonable modifications. Given the disparities revealed in the research data, entities should ensure that policies are not disproportionately impacting any group of children. Awareness of and compliance with federal guidelines for free and public education (FAPE) for all students should be promoted, including children with disabilities and special needs.

- 2. Invest in and Support a Highly Skilled Workforce:** Teachers and caregivers are critical elements of high-quality early learning programs. Programs should strive to build their workforce's capacity to prevent and manage challenging behaviors, promote social-emotional development, form nurturing relationships, identify children who need additional supports, and have a strong understanding of culture, diversity, and implicit bias. Supportive policies and service regarding teacher/job stress should be addressed, with attention to reasonable work hours with breaks; work conditions; compensation; and supportive services for teacher well-being and stress. Teacher-child ratios in preschool settings should follow professional guidelines of 10 or fewer children per teacher.
- 3. Implement Universal Developmental and Behavioral Screening:** Ensuring that all children receive early and regular developmental and behavioral screenings is critical to identifying concerns early and ensuring children who need supports, receive them as early as possible. Preschool programs should have resources to provide assessment of overall child development to determine the individual child's status and specific needs. Resources should be made available to support preschool programs in the assessment and intervention procedures, including mental health and social emotional supports.
- 4. Access Specialized Supports for Administrators and Educators:** All teachers and other professional staff in early childhood programs should have access to support from specialists, such as early childhood mental health consultants and behavior coaches. This support provides assistance in identifying needs and referring children, families, or staff for social services as needed; understanding and responding appropriately to children exposed to traumatic or highly stressful events; developing behavior plans for children who require them; and building greater capacity to prevent and manage challenging child behaviors, promote social-emotional development, and engage in self-reflective practice to prevent potential biases in practice.
- 5. Strengthen Family Partnerships:** Families are children's first and most important teachers. Family-teacher and family-program or school partnerships are critical to reducing expulsion and suspension. Programs should work with families to identify concerns early, collaborate on solutions to address challenging behavior, and share strategies to promote children's healthy development. If necessary, child transfers to other programs should be facilitated and directed within a positive context – parent support and sharing of information and resources.
- 6. Set Goals and Track Data:** Eliminating expulsion and suspension will happen at different rates, depending on where programs or States start. Each program and State should have goals to set policies and implement wide-scale preventive practices, such as those discussed here, to eliminate expulsion and suspension. Entities should track data on rates of expulsion and suspension in early childhood settings, and ensure that data is disaggregated by gender, race, ethnicity, and disability status, at a minimum, to track disparities.<sup>38</sup> Federal and state funds should be utilized to support

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policies that reduce and eliminate preschool expulsion and suspension: track expulsion rates; implement and evaluate promising models; determine disproportionate patterns of expulsion.

### ***Research Recommendations***

Additionally, there is a need for more refined and focused research on preschool expulsion and suspension. There are relatively few studies on this practice, thus there is a need to conduct research at all levels: national, state and local levels. Adequate research is essential for policymakers and practitioners to gauge the extent of preschool suspensions and expulsions and develop appropriate strategies to avoid exclusionary practices. Based on the early work of Gilliam and others, the following research needs and topics are indicated:

- Rates of preschool expulsion and suspension by gender, race, SES, ethnicity, and English Language Learner by geographic location and program type
- Parental, family, and community variables associated with higher rates of preschool expulsion and suspension
- Factors that correlate with higher and lower rates of preschool expulsion and suspension
- Case study and longitudinal research on the outcomes for young children expelled or suspended at the preschool level in diverse settings.
- Teacher variables related to expulsion and suspension: teacher stress and the variables that lead to expulsion and suspension; teacher attitudes toward preschool suspension and expulsion, mental health interventions, and parent involvement.
- Effects on teachers and parents of professional development on social emotional development and learning
- Community resources to support parents of children expelled or suspended and *for children* with behavioral challenges and mental health needs

### **(about the author)**

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## (appendix a: resources for professionals)

The *Institute for Child Success* seeks to provide research-based information to support policies and practices for high quality early childhood education. Following is a list of resources for professionals to use to facilitate their development of practices and policies that diminish or eliminate the practice of preschool expulsion and suspension.

### Policy And Research Briefs

Gilliam, W.S. (2008). *Implementing policies to reduce the likelihood of preschool expansion*. New York, NY: Foundation for Children Development. Available at: <https://www.fcd-us.org/implementing-policies-to-reduce-the-likelihood-of-preschool-expulsion/>

This policy brief examines factors associated with expulsion from preschool such as mental health and classroom behavior problems. Certain factors that contribute to expulsion may inform changes in policy that can be regulated.

Gilliam, W.S. (2005). *Prekindergartners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten programs*. New York, NY: Foundation for Children Development. Available at: <https://www.fcd-us.org/prekindergartners-left-behind-expulsion-rates-in-state-prekindergarten-programs/>

This policy brief studies expulsion in preschool programs nationally and by state as well as by program setting gender, race/ethnicity and state. The report found preschool students are expelled at a rate more than three times that of children in K-12 grades.

Longstreth, S., Brady, S. & Kay, A. (2013). Discipline policies in early childhood care and education programs: Building an infrastructure for social and academic success. *Early Education and Development*, 24(2), 253-271. doi: 10.1080/10409289.2011.647608

Preventing challenging behavior in young children is becoming a national priority. Discipline policies could help early childhood programs build an infrastructure that promotes academic and social success. This study evaluates whether current discipline policies are considered high quality.

McCabe, L.A & Frede, E.C. (2007). *Challenging behaviors and the role of preschool education*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Available: <http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/16.pdf>

This policy brief from the National Institute for Early Education Research discusses the research on the role preschool education plays in improving challenging behaviors. This includes recommendations that can lead to better behavioral outcomes.

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## **Position Papers On Suspension/Expulsion from Selected Organizations**

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

<https://www.naeyc.org/standing-together-against-suspension-expulsion-early-childhood-resources>

US Departments of Health and Human Services and Education (HHS and ED)

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ecd/child-health-development/reducing-suspension-and-expulsion-practices>

US Department of Education (DOE)

<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/policy-statement-eee>

Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTAC)

<http://ectacenter.org/enotes/search/search-expulsion.asp>

Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO)

[http://ceelo.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ceelo\\_annotated\\_bib\\_expulsion\\_2015\\_08\\_final\\_web.pdf](http://ceelo.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ceelo_annotated_bib_expulsion_2015_08_final_web.pdf)

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