

ADDRESSING PRESCHOOL SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION

THE PYRAMID EQUITY PROJECT

THE PRESCHOOL SUSPENSION CRISIS

Recent data indicate that expulsions and suspensions occur at high rates in preschool settings.

In addition, stark racial and gender disparities exist in these practices, with young boys of color being suspended and expelled much more frequently than other children. These data are particularly troubling given that research suggests school expulsion and suspension practices are associated with negative educational and life outcomes. Young students who are expelled or suspended experience greater academic failure and grade retention, hold more negative attitudes about school and are less engaged, have higher rates of dropout, and face increased rates of incarceration than those who are not. Disproportionate discipline practices in early childhood remove children from early learning environments and enriching experiences that contribute to healthy development and academic success and have the potential to result in pervasive achievement gaps and exacerbate inequality.

THE FEDERAL RESPONSE

The Obama Administration's initiative, [*My Brother's Keeper*](#) (MBK), has focused on ensuring that all youth, including boys and young men of color, have opportunities to improve their life outcomes and overcome barriers to success. MBK's first milestone "Getting a Healthy Start and Entering School Ready to Learn" includes an emphasis on eliminating suspension and expulsions in early learning settings. In recognition of the severity of the issue, the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services issued a [*Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Practices in Early Childhood Settings*](#) in 2014 that provided recommendations to states and public and private local early childhood programs to prevent and severely limit expulsions and suspensions in early learning settings. A key recommendation is that early learning programs use evidence-based practices and approaches to promote positive social, emotional, and behavioral development and address challenging behavior, and that staff engage in self-reflective practice that can help prevent and eliminate potential biases in their practice.

To support early learning programs in meeting this recommendation, the Departments are funding the [*Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports*](#) to implement the **Pyramid Equity Project** in collaboration with the University of South Florida and the University of Colorado Denver with [*Preschool Development Grant*](#) national activity funds. The Pyramid Equity Project will develop and disseminate an effective approach for the prevention of suspension, expulsion, and discipline disparities in early learning programs. Specifically, the Pyramid Equity Project will develop tools, materials, and procedures to explicitly address implicit bias, implement culturally responsive practices, and use data systems to understand potential discipline equity issues. These practices will be implemented within the Pyramid Model for Promoting the Social Emotional Competence of Infants and Young Children—a framework of evidence-based early childhood teaching practices that are organized in tiers to include the promotion of social and emotional skills of all children, the prevention of challenging

behavior of children at risk of challenging behavior, and individualized interventions for children with persistent challenging behavior. The Pyramid Equity Project will partner with Preschool Development Grantees, Clifton Early Learner Academy in Clifton, NJ, and Cambridge Early Learning Center in Antioch, TN, to establish demonstration sites that implement the enhanced Pyramid Model and serve as national models for addressing disproportionate discipline practices in early learning programs, and eliminating exclusionary discipline practices.

Additionally, ED's [Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services \(OSERS\)](#) recently issued guidance in the form of a [Dear Colleague Letter](#) (DCL) that emphasizes the requirement that schools provide positive behavioral supports to students with disabilities (including preschool children with disabilities) who need them. It also clarifies that the repeated use of disciplinary actions may suggest that many children with disabilities may not be receiving appropriate behavioral interventions and supports. The *Dear Colleague Letter on the Inclusion of Behavioral Supports in Individualized Education Programs* is now available on the Department's website: <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/>. Also available is a suite of accompanying resources, including a [Summary for Stakeholders](#), which lays out the main points of the issued guidance in an easily-digestible format.

THE FIELD RESPONDS

As part of this renewed commitment to rethink discipline in early learning programs, a group of more than 30 national organizations, led by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), released a joint statement — [Standing Together Against Suspension and Expulsion in Early Childhood Education](#)—in support of the federal policy statement on expulsion and suspension in early learning.

A [recent report](#) also highlighted progress across the country in preventing expulsion in early learning. **Preschool expulsion and suspension rates should matter to all states.** This [new brief](#) describes the policies or guidelines that Preschool Development Grant states have developed to prevent or eliminate suspensions and expulsions in preschool, which other states and communities may look to as a resource.

COMMIT TO TAKE ACTION

Addressing suspension and disproportionate discipline practices in early learning settings requires that all early learning programs and personnel share responsibility for and commit to take immediate action to prevent, severely limit, and work toward eventually eliminating expulsion and suspension—and ensure the safety and well-being—of all our young children.

To effectively promote all children's social and emotional competence and address challenging behavior, State and local programs need to intentionally develop and enhance their infrastructure so that there are a continuum of services and supports in place to meet the needs of all children and their families, regardless of the type of program the child is enrolled in. This involves thinking systemically about state and local policies, funding, professional development, and practices that allow early learning programs and providers to have the competencies to collaborate and work within a comprehensive model to both prevent and respond to challenging behavior.

Collaboration among state early learning leaders, including State Child Care Administrators, Head Start Collaboration Directors, State Preschool Directors, and State *IDEA* Part B, section 619 Coordinators and *IDEA* Part C Coordinators is essential to ensuring that all children are afforded high-quality early experiences. Administrators should work together to:

- Ensure that there is a statewide vision for how to promote young children’s social, emotional and behavioral competence, and prevent and address challenging behaviors such as implementing positive behavior interventions and supports such as the Pyramid Model within programs and supporting access to early childhood mental health consultants.
- Set statewide policies around suspension and expulsion and develop a strategic plan on how to implement practices to prevent exclusionary discipline practices.
- Ensure that providers possess the competencies to meet the learning needs of all children, including promoting children’s social emotional competence, preventing and responding to challenging behaviors, responding to implicit bias, and teaming to make data-based decisions.
- Work with early learning programs to understand the continuum of supports and services available for children and families, and how to access specialized services and supports.

Fostering the social, emotional, and behavioral development of all children and eliminating expulsion and suspension practices in early childhood settings depends on strong partnerships. Those who serve our youngest learners have the responsibility to work together to ensure that all young children are given an equitable opportunity to thrive in high-quality, inclusive environments.