

Combating the Suspension and Expulsion Crisis in Early Care and Education Programs in North Carolina

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The detrimental practice of early childhood suspension and expulsion is a national crisis impacting numerous children and families across North Carolina. The immediate and lifelong consequences include exclusion from enriching early learning environments and negatively influencing children's feelings of self-worth. Children subjected to suspension and expulsion tend to experience lower educational opportunities, increased high school dropout rates, and more adverse health outcomes. Given the negative implications of this practice, legislators and policymakers in North Carolina must take action, starting with the regulation and tracking of suspensions and expulsions in all early care and education settings.

Suspensions and Expulsions Harm Children and Families

Though North Carolina does not track suspension and expulsion data between birth and five years of age, national studies indicate that they **disproportionately impact minority male children**—and are having long-lasting and far-reaching negative consequences for the children involved. Suspension and expulsion can increase young children's risk for academic failure, absenteeism, and many researchers consider this an entry point to the preschool to prison pipeline. The harmful effects of suspension and expulsion can also be devastating to families, resulting in isolation, limited access to resources, and loss of vital income due to the lack of childcare.

The impact of suspensions and expulsions has grown only more urgent since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased and created new stressors for families, the field of childcare, and early care and education professionals. **Recent studies** indicate the entire childcare system is under stress, creating circumstances that contribute to higher incidences of early childhood suspensions and expulsions. Specifically, early educators experiencing frequent and higher stress levels tend to expel young children more often, particularly young boys of color, while stressors can also result in a change in children's behaviors that could increase the child's likelihood of being suspended or expelled. Given that families and children of color have disproportionately borne the brunt of the pandemic, losing access to reliable childcare may compound their troubles.

All the while, the pandemic has forced many programs to close permanently—in North Carolina, there are 4 children for every 2.24 vacant childcare slots due to pandemic-precipitated closures. The results could be dire when coupled with low-income families' likelihood of living in one of the state's many childcare deserts, plunging more families into poverty.

North Carolina's Response to the Suspension and Expulsion Crisis

Due to the grave consequences of suspension and expulsion, North Carolina's state government have made some efforts to address this crisis. In one key strategy, North Carolina's Childcare Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Council supports initiatives that provide evidence-based programmatic mental health services to licensed childcare programs—though currently, only three Expulsion Prevention Specialists are serving *all* licensed childcare programs across the state.

The NC PreK and the Preschool Exceptional Children's Programs have also made concerted efforts to reduce suspensions and expulsions. These programs developed mandatory protocols teachers and administrators must follow, reserving suspension and expulsion as a last resort. Then there are the NC Head Start programs, which have banned the practice altogether. These are all programs that the state can look to for inspiration

for the state's future.

Policy Recommendations

While many of North Carolina's initiatives show a great deal of promise, this crisis still runs rampant in the state. We must do more to promote the development of positive behaviors and eliminate suspensions and expulsions in all childcare programs. To aid in this critical work, state leaders should implement the following steps:

1. Develop and manage a data tracking and reporting system that promotes key stakeholders' ability to better understand North Carolina's early childhood suspension and expulsion crisis.
2. Revise North Carolina's Division of Child Development and Early Education's (DCDEE) Suspension & Expulsion Policy to provide more specific guidance to childcare programs. For example, we recommend that all licensed childcare programs must have and share a policy related to suspensions and expulsions with families and teachers. The policy should include steps for working with children, teachers, and families that leave short-term suspensions and expulsions as a last resort.
3. Require the DCDEE Suspension/Expulsion Policy and toolkit training be conducted by Expulsion Prevention Specialist for all childcare programs and expand access to technical assistance.
4. Expand funding to childcare programs for professional development targeting partnering with families, reducing challenging behaviors, and promoting positive behaviors.
5. Early Childhood programs in NC colleges and universities must evaluate their curriculum and address gaps in preparing future educators to create supportive classrooms that help all children thrive.

The work being done across North Carolina is encouraging, yet is too often siloed and can be uneven. With a coordinated effort, the state can better protect and provide for children and their families.