Policy & Practice Briefs to Eliminate Child Care & Preschool Exclusion

An NCECF & TREP Project Collaboration

Beyond Suspensions and Expulsions: Reducing Disproportionality in Exclusion Through Everyday Practices

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To Narrow Racial Disparities in Exclusion from Early Education, Target Investments of Attention, Energy, and Resources

As mentioned in *previous briefs in this series*, the burden of exclusion from early care and learning settings falls more heavily on the shoulders of Black children and their families than children of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Some of the *most important findings* from research on early childhood exclusion are that:

- The race and gender disparities are such that Black children and Black boys are the most likely to experience exclusion.

- These race and gender disparities are not explained by differences in children's behavior.

- Exclusionary discipline does not improve children's behavior challenges, but it does create additional negative consequences that exacerbate existing racial and socioeconomic inequities.

In the push to end exclusion from early learning and care environments, some states have taken steps to limit the use of exclusionary discipline for young children. States like California, Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, and Minnesota have banned or placed sharp limits on the use of expulsion for children in publicly-funded preschool programs. These states and others also encourage the use of non-punitive or restorative approaches to managing young children's challenging behaviors. These actions are important and meaningful steps on the path to creating more inclusive and nurturing early learning environments. And, while implementing broad policies aimed at reducing exclusionary discipline will hopefully improve outcomes for all students, they may fall short of meaningfully changing some of the everyday practices that contribute to the disproportionate use of expulsions by race.

Most efforts to address exclusionary discipline do not directly target racial disparities.

Instead, most interventions focus either on [building educator capacity to manage challenging behavior, or building children's self-regulation skills](). Both strategies have been shown to be effective in reframing how adults view and respond to children's challenging behaviors. However, without specific and explicit attention to improving outcomes for children of color, these types of policies [have not reduced racially-disproportionate outcomes]() in student discipline and academic achievement. Put another way, race-neutral policies are not enough to undo racist practices.

Previous briefs in this series have explored the evidence that [educational exclusion is disproportionately leveraged against Black children](), and that racially exclusive learning environments [worsen the academic and social-emotional outcomes for all children](). Policy interventions should be intentional regarding their aims to promote nurturing early learning and care environments that affirm children of every race, providing equitable access to opportunity. There are many resources available to policy-makers who seek to enact interventions that effectively target racial disparities in early care and education. For example, the Children's Equity Project provides a list of [14 Priorities to Dismantle Systemic Racism in Early Care and Education]().

Policy interventions that can reduce racial disparities in the early care and education setting:
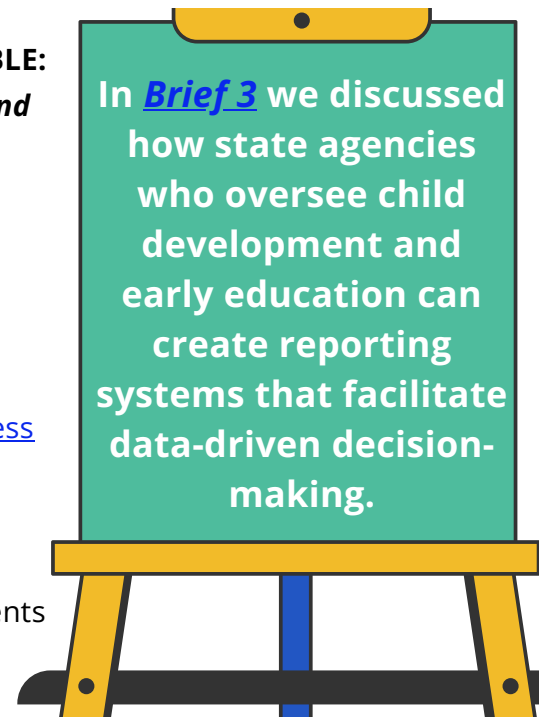
STAFF DEVELOPMENT TO MINIMIZE RACIAL BIASES: *Educator credentialing can include and/or require training on cultural competence and social justice-oriented teaching and staffing practices.* Ensure that effective, evidence-based racial equity training is a requisite and consistent part of staff credentialing. Adults coming to early care or learning centers from outside partnerships, such as early childhood mental health consultants and pyramid model trainers, should also receive training that explicitly equips them to recognize and mitigate racial disparities and biases. Providers can look to resources like this crosswalk to self-assess.

INVEST IN BUILDING A RACIALLY-DIVERSE EARLY CARE WORKFORCE: *Prioritize allocation of funding to early care and education centers that serve and are run by people from historically marginalized groups.* It is important that children see themselves in some of the educators that serve them. It is also important to invest in developing racially-diverse contractors, technical assistance providers, curriculum developers, and professional development servicers. Ensure pathways are in place to provide funding streams to Indigenous or tribal centers.

MONITOR OUTCOMES AND HOLD PROGRAMS ACCOUNTABLE: *Track disaggregated data on exclusion from early learning and care programs, in order to be able to monitor and evaluate patterns of exclusion by race and other factors, such as behavioral and cognitive development.* The lack of data on preschool suspension and expulsion can make it difficult to understand exactly where the challenges are and what interventions are needed. To monitor such data and assess outcomes, policymakers can use Race Forward's guide to assess racial impact and equity during policy creation and implementation. These evaluation methods should include school-level indicators, such as suspension, expulsion, and transfer rates; as well as families' and communities' assessments of how their needs are being met by local early education programs.

> In **_Brief 3_** we discussed how state agencies who oversee child development and early education can create reporting systems that facilitate data-driven decision-making.

Engage Families and Communities to Create Nurturing and Justice-Oriented Learning Environments

While managing the day-to-day needs of an early care or learning program, it can be difficult for educators to engage in the kinds of reflective thinking and collective action necessary to ensure that implicit racial biases do not negatively affect their interactions with children. As in the examples detailed below, providers can partner with child advocacy organizations whose members are focused on promoting anti-racist or social justice-oriented practices in early care and learning environments. States including North Carolina are working to involve local businesses and grassroots organizations in their early care and education models. These types of community-school partnerships can better connect school policies and practices with the lived experiences of the students attending the school, and increase the consistency in behavioral expectations for young children at child care/preschool, at home, and in extracurricular settings.

Strong bonds between child care and early learning providers and the communities they serve can help to build a more inclusive

environment that affirms Black children, as well as children of all races and backgrounds. Early learning and care center administrators can engage with parents, and encourage parents to become involved in education advocacy.

These strong bonds are at the heart of North Carolina's five promising models for eliminating racially disproportionate preschool exclusion. Organizations like EPiC and we are in North Carolina have provided inlets for parents to learn about how structural racism exists in preschools, and for early care and learning sites to build partnerships with parents based on the shared goal of eliminating all forms of early exclusion. Village of Wisdom, a parent-led organization created a Black Genius Framework to help parents and educators in North Carolina re-frame deficit-oriented thinking. The Hertford-Northampton project is deepening connections between parents, community members, and child care providers to change deep held beliefs about race in service of reducing the role of race in exclusionary discipline.

How to Meaningfully Address Race in Educator Training and Supervision

Educators' unconscious biases and decision-making play a large role in shaping the contexts that define children's opportunities to learn. Research shows that, for low-income Black and Latinx children, the rate at which educators complained about their behavior in preschool was associated with the children's cognitive skill performance in elementary school. The same study found that the rate at which childcare providers complain about their Black students' disruptive behavior is not explained by the rates in which young children actually engage in disruptive behavior, indicating biases in how educators perceive their Black students.

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Once a teacher has labeled a child as "disruptive" or "good," they are likely to use behavior management strategies based on those labels rather than based on the child's behavior in the immediate moment. A teacher is more likely to redirect a "good" child for the same behavior that they would reprimand a "disruptive" child for. These everyday interactions matter: beyond suspensions and expulsions, educational exclusion can look like sending a child to a time out, removing a child from circle or carpet time, or limiting the activity stations that child is allowed to engage with. When educators repeatedly perceive Black children's behavior as challenging and disruptive, and exclude them from learning and care settings, these everyday actions create and reinforce care and learning environments that exclude Black children.

Four meaningful steps that early learning & care administrators can take to build more inclusive learning environments

Early care and learning center administrators can and should address racial biases as part of ongoing staff development.

☀ **Equip staff and educators with the facts about racial disparities.** Stay up to date on the latest research on race and early childhood outcomes, using resources such as [NAEYC's Creating Anti-Racist Early Childhood Spaces](). Be transparent with staff about how outcomes at your school compare to those in your county, state, or the country.

☀ **Model and encourage self-reflection.** Use questions like the following from Leadership Academy to guide your own and your staff's reflective processes:
- How has race played a role in your leadership journey?
- What are your own beliefs around race and equity?
- How has your education benefited you to help you get where you are?
- How are your experiences different from those of the students you serve? How are they similar?

☀ **Coach staff and educators to help them incorporate new information on the effects of implicit biases** into how they interact with children and manage behavior. There are many online resources that you can use for ongoing professional development. Try tools that can help them learn [to talk to young children about race, justice, and activism](), [to provide trauma-responsive care after an instance of interpersonal or community racial harm](), and [to create a checklist to understand their own biases]().

☀ **Center coaching meetings on culturally-responsive practices** and eliminating disparities in outcomes. In meetings between educators and their managers or instructional coaches, consistently check in with educators on their anti-racist practices. Ask questions that encourage self-reflection and modeling of intercultural competence, like, How can your students' cultures be incorporated into your lesson?

This was the sixth in a series of eight briefs on Ending Early Expulsions. Access the full series here. In the next brief, we will discuss the need to address and respond to the root causes of young children's dysregulated and/or challenging behaviors. We will focus on the role of exposure to toxic levels of traumatic stress, examine Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and present policy and practical steps to reduce children's exposure to situations that can harm their well-being and development.

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.