

Policy & Practice Briefs to Eliminate Child Care & Preschool Suspension

An NCECF & TREP Project Collaboration



Building Effective Reporting Systems to
Prevent and Reduce Early Exclusion

Micere Keels, Emma Heidorn, & Ana Vasan



States hold significant power and autonomy in creating and implementing early childhood learning policies, and within states, *governance in early childhood education* is often fragmented across multiple agencies and organizations. *Variation in legislation related to early childhood learning and care* has led to critical differences across and within states in how preschool programs operate and provide care. For example, *states have distinct policies* on licensing and qualification standards, teacher compensation and support, and preparation programs for early educators. *Early learning standards, class sizes and teacher-to-pupil ratios*, and *early childhood education financing* also differ widely by state.

Variation and fragmentation also shows up in how states address disciplinary decisions in early childhood education. *State policy varies* in what terminology is used to describe the exclusion of children from learning environments and how teachers are expected to handle student exclusion. Although the *accreditation standards* outlined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children highlight the need for written policies “related to suspension, expulsion and other exclusionary measures”, there is a lack of specificity about how to handle these disciplinary actions in practice.

Thankfully, there is a growing body of guidance aimed at minimizing exclusion from child care and early learning:

- US Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Education developed *policy recommendations* for preventing and reducing expulsion and suspension in early care and learning settings. These include recommendations for both state legislative bodies and early childhood programs.
- Head Start’s *policy on preventing on suspension and expulsion* prohibits programs from removing or expelling children due to behavior. It requires all Head Start and Early Head Start programs to develop practices that restrict the exclusion of the children they serve, such as social and emotional supports, workforce development, and using data to monitor children’s development and progress.

LEGISLATORS CAN provide clarity and guidance to reduce the overall use and disparities in who experiences exclusion from early care and learning environments.

Standardized regulatory guidelines on the terminology, definition, and implementation of exclusionary discipline is necessary because research shows that there are *discrepancies in how different young children are disciplined*. As of 2022, *only eight states required early childhood care providers to report expulsions*. This lack of data is significant.

Collecting and reporting data on trends in early exclusion by race, ethnicity, disability, gender, and English language learner status is necessary for parents, policymakers, and the general public to know whether and which programs are contributing to disparities in children’s access to developmentally supportive early learning experiences. Reporting guidelines should clearly articulate the processes for collecting and evaluating this data, and this data should inform the strengthening of child care and preschool programming, teacher training and policies aimed at reducing exclusion and bias in who experiences exclusion.

Illinois has one of the most *comprehensive early childhood expulsion legislation* in the country, seeking to limit the use of exclusionary discipline among all publicly funded or state-licensed early childhood providers.

The law prohibits programs from expelling a child due to behavior, outlines documentation steps in dealing with challenging behavior, and mandates that providers collect and report data on children transitioning out of their program. It also outlines best practices in reducing exclusion through professional development, family engagement, and locating mental health support resources (i.e. Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation).



Establishing effective state policy to address early care and learning exclusion is critical given the diversity of early learning contexts and limited availability of resources. Across all states, *comprehensive policy making* should include the voices of relevant stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and administrators. Evidence-based and developmentally-appropriate practices should be called-out in state policies. State policies can include specific plans for addressing racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and disability disparities in exclusion by requiring disaggregated data. Lastly, policies need to include accountability measures to ensure program adherence to legislation.

Include *Soft Expulsion* in Exclusion Guidelines

Reporting guidelines can guard against the use of “*soft expulsion*” practices, which are ways that children can be excluded from early learning environments without a formal suspension, expulsion or removal. Rather than formally excluding a child, a teacher may frequently remove a child from the classroom for a period of time or habitually send the child home due to behavioral challenges. A provider may also tell a parent that the program cannot meet the child’s needs and strongly suggest they go elsewhere. School district administrators may *transfer a child voluntarily or involuntarily* to another school in the same district without reporting the transfer as exclusion.

These soft expulsions contribute to the *disproportionate exclusion* of Black and other students of color. Because there are many ways that children can be informally excluded from early care and learning programs, it is critical that systems require the reporting of transfers, “soft” exclusionary discipline, and care termination for all children that participate in licensed program.

STATE POLICY SPOTLIGHT: **COLORADO**

In 2019, Colorado passed *legislation* to prevent and reduce suspensions and expulsion of children in preschool through second grade. While “soft exclusion” is not explicitly included in the law, Colorado’s Department of Education issued *guidelines* on defining suspension and expulsion, including “**soft-expulsion: when a program is inconvenient for a family or unwelcoming to the point the family must stop attending.**”



STATE AGENCIES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND EARLY EDUCATION CAN implement reporting systems that facilitate thoughtful decision-making.

Legislative changes alone cannot solve the problem of preschool exclusion. It is critical that child care and early learning programs are supported in the process of implementing documentation, reporting, and review practices that increase the likelihood of using supportive rather than punitive management of challenging behavior incidents.

Integrating reporting systems like the *Behavior Incident Report System (BIRS)* or the *Early Childhood School-Wide Information System (EC-SWIS)* into child care and early education systems enable providers to collect systematic data on child behavior incidents and staff responses. These reporting systems are only useful when updated and reviewed regularly and used by providers, early education advocates, and state leaders to make actionable decisions about how to support children.

It is necessary for early childhood care staff to be trained regularly in implementing reporting systems, and that professional support is embedded in state-level legislative guidelines for exclusionary discipline. Teachers and other care providers are important points of intervention for reducing exclusionary discipline.



Reporting systems can do much more than collect information on the number of exclusions and who is being excluded. Behavior reporting systems can also encourage more thoughtful decision-making by requiring the following pieces of information to be entered whenever a child is suspended or expelled:

- Efforts to build social and emotional skills using programs like the *Pyramid Model*
- Collaborative decision-making and problem-solving efforts with parents and other caregivers
- Consultation with early childhood technical assistance support programs
- Transition plan to minimize disruption in care
- Referral to early intervention support programs to address underlying developmental challenges
- Communication with a child's primary health provider to facilitate access to external supports

EARLY CARE AND LEARNING PROVIDERS CAN collaborate with parents.

Collaborating with families is a critical preventative step that providers can take to minimize the likelihood that children exhibiting challenging behaviors will be excluded from the program. Young children are limited in their ability to express themselves through words and some may rely on challenging nonverbal actions to get their needs met. It is likely that these children express themselves similarly at home and in other community settings. It is therefore likely that more positive outcomes will result when parents are invited as partners in identifying and implementing interventions aimed at helping their children learn more prosocial ways of expressing their needs. Parental and family involvement in early childhood education is positively associated with young *children's literacy and math skills, school readiness, preparedness for Kindergarten, and social-emotional development.*

Co-creating intervention plans with parents of children who repeatedly exhibit antisocial behaviors can help reduce the use of exclusionary discipline and strengthen parent engagement. Research shows that the quality of the relationship between providers/teachers and parents is a strong indicator of the *quality of provider/teacher and child relationships* in the preschool classroom. Strong relationships with parents also reduce the extent to which teachers perceive problems in self-regulation, especially for Black children. *Increased parental engagement* is associated with positive cognitive outcomes among parents and less harsh disciplinary behaviors at home, producing positive outcomes for children, such as increased math and literacy skills and decreased problem behaviors.





Guidance for Collaborating with Parents

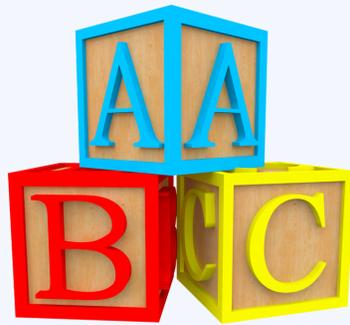
- **Communicate early and consistently with parents about challenging behaviors.** Honest and transparent communication with parents lessens the risk of exclusionary practices. When a parent is informed of challenging behavior as soon as it begins, more time is allowed for parents and providers/teachers to find supportive ways of responding.

- **Collaborate with parents to find solutions to challenging situations.** Involving [Early Intervention coaches](#) to support parent-teacher collaboration is an effective strategy in promoting parental engagement and handling challenging child behaviors. Early Intervention coaches can facilitate the discussion, planning, implementation, and assessment of behavioral strategies. [Behavior support plans](#) help children build positive behaviors in the classroom and prevent exclusionary discipline. These plans are most effective when a team-based approach is used, including the collaboration of parents.

- **Strengthen support for providers/teachers in engaging with parents and families in ways that are culturally responsive.** Integrate workshops on family engagement into existing professional development opportunities. These workshops should prioritize cultural competence to help providers/teachers recognize their own cultural biases, gain, and apply understandings of different cultures into how they connect with families and children. Communication and collaboration with parents can be difficult due to parental or staff time constraints, limited resources, and a lack of understanding on how to address challenging situations. Administrators need training in addressing these barriers to ensure that staff and parents feel supported.

In the next brief, we will discuss the importance of building staff capacity for providing developmentally-appropriate supports in response to children’s challenging behaviors. We will examine how increased technical assistance and workforce development in trauma-informed practices can help reduce the use of exclusionary discipline in early care and learning contexts.

Access previous briefs and other resources at our [end early learning exclusion resource website](#).



The **North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation** (NCECF) promotes understanding, spearheads collaboration, and advances policies to ensure each North Carolina child is on track for lifelong success by the end of third grade.



The **Trauma Responsive Educational Practices (TREP) Project** aims to create schools and classrooms that can meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students coping with toxic levels of stress and trauma.