Eliminate Suspensions and Expulsions of Young Children through training for child care staff and early childhood teachers
A Policy Brief

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Suspensions and Expulsions (S/E) from Pre-K Programs. In 2005 suspension and expulsions of pre-school children were not uncommon. Nationally, one out of every 10 teachers in a representative sample of state supported pre-k programs reported expelling at least one child in the previous year.1 About two percent expelled more than one child. In state-sponsored about 5,117 children were expelled from pre-k.2 In the state of Maryland the rate was estimated to be somewhere between four and seven children per thousand3. Recently, the Maryland State Department of Education presented data suggesting that the number of S/E have fallen dramatically since 2005 when attention was first brought to this issue. Only 82 pre-k children in the State of Maryland were suspended or expelled in the 2015-16 school year. Does this mean that a proposed law to ban S/E is a solution in search of a problem? We think not. The number of suspension and expulsions did increase over the previous year. Suspensions and expulsions should be extremely rare if they are permitted exist at all.

Focus on Groups for whom suspensions/expulsions are most prevalent. An important aspect of the problem of suspensions and expulsion is the disparity in the use of S/E for specific groups of children4. Significant disparities exist on the basis of race/ethnicity and gender. Suspensions and expulsions are more likely in programs serving high need, impoverished and ethnic-minority communities than in programs serving affluent and non-minority populations. For example, although only 16% of the student population, Black students accounted for 48% of preschoolers receiving out-of-school suspension. This is 3 times the rate of white students.5 In addition, males accounted for 72% of multiple out-of-school suspensions, and 74% of expulsions. African American and Latino boys are highly vulnerable to being suspended or expelled.

Eliminating suspensions and expulsions is a highly desirable policy objective. It has our
strong support. However, to achieve this objective, the policy must:

- Focus attention where the greatest risks exists
- Address the underlying causes of suspensions and expulsions
- Monitor schools effectiveness in addressing the underlying problems for example through universal behavioral screening with tools such as the ABLE.
- Extend the ban on Suspensions and expulsions up to 3rd grade

I. Address the Underlying Causes

Programs often suspend or expel due to children’s inability to regulate their attention, behavior or emotions. These behaviors include “prolonged tantrums, physical and verbal aggression, disruptive vocal and motor behavior, property destruction, self-injury, noncompliance, and withdrawal”. The ability to control these behaviors is developed over time and is highly dependent on brain maturation. Once fully developed this executive capacity to control attention, behavior and emotions enables us to resist doing the things we want to do but should not do and enables us to do the things we should do but do not want to do. By the age 4 children have emergent capacities to support self-regulatory behavior. However, for many children the brain structures required for self-control are not fully developed until third grade. Until then, many children will require additional support, external structure, warmth and guidance to meet the demands that schooling places on them. This means that if education of children pre-k to 3rd grade is to be effective, schools must take steps to augment children’s efforts at self-control. School staff would benefit from knowledge about practices for providing a supportive safe base for children and the encouragement to explore (e.g. Circle of Security program). Such programs have proven to be effective in helping adults create an emotionally sensitive and warm environments that provide children the predictability and structure they need to develop their capacity for self-regulation. Programs which fail to adopt these approaches often resort to suspensions and expulsions.

II. Universal Screening and Mental Health Support for Early Childhood

Suspensions and expulsions of young children can be eliminated or managed if we address the underlying conditions. The most effective way to eliminate pre-school expulsions is to prevent them. This can be done by identifying the children who show early signs of difficulty in regulating attention, behavior or emotions in Pre-K or Kindergarten. Use of a Universal Screen such as the ABLE to detect serious problems related to children’s self-regulation of attention, behavior or emotions. The elements of this preventive approach include the following steps:

- A brief phone based screening can ascertain from parents and teachers behavioral concerns arising within the first 6 weeks of program enrollment.
- Support and training for programs (e.g. Circle of Security), schools and staffs can be provided to children who would benefit from assistance before the problems become entrenched and attitudes toward the child hardened.
Conclusion.

An outright ban of suspensions and expulsions does not go far enough to address the problem. Universal behavioral screenings, support for distressed families and consultation for pre-k classrooms are the most promising approaches for preventing them. Finally, the work of reducing expulsions is not complete until policies address publicly supported programs where expulsions are most likely to occur namely, child care programs.

Recommendations

1. Ban suspensions and expulsion up to 3rd grade
2. Direct the Maryland State Department of Education to institute a plan for universal behavioral screening using a tool such as the ABLE for high risk students and programs serving low income children to identify children in need of early intervention
3. Direct the Maryland State Department of Education to provide an annual report on the number of children with serious behavioral issues, the number for whom support was provided and the number whose issues were resolved through the support.
4. Monitor suspensions and expulsions from childcare programs receiving public funding, e.g. child care block grants.
5. Provide support to child care staff and teachers in pre-k to 3rd grade in the use of ideas from programs such as “Circle of Security” (See Powell, Cooper, Hoffman & Marvin (2014) The Circle of Security Intervention. NY: Guilford Press)
Works Cited


4 Alexandra Matos Washington Post February 2, 2017 [link]


