Beyond Bans and the Challenge We Face: Crafting Effective State Strategies to Reduce Suspension and Expulsion in Early Childhood Settings

Suspension and expulsion in early childhood settings are more than just disciplinary actions—they are symptoms of a complex system needing reform. These practices disproportionately affect children of color, particularly Black boys, and can have long-lasting negative impacts on a child's development and educational journey.[1]

But here is the catch: simply banning these practices is not enough. Bans without comprehensive support to replace those practices can drive the problem underground, making it harder to track and address.[2]

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[1] Gilliam, W. S. (2005). Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems. Foundation for Child Development.

[2] Meek, S. E., & Gilliam, W. S. (2016). Expulsion and suspension in early education as matters of social justice and health equity. NAM Perspectives.

< The Problem >

Seminal research by Gilliam (2005) introduced to the country that preschool children are expelled at rates three times higher than K-12 students. With those enrolled in child care, the rates are much higher. Stark racial and gender disparities persist:

> Black children are 18% of preschool enrollment, but 48% of preschool children receive more than one out-of-school suspension.[2]

> Boys are 54% of preschool enrollment, but 82% of preschool children are suspended multiple times. (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. 2014.)

We know from individual states and cities that toddlers are just as likely as preschoolers to be asked to leave their setting.

In the national Children's Health Survey (2016), parents reported that their preschoolers with delays and disabilities were suspended or expelled 14 times more often than their peers.

EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICES SOUND LIKE:

"Please pick up your child early today."
"Don't bring her in tomorrow."
"Let's try half days for the next several weeks."
"The program isn't a good fit for your child."
"We can't meet your child's needs."

State policies on early learning suspension and expulsion either do not exist or are insufficient. The BUILD Initiative contends that a more thoughtful, multi-pronged or layered state policy approach is needed—one that reflects an understanding of expulsion as a symptom of problems related to quality, equity, and adequate supports.

COMPLEXITY OF THE ISSUE

Addressing suspension and expulsion in early childhood settings is multifaceted and deeply rooted in systemic issues. Labeling a child's behavior as "challenging" is inherently subjective, influenced by cultural norms, individual experiences, and societal expectations. This subjectivity can lead to inconsistent responses and potentially biased decision-making processes.

Complicating matters further is the wide range of exclusionary practices

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[2] Ibid.

beyond outright expulsion. These can include **soft expulsions**, such as repeatedly asking parents to pick up a child early or suggesting a program is not a "good fit."[3] Such practices often go unnoticed by official policies and data collection efforts, making the true extent of the problem difficult to quantify and address.

Early childhood programs' characteristics can sometimes inadvertently contribute to or worsen challenging behaviors. High child-to-staff ratios, large group sizes, environments with too little or too much structure, and inflexible and long schedules can create stressful environments for children and educators.[4] This stress can manifest in behaviors labeled as challenging, creating a cycle that can lead to exclusionary practices.

Racial disparities in discipline practices, including implicit bias, play a significant role in this complex issue, disproportionately affecting children of color. Research has shown that preschool teachers, regardless of their race, tend to watch Black children, especially Black boys, more closely for challenging behaviors.[5] This heightened scrutiny can contribute to the racial disparities seen in suspension and expulsion rates. Bias in teacher-family relationships may also impact exclusionary practices. One study found that teachers with a negative perception of a child's parents were more likely to expel the child.[6]

Adding to this complexity is the reality of an underprepared and often **under-supported early childhood workforce**. Many educators lack access to timely, high-quality professional development and support systems that could help them better understand and respond to children's behaviors, especially those challenging behaviors that are typical of child development and the cross-cultural different in how children express and interpret emotions.[7] This gap in support is particularly critical when it comes to working with children who have experienced trauma or have special needs.

Furthermore, recent research has highlighted the **interconnected nature of exclusionary practices with broader societal issues**. For instance, studies have found links between **food insecurity** and increased risk of suspension

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[3] Neitzel, J. (2018). Research to practice: Understanding the role of implicit bias in early childhood disciplinary practices. Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 39(3), 232-242.

[4] Zinsser, K. M., Zulauf, C. A., Nair Das, V., & Callie Silver, H. (2019). Utilizing social-emotional learning supports to address teacher stress and preschool expulsion. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 61, 33-42.

[5] Gilliam, W. S., Maupin, A. N., Reyes, C. R., Accavitti, M., & Shic, F. (2016). Do early educators' implicit biases regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions? Yale University Child Study Center.

[6] Zulauf, C. A., & Zinsser, K. M. (2019). Forestalling Preschool Expulsion: A Mixed-Method Exploration of the Potential Protective Role of Teachers' Perceptions of Parents. American Educational Research Journal, 56(6), 2189–2220.

[7] Halberstadt, A. G., & Lozada, F. T. (2011). Culture and emotions in the first 5 to 6 years of life. In the Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development.

and expulsion in early childhood settings.[8] Similarly, **housing instability** has been associated with higher rates of behavioral challenges and subsequent exclusionary practices.[9] These findings underscore the need for a holistic, cross-sector approach to addressing the root causes of challenging behaviors and reducing reliance on exclusionary practices.

Considering these complexities, it becomes clear that addressing suspension and expulsion in early childhood settings requires a nuanced, multi-pronged approach. While well-intentioned, simple bans on exclusionary practices must be augmented with supports to address the underlying issues or they will drive the problem underground, making it harder to track and address effectively.

< Drivers of Suspension and Expulsion >

BUILD identifies the following key factors that increase the likelihood of exclusionary practices:

1. **Structural Quality:** High child-to-adult ratios, large group sizes, inflexible and long schedules, teacher stress and feelings of hopelessness, and lack of availability of mental health consultation can set the stage for challenging behaviors and hasty adult reactions.

2. **Limited Child Development Knowledge:** Without a deep understanding of child development across cultures and the skills to develop relationships with children, teach social-emotional skills, and use practices that reduce stress for children during transitions or other activities, educators may misinterpret behaviors and respond inappropriately.

3. **Racial Disparities in Discipline:** Both conscious and unconscious biases affect who gets disciplined and how. Underprepared teachers are also more likely to use punitive disciplinary techniques, respond with bias towards children or families, and have higher rates of exclusionary practices and referrals to special education.

4. **Additional Needs of Some Children and Family Stress:** Children who've experienced trauma or have developmental differences may need more support than typical programs can offer without resources.

Suspension and expulsion are practices that do not respond to the root causes. They are lagging indicators that result from multiple factors interacting over time, not just a child's behavior on a given day.

[8] Jackson, D. B., & Testa, A. (2020). Food insecurity as a risk factor for preschool suspension and expulsion. Preventive Medicine, 141, 106240.

[9] Coley, R. L., Lynch, A. D., & Kull, M. (2015). Early exposure to environmental chaos and children's physical and mental health. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 32, 94-104.

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BUILD'S CALL TO ACTION FOR STATES

1. **Address Immediate Needs and Long-Term Prevention** Tackle the urgent issue of children at risk of expulsion today while building a system that prevents future expulsions. *Don't just ban—build alternative practices.* Create a continuum of supports for children, families, educators, and programs.

2. **Invest in Knowledge and Professional Development** Make ongoing professional development on social-emotional development, trauma-informed care, and bias recognition a priority. Integrate expulsion prevention strategies into all aspects of workforce development. A well-informed workforce is better equipped to prevent and address challenging behaviors effectively.

3. **Coordinate Quality Improvement and Mental Health Consultation Supports** Make it easier for programs and families to ask for and receive rapid help tailored to their needs regardless of their program type or funding stream. Expand access to a coordinated system of supports that uses all resources, e.g., quality improvement systems with technical assistance and coaching, infant and early childhood mental health consultation, etc.

4. **Align Policies, Systems and Messages** Ensure all parts of your early childhood system—child care, preschool, early intervention, and special education—share consistent messages, practices, and resources around social-emotional support and discipline. This alignment creates a unified approach, reducing confusion and strengthening overall impact. Use state policy to drive early care and education programs to use available supports.

5. **Use Data Wisely and Address Disparities** Collect information to spotlight disparities but create a climate where programs feel safe reporting accurately. Prioritize equity and check for unintended consequences. Regularly assess the impact of policies and practices to ensure they are closing, not widening, gaps.

6. **Address Structural Issues** Examine how licensing standards, quality rating systems, and funding mechanisms might inadvertently contribute to exclusionary practices. Look at each aspect of the state's early childhood system to identify factors contributing to expulsions and develop targeted strategies.

7. **Support the Whole System** Recognize that trauma impacts everyone—children, families, and educators. Create supports that address the entire context of early learning, which include feeling safe, healthy, known, and understood, having adequate and nutritious food, and having a supportive family and community. This comprehensive approach ensures that all system components work together to support positive outcomes.

By implementing and layering these comprehensive strategies over time, states can create an effective, equitable approach to reducing exclusionary practices. This approach addresses immediate concerns and builds a more robust, responsive early childhood system capable of supporting all children's success.

PROMISING STATE APPROACHES

Several states have implemented innovative strategies to address suspension and expulsion in early childhood settings. These approaches offer valuable lessons for other states considering similar initiatives:

1. **Arkansas: Comprehensive Triage and Support System**

   Arkansas has developed a multi-tiered system of support to prevent expulsion:

   > Established a centralized helpline for providers facing challenging behaviors.
   > Created a triage system that connects providers with appropriate levels of support, from technical assistant specialists to mental health consultants.
   > Data from their support system informs their professional development and quality improvement efforts.
   > *Result:* Significant reduction in expulsion rates and increased provider confidence in managing challenging behaviors.[10]

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[10] Arkansas Department of Human Services. (2020). Arkansas Better Chance Program Suspension and Expulsion Report.

2. **Colorado: Embedding Prevention in Licensing and Expanding Mental Health Consultation**

Colorado's approach focuses on systemic change:

> Incorporated expulsion prevention requirements into child care licensing rules.
> Expanded statewide access to early childhood mental health consultation.
> Developed a toolkit for providers to prevent suspension and expulsion.
> *Outcome:* Increased awareness and reduced exclusionary practices across the state.[11]

3. **Ohio: Comprehensive Professional Development and Mental Health Integration**

Ohio's strategy focuses on workforce development:

> Developed a robust professional development series on social-emotional development and trauma-informed care led by regional trainers specializing in Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health.
> Integrated early childhood mental health consultants into child care resource and referral agencies, Department of Education and Workforce State Support Teams, and Early Intervention.
> Created a specialized credential for early childhood and infant mental health professionals.
> Created the Ohio Preschool Expulsion Prevention Partnership as a rapid response when children are at risk of suspension or expulsion from their early learning and care settings. IECMH consultants respond within 48 hours to support children, families, and early learning professionals.
> Developed 1250 mental health toolkits along with a professional development and technical assistance plan to support early learning and care professionals' use of evidence-based social-emotional tools in their settings.
> *Result:* Enhanced provider capacity to support children's social-emotional needs and reduced reliance on exclusionary practices.[12]

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[11] Colorado Department of Human Services. (2021). Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Program Evaluation Report.

[12] Ohio Department of Children and Youth. (2024) Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Annual Report and Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. (2022). Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative Annual Report.

4. **Washington: Racial Equity-Focused Approach**

Washington state has prioritized addressing racial disparities:

> Implemented mandatory training on implicit bias for all early childhood educators.

> Developed culturally responsive positive behavior support strategies.

> Created a racial equity toolkit for early learning programs.

> *Outcome:* Increased awareness of racial disparities and initial signs of reduction in disproportionate disciplinary actions.[13]

Washington's QRIS supports DCYF's agency priorities related to equity to eliminate racial disproportionalities and advance racial equity by:

> Becoming an anti-racist organization.

> Implement liberatory, human-centered, and healing-centered design across DCYF.

> Ensure assessments and programs are equitable across DCYF.

Specifically to address suspension and expulsion, Washington also:

> Created and implemented a Pyramid Model training focusing on implicit bias and trauma-informed care practices to promote positive behaviors.

> Held family design circles to understand their children's experiences around behavior supports. Those families produced two resources that address behavior.

> Continues to track self-reported suspension and expulsion data.

These state approaches demonstrate that effective strategies to reduce suspension and expulsion often involve a combination of policy change, workforce development, data collection, and targeted support systems. By learning from these examples, other states can develop comprehensive, tailored approaches that address their specific needs and contexts.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Reducing suspension and expulsion in early childhood settings is not only about keeping kids in programs. It is about establishing early childhood systems that genuinely support all children's development and learning, tackle inequities directly, and equip educators with the tools they need to create positive relationships and learning environments.

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Gilliam, W.S. (2005). Prekindergartners Left Behind: Expulsion Rates in State Prekindergarten Systems. Foundation for Child Development.

U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2014). Data Snapshot: Early Childhood Education.

13 Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families. (2021). Racial Equity in Early Learning Annual Progress Report.

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