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Facing a Broken System: Addressing Suspensions and Expulsions of Young Black Children in South Carolina

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“There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.”-Nelson Mandela

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report aims to shed light on the pervasive issue of school and classroom removals experienced by young Black children, with a particular focus on Charleston and its broader state context in South Carolina. By examining the forces at play in this type of discipline, based on *exclusion*, and highlighting the issue of implicit bias, we hope to raise awareness of the driving factors that contribute to this crisis.

Additionally, this report offers recommendations urging policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders to address implicit and systemic bias and to implement evidence-based strategies that prioritize prevention over punishment. Below are our key findings and recommendations.

Quantitative Findings from Charleston County School District (CCSD)

Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), we compared predominantly Black schools to predominantly White schools that either exclusively offered early childhood programming or included pre-K to kindergarten programming within their schools in CCSD for the 2022-23 school year:

- Schools with predominantly Black student enrollments had a disciplinary removal rate of 98 per 1000 students—seven times the rate of majority White schools at only 14 and more than double the district-wide rate of 43.
- Out-of-school suspension rates were also much higher at schools with majority Black student populations (79) compared to majority White schools (12) and the district average (35).
- In-school suspension with predominantly Black schools had approximately 18 per 1000 students compared to 2 at majority White schools and 7 district-wide.
- Similarly, schools with a majority Black student body had an arrest referral rate of 1.89 per 1,000 students, compared to 0.08 per 1,000 students at schools with a majority White population and 0.82 per 1,000 students for the entire district.

Using data from the South Carolina Department of Education's (SCDE) publicly available website, we analyzed school removal for students attending schools in North Charleston compared to those outside North Charleston within CCSD offering early childhood programming (2022-23):

- North Charleston had a total removal rate of approximately 68 per 1000 students, compared to 32 for schools outside of North Charleston and 43 district-wide.
- North Charleston out-of-school suspension rates were 60 per 1000 students, compared to 24 outside of North Charleston and 35 across the entire district.

Conclusion: Black children are disproportionately subject to removal, known as *exclusionary discipline*, in Charleston County, SC.

Quantitative Findings from State & National Datasets

- Using open-access *Project Implicit* data from all 50 states, together with Office for Civil Rights data, more preschool suspensions by race were significantly associated with higher scores on a well-known pro-white scale of implicit bias (the *Project Implicit's* Implicit Associations Test or IAT). South Carolina stands out as having the second-highest pro-White IAT score in the country, trailing only behind Mississippi.

Conclusion: Unconscious attitudes should be examined as a contributor to disciplinary removal of Black children in South Carolina.

Qualitative Interview Findings from Stakeholders and Experts

- Unconscious bias among educators contributes to the high rate of disciplinary exclusion of Black preschoolers in the Charleston County School District (CCSD) and South Carolina.
- Multiple interviewees attributed funding disparities directly to racism, specifically highlighting how district leaders prioritize resources for schools that serve Charleston's wealthy White families. They observed that the additional staff and support afforded to these schools contribute to a reduction in the occurrence of classroom and school removal practices within them.
- Educators are underprepared and lack support to effectively manage young children's behaviors in the classroom.

Conclusion: Professional learning about proactive behavior management and de-escalation strategies should be coupled with cultural competence and anti-bias training.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Call for Better Data

A “free and open data” approach should be part of a stronger effort from the U.S. Department of Education and Office of Civil Rights in coordination with state education departments and local school districts to produce and analyze data that illuminates the early learning environments of our youngest learners—with a specific focus on the experiences of Black preschool children.

Education and Policy Leaders

1. Recruit Black educators, with particular attention to Black men, while also actively seeking to increase male representation in early childhood education in general.
2. Allocate funding for early childhood education at levels comparable to K-12 education with specific funding for the following:
 - Increase pay for early childhood educators.
 - Allocate funding to increase professional resources.
 - Decrease South Carolina’s child-to-staff ratios.
 - Raise awareness about new discipline reform legislation that prohibits suspensions, expulsions, and corporal punishment.
 - Mandate and pay educators to complete ongoing unconscious bias training and professional development.

Educators

3. Learn about “soft” exclusion-based discipline and its negative effects.
4. Act and advocate:
 - Request racial equity, unconscious bias, and restorative practices training.
 - Provide proactive, strengths-based, developmentally appropriate education.
6. Build trust and strong relationships with families.
7. Engage all children.

Parents and Families

8. Build a relationship with your child’s teacher.
 - Ask about the good and hard parts of your child’s day.
 - Ask for resources to support your child.
 - Volunteer in the classroom.
9. Support your child.
 - Talk to your children about feelings.
 - Help your child use words for their feelings.
10. Engage your community
 - Request classroom observation or an evaluation by a psychologist.
 - Attend school board meetings; run for school board.



ImpactSTATS INC. Team Members

Our research team included four members, each contributing a different set of expertise. We also relied on support from CIRCL, a center that Drs. Baker and Cameron co-founded to promote community-invested research processes.

Dr. Melodie Baker PhD, is the Founder and President of ImpactSTATS Inc., a research and evaluation nonprofit dedicated to promoting responsible, community-led research aimed at improving the health, wealth, and well-being of underserved populations. She oversaw the entire project and conducted the local quantitative analysis.



Dr. Claire Cameron PhD, is Associate Professor at the University at Buffalo. She specializes in how children navigate their thoughts, feelings, and actions; and how learning environments and educators support them. She is also the parent of an elementary-age student with a significant disability. As a mixed methods scholar she provided methodological direction and guidance for each element of the project.



At the time of this study, **Kelsey LiPuma** was a doctoral student at the University at Buffalo in the Learning and Teaching in Social Contexts EdD program. She has taught 6th grade in a small community outside of Rochester, NY for almost ten years. She was responsible for coding the interview data.



Gizella Wade, (not pictured) a recent graduate from the Statistics and Data Science Department at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), conducted the national quantitative data analysis.

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"It's Easier to Build Strong Children than to Repair Broken Men"-Frederick Douglas

The alarming rate of suspensions and expulsions of Black preschool children in the United States

has gained increased attention in recent years, due to the significant consequences these practices have on children during critical early development years and on families who need their children to attend school (Gilliam et al., 2016; U.S. Departments of HHS and ED, 2016). Post-pandemic research from the University of Virginia reveals that each year, approximately 17,000 children are suspended or expelled from preschools in the U.S., and half of these children are Black boys (Zeng et al., 2019). A recent UCLA report found that Black preschoolers are 3.6 times more likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions than White preschoolers (Quereshi & Okonofua, 2018). Furthermore, according to federal data, South Carolina leads the nation in exclusion-based discipline, reporting 438 preschool suspensions, with 61 percent of these suspensions imposed on Black children, despite representing only 39 percent of total preschoolers enrolled (Office of Civil Rights 2017-18).

Glaring disparities in classroom removal practices represent a pressing need to understand the underlying factors of such inequities. A key factor may be implicit bias or attitudes adults hold unconsciously. A study by Gilliam and his colleagues (2016) found that teachers tend to view Black students' behavior more negatively than that of White students, even when their actions are the same. Unconscious bias can contribute to harsher disciplinary measures for Black preschoolers, which may help explain the high classroom removal rates of Black children in the country and South Carolina.

Frederick Douglass's quote, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men," highlights the efficacy of prevention over rehabilitation. Society's obligation is to examine the root causes of these disparities in discipline and to prioritize the education and well-being of its youngest members, with a particular focus on Black children.

Research suggests that the disparities observed in preschool exclusion-based discipline are rooted in deeper, more complex issues that extend beyond surface-level behavior management (Kagan & Neuman, 1998). Instead, experts point to the enduring legacy of systemic racism and the association of childcare historically being the responsibility of Black women (Collins, 2022).

Prior to the establishment of the modern childcare and preschool systems, Black women predominantly assumed the role of primary caregivers, effectively constituting the early childcare system of their time. Despite the crucial role Black women played in the development and well-being of children, their labor was often marginalized and inadequately compensated. This has laid the foundation for the systemic undervaluing, underpaying, and underfunding prevalent in today's preschool systems (Boshara & Emmons 2006).

Inadequate funding due to institutional sexism and racism in early childcare programming has a direct impact on quality of care and can contribute to the disparities in preschool and school-age suspensions (Heckman, 2008). Underfunded preschools frequently lack resources, including mental health professionals, teacher training, and qualified staff. A study by the Center for American Progress (2021) found that providers in marginalized communities are more likely to have fewer resources leading to higher staff turnover rates and disruptions in continuity of care, which is critical for children during their earlier years.

This report aims to address the pervasive issue of classroom and school removal among young Black children with a particular focus on Charleston within its unique state context. Notably, South Carolina was the last state to desegregate its public school system. The state did not desegregate fully until the federal government intervened in 1970 — just over 50 years ago. This means that South Carolina's public schools remain highly segregated. One interviewee stated, "in South Carolina our schools are not completely segregated, but they're not far from it." (Interviewee C).

By examining the forces at play in exclusion-based discipline and highlighting the issue of unconscious bias within the local and state-level systems, we hope to shed light on the factors contributing to this complex issue through multiple pathways. A thorough review of the current literature on classroom and school removal, coupled with data analysis and interviews with stakeholders and community members, allows us to offer recommendations for effective interventions and policy reform.

Thus, this report serves as a call to action, urging policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders to address unconscious bias and implement evidence-based strategies that prioritize prevention over punishment while addressing the specific needs of Black children and their families. Our ultimate goal is to advance meaningful change aimed at creating nurturing and inclusive atmospheres where all preschoolers and particularly Black children, can thrive.

REPORT METHODOLOGY

This study is built on principles of community-based participatory research, in which community stakeholders are integral partners, collaborating with the researchers in every aspect of the study. Recognizing the vital contribution of expertise and contextual understanding that community stakeholders offer, local knowledge was prioritized to improve accuracy and include the cultural nuance often lacking in broader theoretical research (Hall & Tandon, 2017).

In our case, the BEE Collective, a Low Country grassroots organization formed to improve social-emotional development outcomes for children (birth to six years) and to support family resilience through the provision of doula services, sought a research team that could investigate the specific problem they had identified of too-frequent removals of Black children from early learning settings in the State of South Carolina and County of Charleston.

To create this report, we employed a mixed methods research design that used multiple data sources, including qualitative and quantitative. Our starting point was to begin an ongoing literature review, with initial findings incorporated into Kicked Out, a two-page summary explaining the frequent exclusion-based discipline of Black children and offering evidence-based solutions (see Appendix A).

This summary featured a preliminary quantitative analysis using local Charleston school data. We shared this summary with our primary stakeholders within the first six weeks to ensure our project direction aligned with their community goals. Their feedback and responsiveness to the two-page summary was the first of multiple, ongoing check-in points with the BEE Collective.

From these check-ins, our team of researchers learned from the BEE Collectives' local and historical knowledge. We then incorporated the Collective's unique wisdom and perspectives as the research inquiry evolved. Figure 1 illustrates our study process from start to finish, with orange elements indicating major check-in points that informed our continuing research.

We then commenced individual interviews or focus groups with a total of 11 individuals representing state and local non-profit leaders, researchers, educators, and community members. These 45-60min interviews were usually facilitated by two project team members and recorded for coding purposes. Concurrently, we conducted several national, state and local-level quantitative analyses examining associations among key variables that we identified in both the literature review and focus group/interview data. These variables represent potential elements in the complex system that contribute to early childhood professionals making exclusion-based disciplinary decisions that disproportionately affect Black children.

The influence of this study's qualitative information on the statistical analyses that we conducted creates a sequential mixed methods design, privileging the qualitative data.

Our quantitative results are meant to inform, contextualize, and supplement the themes that surfaced in the qualitative data. Our results overall and the purpose of our research fit within a transformative paradigm, where we use the information and local wisdom synthesized in this project to address a real-world problem with actionable solutions (Tashakkori et al 2020).



Terminology

Preschool: Children between the ages of three and five years old; in grade levels called preschool, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.

Children: School-age children in kindergarten through 8th grade.

Removal or exclusion-based discipline: All practices that remove a child from their learning environment as a form of punishment. This can include formal suspension or expulsion from school or even asking a child to sit in a corner or outside the classroom briefly.

Expulsion: An extreme removal practice in which a child is permanently dismissed from a program for what is deemed challenging behavior by the adults in the program. This includes programs encouraging parents or family members to disenroll the child from the program.

In-School Suspension: An exclusion-based practice where a child is removed from a classroom or from activities that include other children for a portion of a school day or a full school day in response to the child's challenging behavior. The child physically remains on the premises under direct supervision of school personnel.

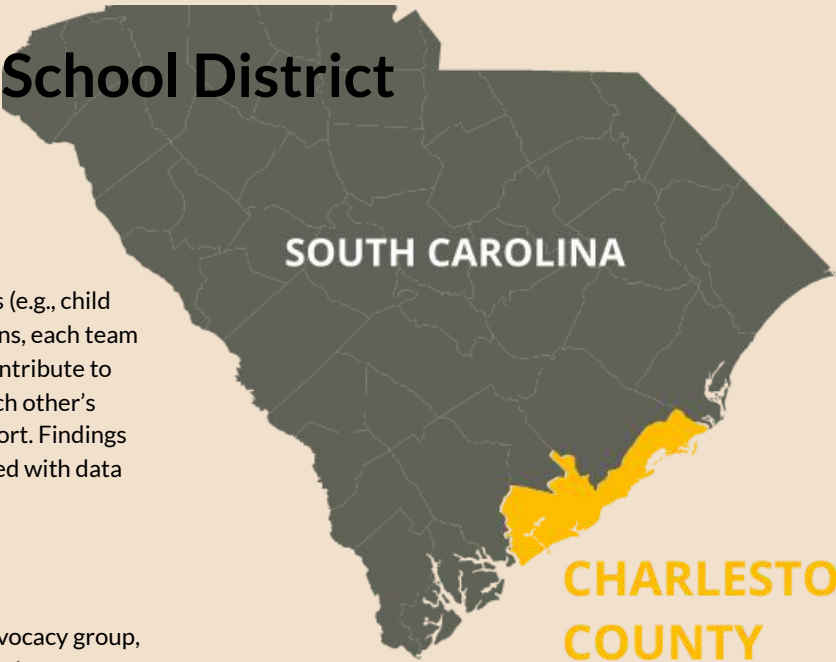
Out-of-School Suspension: A removal practice in which a child is sent home early or not allowed to return to the program for a portion of a school day or a full school day in response to the challenging behavior.

Soft Exclusion: An informal request to remove a child from their learning environment. This can include calling a parent or family member to pick up their child early or asking that the child is removed from the program.

Isolation: A removal practice in which a child is required to be alone and separate from the rest of the children and the learning experiences of the classroom.

Time Out: A type of brief isolation commonly used for children.

Charleston County School District



LOCAL QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

Literature Review

We each worked from a different stakeholder lens (e.g., child and family, teacher, and policymaker). With this lens, each team member found 5-15 relevant, recent studies to contribute to the literature review. Team members explored each other's contributions, culminating in an outline of the report. Findings from the literature review were then supplemented with data collected from interviews and focus groups.

Interviews and Focus Groups

Through collaboration with the BEE Collective advocacy group, expert informants were identified for individual and group interviews. Interviewees were grouped based on roles and expertise. At least two team members were present at most interviews, with one team member acting as the primary interviewer, giving the other team member the capacity to take notes, actively listen, and ask follow-up questions. At the start of each interview or focus group, the interviewees consented to recording; audio recordings were taken with Zoom and then transcribed and coded with the software Quirkos.

Transcriptions underwent initial coding and then a second round of coding by one team member. We relied primarily on in-vivo, description, and versus codes. This means that codes were chosen to preserve the spoken words of the participants and to pinpoint any conflicting ideologies revealed in the interview responses. Codes were merged as more interviews were conducted and more data became available. We then synthesized the codes into larger themes on the site Miro and presented those themes to the whole team. All team members provided feedback as needed.

Interview and Focus Group Findings

We share findings from the interviews and focus groups throughout this report. Interviewees were assigned a random letter (e.g., Interviewee A), and their quotes are italicized.

LOCAL QUANTITATIVE METHODOLOGY

We reviewed data from various sources to gain insight on potential disparities in early childhood removals across race from a local perspective. However, due to the absence of publicly available suspension data disaggregated by race age, or grade level from the Charleston County School District, we opted for an inferential analysis to examine potential differences in removal rates by race. While inferential analysis offers valuable insights, it should be noted that its ability to provide precise and accurate findings is limited.

Data Collection and Analysis

We began by reviewing 2022-2023 classroom/school removal data from the Charleston County School District (CCSD) retrieved from the South Carolina Department of Education School Report Cards (SCDE).

The SCDE data provided specific counts on the number of students enrolled in each school and the school's grade levels. The SCDE data also provided the number of (1) in-school suspensions, (2) out-of-school suspensions, (3) expulsions, and (4) arrest referrals by school. To identify a proxy for race, we reviewed Charleston County demographic and population profiles retrieved from the US Census Bureau (2020). We then compared subdivisions to determine percentage of Black residents.

The Census map revealed sharp lines of segregation, with the concentration of Black residents densely represented in three main neighborhoods: North Charleston (45%), McClellanville (45%), and Wadmalaw Island (44%). McClellanville and Wadmalaw Island had significantly smaller populations, with less than 8,000 residents combined, compared to North Charleston's population of nearly 100,000; therefore, the decision was made to use schools located in the North Charleston school zone as one proxy for race.

Terminology

Race Proxy: A race proxy is a factor often used in various contexts, including statistical analysis, research, or decision-making processes, as a substitute or indicator for race or ethnicity when direct data on these factors are unavailable or not collected.



LOCAL QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

A second race proxy was included in the study to improve the robustness of the analysis. We sourced data on CCSD student enrollment by race from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). This allowed us to calculate the percentage of Black children enrolled in a specific school and then match the data with school-level removal-based disciplinary data reported by the SCDE.

Because removal-based disciplinary data specific to early childhood levels within CCSD is not publicly reported, our research team was limited to analyzing data from schools with multiple grade levels. However, only schools that offered preK-kindergarten programming were included in the dataset. We analyzed a total of 42 schools that serve children in grade levels Pk-K (2), Pk-2 (1), Pk-5 (33) and Pk-8 (6). The following two race proxies were used in the dataset: (1) schools located in North Charleston (see Table 1), denoted by the 2022-23 school years CCSD zoning map (Figure 2), and (2) student enrollment percentages by race at the school level (Table 2).

Finally, an Excel spreadsheet was used to compile all the data and compare schools that offered Pk-K programming in the North Charleston neighborhood to all other schools that included or solely offered preschool programming located in the Charleston County School District. We also compared exclusion rates of schools with a majority percentage of Black children to schools with a majority percentage of White Children to identify trends in the data.

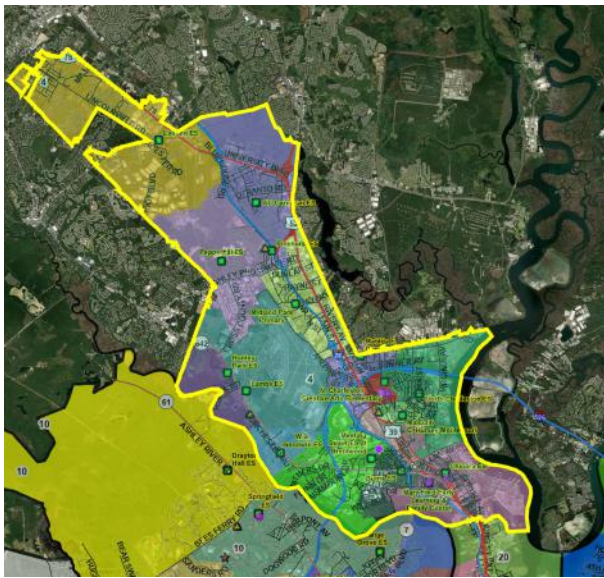


Figure 2. CCSD 2022-23 Zoning Map of Schools (green squares) in North Charleston

Local Findings

Our analysis revealed sharp differences in rates of removal-based discipline across race in both scenarios for the 2022-23 school years. Schools with predominantly (majority = 51 percent or more) Black children enrolled and schools located in the North Charleston zoning district (see Table 1 & 2) had significantly higher suspension rates than their peers in CCSD.

The removal rates per 1,000 students provide critical insights into these disparities.

Schools with predominantly Black student enrollments had a removal-based discipline rate of 98.23 per 1,000 students—seven times the rate of majority White schools, which was only 14.11 per 1,000, and more than double the district-wide rate of 42.65 per 1,000 students. Similarly, *out-of-school suspension* rates were much higher at schools with majority Black student bodies (78.8 per 1,000) compared to majority White schools (11.95 per 1,000) and the district average (34.82 per 1,000). *In-school suspensions* at predominantly Black schools were 17.54 per 1,000 students, compared to 2.08 at majority White schools and 7 district-wide. Finally, *arrest referrals* at schools with majority Black student bodies also revealed gaps in removals, with a rate of 1.89 per 1,000 students, while schools with majority White populations had a removal rate of 0.08 per 1,000 children, compared to the district removal rate of 0.82 per 1,000 children (see Figure 3).

Similarly, North Charleston schools offering early childhood programming showed a stark contrast in removal rates compared to schools outside of North Charleston within the CCSD schools district in 2022-23. North Charleston had a total removal-based discipline rate of approximately 68 per 1,000 students, compared to 32 for schools outside of North Charleston and 43 district-wide. North Charleston's *out-of-school suspension* rates were 60 per 1,000 students, compared to 24 outside of North Charleston and 35 across the entire district. *In-school suspension* rates were 7 per 1,000 students for schools located in North Charleston compared to approximately 7 per 1,000 outside North Charleston and 7 per 1,000 throughout the district (see Figure 4).

Analyzing percentages relative to student enrollment offers additional insight into the disparities in removal-based discipline in CCSD in 2022-23. Schools with predominantly Black children enrolled accounted for 63 percent of the in-school suspensions, 57 percent of out-of-school suspensions, and 58 percent of arrest referrals while only representing 25 percent of total enrollment in CCSD. On the other hand, schools with predominantly White student bodies represented 54 percent of the total enrollment but only 16 percent of the in-school suspensions, 19 percent of the out-of-school suspensions and 5 percent of arrest referrals (see Figure 5).

Similarly, while students attending North Charleston Schools represented only 29 percent of children enrolled in CCSD, they accounted for more than half (53 percent) of the arrest referrals, 50 percent of the out-of-school suspensions, and 48 percent of all removals (see Figure 6).

Limitations

These findings should be interpreted cautiously because we are unable to precisely identify the race and age of the students suspended, referred for arrest, or otherwise removed from school activities in the study.

Even so, one with reasonable logic may conclude that significant bias is at play. This conclusion stems from the fact that schools in highly segregated areas, specifically those within communities with larger Black populations, experience markedly higher rates of punishment by way of removal-based discipline compared to schools in predominantly White communities or with mostly White student bodies.

Further research and the availability of data disaggregated by race on preschool removals is necessary to better understand the stark apparent differences in the rate of removals using the race proxies in CCSD.



2022-23 CCSD Out-of-School Suspension Counts for Schools with Predominantly Black Student Enrollment and Schools Located in the North Charleston Zoning District

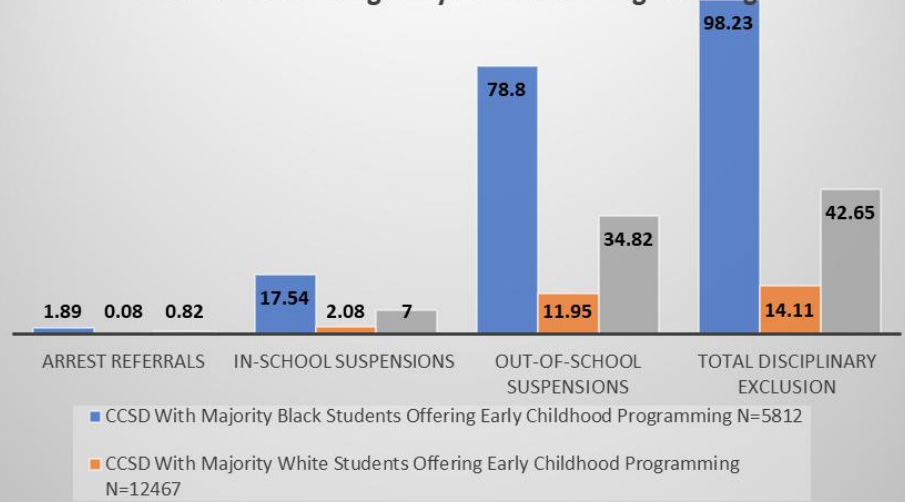
Table 1 CCSD Schools with Majority Black Student Enrollment Offering Early Childhood Programming	2022-2023 Out of School Suspensions	%Percent Black Enrollment
AC Corcoran	39	56%
Charleston Development Academy	1	98%
Charleston Progressive	13	97%
E.B. Ellington	6	59%
Julian Mitchell	29	93%
Mary Ford	4	90%
Meeting Street Brentwood	120	72%
Memminger	14	51%
Minnie Hughes	12	89%
North Charleston	29	51%
North Charleston Creative Arts	40	68%
Pepper Hill	30	57%
Sanders Clyde	42	92%
St. James Santee	46	84%
Stono Park	33	73%
TOTAL	458	

Table 2 CCSD Schools Located in North Charleston Offering Early Childhood Programming	2022-2023 Out of School Suspensions
AC Corcoran	39
Hunley Park	5
Ladson	44
Lambs	25
Malcolm C. Hursey	20
Mary Ford	4
Matilda F. Dunston	20
Meeting Street Brentwood	120
Midland Park Primary	2
North Charleston Creative Arts	40
North Charleston	29
Pepper Hill	30
WB Goodwin	27
TOTAL	405



2022-23 CCSD Schools Rate of Removals Per 1,000 Students: Enrollment by Race & Location

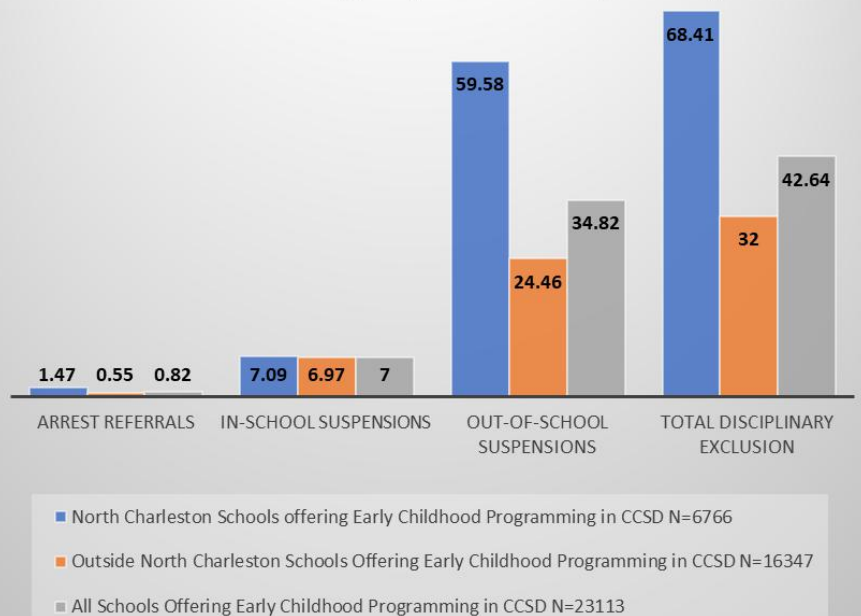
Figure 3 **CCSD 2022-23 Removal/Exclusion Rates Per 1000 Students in Schools with Predominantly Black Student Enrollments Compared to Schools with Predominantly White Student Enrollments Offering Early Childhood Programming**



Data Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES n.d.) and SCDE Report Cards (2022-2023)

Schools with predominantly Black student enrollments had a disciplinary exclusion rate of 98.23 per 1,000 students, while majority White schools had a rate of 14.11, and the district-wide rate was 42.65. Out-of-school suspensions at schools with majority Black student populations were 78.8 per 1,000 students, compared to 11.95 at majority White schools and a district average of 34.84. In-school suspensions at predominantly Black schools were 17.54 per 1,000 students, compared to 2.08 at majority White schools and 7 district-wide.

Figure 4 **CCSD 2022-23 Exclusion Rates Per 1000 Students in North Charleston Schools Compared to Schools Outside North Charleston Offering Early Childhood Programming**



Data Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES n.d.) and SCDE Report Cards (2022-2023)

North Charleston had a total exclusion rate of approximately 68 per 1000 students, compared to 32 for schools outside of North Charleston and 43 district-wide. North Charleston's out-of-school suspension rates were 60 per 1000 students, compared to 24 outside of North Charleston and 35 across the entire district.

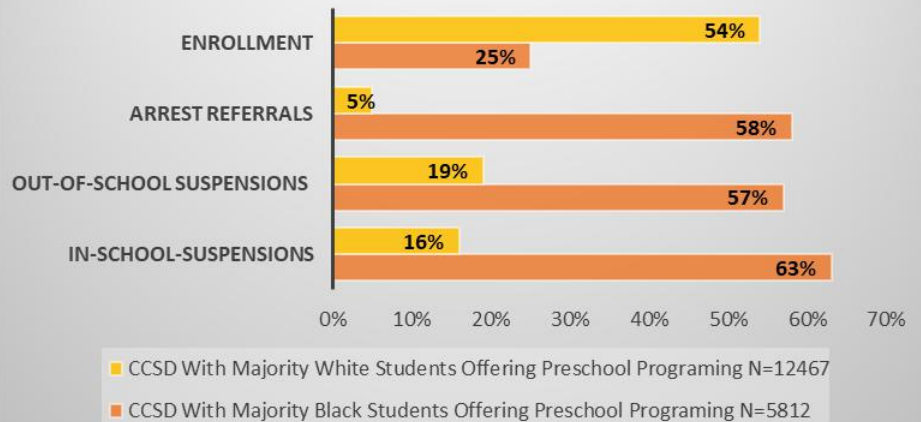




2022-23 CCSD Schools Rate of Removals Relative to Percentage and Enrollment

Figure 5

CCSD 2022-23 Removal/Exclusion Rates Schools with Predominantly Black Student Enrollments Compared to Schools with Predominantly White Student Enrollments Offering Early Childhood Programming

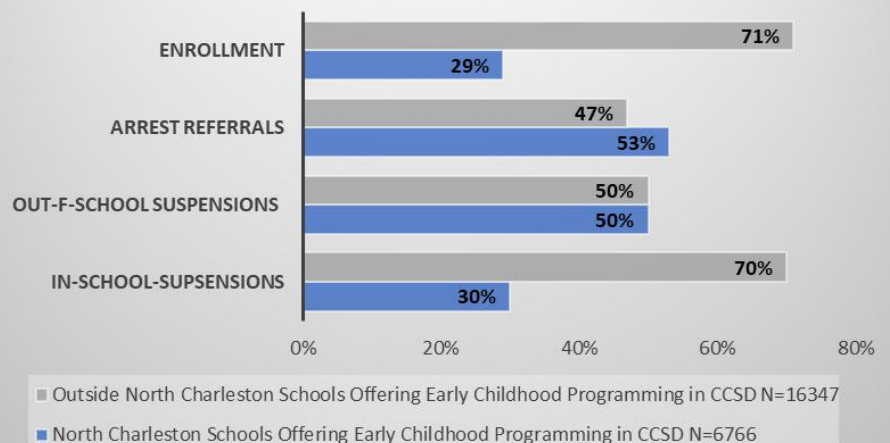


Data Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES n.d.) and SCDE Report Cards 2022-2023)

Schools with a majority (51% or more) of Black children enrolled represented 25% of the student body but accounted for 58% of the arrest referrals, 57% of out-of-school suspensions and 63% of in-school suspensions. In contrast, schools with a majority of White students represented 54% of the student body but only accounted for 5% of arrest referrals, 19% of out-of-school suspensions and 16% of in-school-suspensions in CCSD. Note: percentages do not sum to 100% because not all schools in CCSD have a majority of either Black or White students.

Figure 6

CCSD 2022-23 Removal/Exclusion Rates North Charleston Schools Compared to Schools Outside North Charleston Offering Early Childhood Programming



Data Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES n.d.) and SCDE Report Cards 2022-2023)

Students attending North Charleston Schools represented only 29% of children enrolled in CCSD but accounted for more than half (53%) of the arrest referrals and 50% of the out-of-school suspensions.

METHODOLOGY

While locally available removal data, disaggregated by race and grade level, was not available, national and state-level suspension data can be accessed through the Civil Rights Data Collection Office for Civil Rights. We used these data along with data from *Project Implicit* to directly explore the potential role of implicit bias in early childhood exclusion-based discipline.

We obtained datasets containing state and national levels of suspensions and corporal punishment for prekindergarten (4-year-old) children disaggregated by race from the Civil Rights Data Collection Office for Civil Rights.

The years included 2011-2012, 2013-2014, 2015-2016, and 2017-2018. Data points indicated the percentage of children of each race, as well as the raw numbers of pre-K students, also by race, who were subject to the following incidents: corporal punishment, expulsion, more than one out-of-school suspensions, one or more out-of-school suspensions, and pre-K children with just one out-of-school suspension.

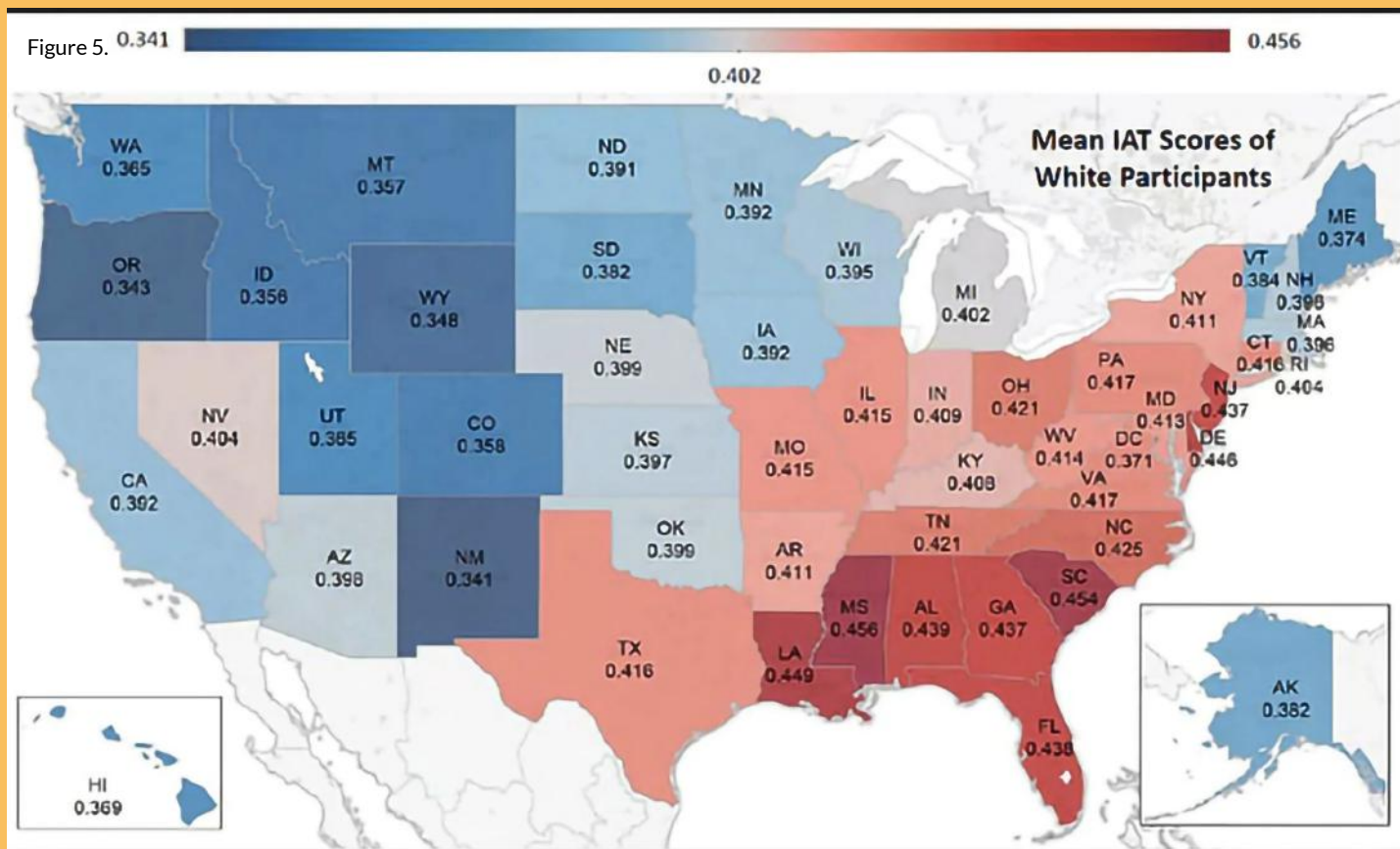
This national dataset allows state-by-state comparisons in early childhood exclusionary incidents by race. First, we ran t-tests to assess whether incidents were the same for White vs. Black 4-year-olds.

Next, we combined this dataset with publicly-available information from *Project Implicit*. Anyone over 18 years of age may participate in the Implicit Association Test (IAT) by visiting the website and then selecting a variable describing human characteristics that vary (e.g., race, gender, weight, etc.).

The IAT measures how strongly and quickly people taking the assessment match these variables to stereotypes. For example, it might test how fast someone matches the word “athletic” to an image of a young Black man.

We then used Chris Mooney’s map from his article “Across America, whites are biased and they don’t even know it” (see Figure 5). This open-access resource reflects the scores of anonymous participants, who identified as White, who have chosen to take computerized bias tests. We used scores from the people who took the IAT in a particular state to represent the state-wide average. For this study, we used each state’s aggregated pro-White bias indicator.

We note that all states are pro-White based on the aggregated results from the IAT tests, but states also vary, with pro-Whiteness more pronounced or extreme in certain states than others. South Carolina (0.454) stands out as having the second-highest pro-White score on the map, trailing only behind Mississippi (0.456) (see Figure 5).



Note: This graphic is from Project Implicit

State & National Findings

Similar to the pattern for Charleston County School District, at the national level, in 2011-2012, White-alone students made up 44 percent of 4-year-old children enrolled in early childhood pre-K programs in the United States, whereas Black children accounted for only 18 percent (Office of Civil Rights, 2011-12). If removal-based discipline was “colorblind,” the number of Black students punished would be less than half of the number of White preschoolers.

Instead, findings from the t-tests indicate significant bias when comparing the difference in removal-based discipline rates by race in the U.S. Focusing on suspensions, there was no statistical difference in the number of Black 4-year-olds suspended compared to the number of White 4-year-olds, even though White children's pre-K enrollment was more than double that of Black children. In other words, Black children are approximately 2.5 times more likely to be suspended than White children.

After analyzing the raw number of non-White preschoolers removed from school through suspensions or expulsions in the 2011-2012 Civil Rights datasets, we found that the raw number of Black children removed was non-significant at every level relative to White children. Again, these statistically equal numbers reflect bias because the number of Black children enrolled in pre-K programs in the U. S. is much lower proportionally than the number of White children.

We further examined whether removal rates for each demographic were associated with state-level IAT bias with secondary linear (regression) models:

In these models, each individual racial demographic's suspension rate was set as the response or dependent variable and mean IAT bias in that state was set as the independent variable in the 2011-2012 dataset.

This model is conceptually informed by the literature base and the interviewee findings (reported next), which suggests that implicit bias contributes to higher exclusionary discipline practices for Black children.

Similar to the results found in the raw scores analysis, for 2011-2012, the only racial group where state IAT score explained meaningful differences (i.e., statistically significant variance) in the number of suspensions and expulsions in that state was Black students. More specifically, when considering one or more suspensions, for every 0.01 increase in state average IAT score, the number of suspended Black children was predicted to increase by almost six percent.

For example, the model predicts that if state A has a mean IAT score of 0.45, Black preschoolers would comprise 60 percent of those suspended one or more times in 2011-2012. In contrast, if state B has an IAT score of 0.42, then Black preschoolers would comprise approximately 42 percent of students suspended. For all other years, both the expulsion and suspension models showed a similar pattern for Black pre-K children.

Limitations

Further research is needed to validate these early conclusions, which are limited by a few factors. First, the IAT scores are fixed at the values observed in 2014-2015, meaning the bias values could have been different for other years and potentially change the results. Also, the R-squares of the models were less than 50 percent which, while good for a social-science-based analysis, indicates other variables/factors contribute to exclusions. Demographic indicators such as sex/gender and income could improve the variance explained across children from varying backgrounds.





BEYOND THE NUMBERS: ENRICHING DATA WITH REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES

The evidence related to the removal of young Black children, which includes interview data from the local Charleston context plus our local and national quantitative analyses, points to a complex system with deep roots in culture and history. This system involves children's behavior and expression, educators' training and capacity for learning and building relationships with children and families, and center and program policies that normalize some behaviors and pathologize others. Ultimately, removing children from early childhood classrooms is a cultural practice that reflects interpersonal, local, state, national, and historical factors. These factors intersect and interact with one another, leading to different outcomes for children with similar behaviors, depending on the specific pressures, adult decisions, and resources in any given situation.

"So if a child is like, I'm totally being ignored. I'm not being cared for. I'm not being loved. A lot of kids don't have a language for that, and so the only thing they likely have will be their reaction, their behavior, and so it's important that we look at the full entire context, we look at the full entire root causes before we make the judgment that the kid is the problem, as opposed to the environment and the context being the problem." (Interviewee A).

Removal-based discipline includes suspension and expulsion, but it also includes anything that limits social and academic engagement (Williford et al., 2021). Often, educators will use 'soft exclusionary discipline,' which may include requiring students to sit alone or silently (Williford et al., 2021). As one interviewee described it:

"So it [soft exclusionary discipline] could be literally where the child is in the classroom. However, there's no engagement. So, in that case, there's no report of suspension or expulsion because the child is still in the classroom, right? But it's still exactly that—disciplinary exclusion. The child is being told; you cannot no longer play with this toy. You have to sit by yourself in this corner" (Interviewee A).

Removal from the classroom is harmful to healthy academic and social development because it takes children away from learning opportunities they may need to develop safer and more adaptive behaviors (Catherine et al., 2024; Trying Together, 2020).

Removal from the classroom also limits the teacher's ability to recognize the need for special education services. Williams and Yogman (2023) have pointed out that psychological diagnoses begin between three and five years old. Exclusion-based discipline excludes students from receiving the support they may need.

Stereotypes and Cultural Biases Impacting Perceptions of Black Children

American children of African descent come from a rich legacy of West African cultures and languages that have survived centuries of violence, enslavement, prejudice, and oppression (Love, 2019).

Meanwhile, many Black children and their teachers may not share a cultural background, which means many teachers may not understand or appreciate the young people in their charge. They may even fear children or assume the worst of some behaviors without an understanding of their origins, function, beauty, and humanity (Boykin, 1986).

One recent example shared by a mother from Charleston illustrates this point too well: a boy greeted his dear friend who had been out of the classroom sick for days. In their excitement to see each other, they hugged with such enthusiasm that both boys fell to the floor in an excited embrace, demonstrating *"the best of little Black boy love and Black joy,"* in his mother's words. The greeting child's teacher misread this situation as a "challenging behavior" and administered an in-school suspension.

To comprehend the vast gulf of misunderstanding that contributes to such a dramatic mismatch in behavior versus the resulting consequence means delving deeper into what many teachers of Black children harbor in their unconscious.

Scientific studies indicate that Black children are impacted by educator implicit bias, or “the automatic and unconscious stereotypes that drive people to behave and make decisions” (Gilliam et al., 2016, p. 3). These unconscious biases have far-reaching and real-life consequences. One study of 344 children and 106 teachers found that teacher ratings, used to make a number of high-stakes decisions, are influenced by “teacher’s characteristics and subjective judgments” of the child (An et al., 2019; p. 908). Wymer et al. (2022) found that White teachers rated Black children’s behavior as worse than White children’s, which led to more removal-based discipline: “Teachers may respond to children’s behavior problems in a way that does not support improvement in children’s ability to regulate their behavior as effectively as they might with children of their own race” (p. 40).

“So there’s all of these things, these implicit biases that we come with, even as members of the same culture, but we have well-meaning teachers or well-meaning educators who are not willing to face the fact that they have biases because they want to do good and work with these children. But unfortunately, if we don’t address what those concerns are, you just wanting to do good doesn’t rectify the fact of how these biases are playing out with our children.” (Interviewee B).

Unconscious bias is especially important when considering the disproportionate removal of Black boys from the classroom. Interviewee A stated, “We know that it’s not that Black kids actually have more problematic behaviors or more oppositional, it’s that they’re viewed already with that in mind.” Another community member confirmed: “I do think that there is a projected fear [that] these little boys are going to grow up to be big Black men.” (Interviewee C). Historically, Black men have been commonly portrayed as violent criminals. These “little Black boys,” as Interviewee C continued, “Have the weight of history’s racial and social constructs on their shoulders before they even walk into the classroom on their very first day of school.”

It is not just Black boys who enter the classroom with the burden of teachers’ preconceived notions; Black girls, too, have history on their shoulders. Multiple interviewees explained the differences in perceptions of Black boys versus Black girls: “I think girls are trained to be more compliant, to be more agreeable, whereas for boys, the comments, if you see aggression or certain behaviors, you’ll say, well, that’s just a boy. He’s just being a boy. And so certain things then become more acceptable, obviously, for boys versus girls.” (Interviewee D). Other interviewees reiterated that Black girls are expected to comply and to be compliant. More than one person said that Black girls are considered to be talkative or “sassy” whereas Black boys are perceived to be more physical. “There is not that same “fear” of sassiness as there is of physicality, “and sometimes that fear can cause folks to label more quickly.” (Interviewee C).

One interviewee who was familiar with the research pointed that educator reactions to behaviors are culturally contextualized judgments that in their early childhood programs become solidified into rules.

In any school system, as one participant noted, “a certain number of kids fit into that norm, and any child that’s an outlier or displays atypical behavior” (Interviewee E) is excluded from that norm. For example, physicality, or one’s movement, has been determined as outside of the established norm but perhaps is “a part of Black culture.” as one participant expressed (Interviewee F). These norms then become codified into school rules and codes of conduct, further confirming educators’ reactions and biases.

“I think we have this middle-class, White perspective of how we expect children to behave and that’s to sit quietly and listen to adults. And I just don’t think that is—that’s just pushing views on different cultures. And so that’s just not appropriate.” (Interviewee D).

When individual unconscious biases are solidified and codified into policies, we then have systemic bias. Interviewees described how teachers or administrators may point to their program’s code of conduct for the reasoning behind removal practices. However, these codes of conduct are written by some of those same educators. One former administrator said, “Everybody’s been invited to look at the code of conduct, provide feedback. This isn’t something that was just done to them” (Interviewee G). One takeaway here is that if rules and codes that allow children to be removed from learning were written by people, driven by unconscious bias, they can be rewritten.

Educator Cultural Competence and Professional Learning

A consistent message from our interviews is that teachers, generally, still have a lot to learn to acquire the knowledge, empathy, and pedagogical skills to effectively teach Black children (Boutte et al., 2021). Awareness of Black children’s unique strengths (Harvey, 2014) as well as challenges, given what their identity means in the U. S., are both important. For example, teachers, especially White teachers, do not always understand racial stress and how these traumatic experiences may manifest into challenging behaviors (Anderson et al., 2019; Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2022). Referring to challenging behaviors, one community member stated, “We oftentimes can read those behaviors as that is the cause and not the symptom of something else.” (Interviewee C). Without knowledge of children’s communities, cultures, and families, teachers’ efforts are rendered ineffective or retraumatizing.

Further, teachers may be perpetuating racial stress by only teaching topics that further dehumanize and/or ignore the Black experience (Anderson et al., 2019). Interviewees agreed that educators in the U.S. matriculate through inadequate teacher preparatory programs related to race; one expert weighed in, “In the preparation programs that a lot of teachers have, they have not learned about Black children and Black culture. They tend to see Black children as acultural. They don’t understand the culture.” (Interviewee F).

When teachers have not developed the capacity to teach Black children, the result may be removal-based discipline.

The presence of disabilities or developmental delays for some Black children illustrates intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), where we understand human beings holistically and not just based on a single characteristic like race. Through this lens, teachers may be additionally underprepared and ill-supported because they have not had adequate training in special education, namely how to interact effectively with children with disabilities. A researcher and administrator stated, *“Teachers just do not feel like they have the knowledge or support to deal with what they call challenging behaviors or children with disabilities...Professional learning of classroom management and de-escalation strategies “can go a long way in reducing those [suspension] numbers.”* (Interviewee D).

Interviewee D continued, *“So I’m talking to teachers who have been in the classroom for 30 years, and they do not feel like they have—after being in the classroom for 20 to 30 years—feel like they do not have the skill set to manage these challenging behaviors or children with disabilities. And they don’t feel like they have support from their program leadership either. And that’s a real problem.”*

“We all need to be part of the team of caring adults that are working together to shape this young person into the best version of themselves. But we have to, like, be on the same team first.”

At the same time, five participants agreed that a hyper-fixation on behavior management or even special education will not assuage the disproportionate rates of removal because unconscious and systemic bias will remain. Behavior management and de-escalation professional learning needs to be coupled with cultural competence and anti-bias training. This learning should then be reinforced and supported by a classroom coach and by school administrators. To effectively serve this community, interviewees agreed, we must start with self-reflection and learning about Black culture. Only then can we unpack educators’ unconscious biases and schools’ systemic biases to reduce the removal rates of Black children.

One suggestion that surfaced to address unconscious, gender, and systemic bias in schools is to hire more men, particularly Black men and educators of color. Some large-scale initiatives like Call Me Mister have endeavored to recruit, prepare, and retain more teachers from marginalized backgrounds, based on research about the power of shared cultural backgrounds between teachers and students (Jones, et al., 2019).

However, multiple interviewees agreed that while diversifying the teaching workforce is an essential priority, it cannot be the only solution. Black educators can also have unconscious biases related to race, class, and gender. For example, a middle-class teacher cannot fully understand what it is like to grow up in poverty. Similarly, a male preschool teacher might perceive the benefits of rough-and-tumble play differently than a female teacher (DiCarlo et al., 2015).

To summarize what we learned from the literature and the interviews, hiring more educators of color will not fully address the issue; teacher preparation in the context of where they teach must be part of the conversation. Specifically, the teachers hired to work in South Carolina should have an understanding of what it is like to be a Black child in that state. One parent and resident of South Carolina said:

“That’s part of like, the nature of growing up in the South ... I can’t name when I knew that racism and bias was a thing but as far back as I can remember, it has been a thing. And something that we’ve had to grapple with and navigate as parents. We educate our children to make sure that they survive. And part of that survival is teaching, like, you have to mind your manners at school in front of old folks and definitely in front of the police” (Interviewee B).

An additional barrier can be imposed by top-down curricular requirements: One community member suggested that teachers may not feel “empowered” to make changes in their school community or to exercise their autonomy in their classroom.

So, a real solution also requires collaboration and communication between families and teachers. One community member said that educators need *“To see that this little Black boy came from, you know, a big Black man you don’t need to be afraid of.”* She continued, *“We all need to be part of the team of caring adults that are working together to shape this young person into the best version of themselves. But we have to, like, be on the same team first.”* (Interviewee C).

Being on the same team means consistent, positive interactions between school and families. It also means shared goals and shared decision-making. Finally, the adults in charge must understand how their interactions can support or fail to support the children in their care.

Child and Caregiver Self-Regulation, Expression, and Behavior

For educational professionals to learn about the children they teach, they need motivation, empathy, and adequate professional preparation. Yet early childhood teachers are among the nation’s least compensated professionals, which means high turnover and stress levels.

Stressed teachers are less able to show patience, creativity, and curiosity with children. They have less time and capacity to collaborate with parents and family members about children, a prerequisite to effective behavior management and a positive classroom environment. Stressed teachers are less able to locate the support and resources necessary to do their jobs well (Hatton-Bowers, et al., 2021).

“We're all caught up in the hustle and bustle. Teachers are caught up in trying to make sure that they get through what standards they're teaching—that they're compliant with whatever state requirements are on them. And also—it's just a lot to have 10+ [or more] three- and four-year-olds running around. That's a whole lot. And so I think ... teachers are overwhelmed.” (Interviewee C)

To survive and thrive in any setting, we humans must be able to manage or self-regulate our reactions to the people and world around us. Self-regulation refers to how we manage our attention, emotions, thoughts, and behavior in response to our environment.

Being able to do this effectively means regulating our nervous system activation levels and physiological responses that inform and feed our emotional reactions and impulses (Cameron et al., 2024).

For example, a toy dropping off a table with a loud noise could startle both teachers and children; this reaction is a nervous system response. Everyone must quickly determine the source of the noise, decide it's not a safety issue, calm any bodily upset such as a fast heartbeat or desire to escape, and refocus attention on learning. Every person varies in how startled they feel and how quickly they can return to a calm state, which could also be considered a baseline level of activation that allows connection and engagement (Diamond, 2015).

The origins of self-regulation are apparent in infant attempts to self-soothe (e.g., finger-sucking) or to co-regulate (e.g., crying to bring a caregiver to them) (Rothbart et al. 2006). Self-regulation advances significantly during early childhood with the development of executive function, or a child's deliberate “top-down” attempts to focus and shift attention, redirect impulses, and use incoming information to make ongoing, adaptive choices given their activation levels and emotional responses (Blair & Raver, 2015).

Young children's self-regulation is still developing, as Interviewee A suggested: *“When you think about 36 months old, 48 months old, there's still children navigating their, their body, their behaviors, their regulation.”*

An enormous amount of developmental and educational research has focused on measuring, explaining, and promoting children's self-regulation and executive function (Kenny et al., 2023). A narrow view of preschool removal-based discipline might place “poor child self-regulation” at the center of explanations for why some children must be excluded from learning environments. This is a deficit lens (Miller-Cotto et al., 2022) that places responsibility on young children, who are embedded in a larger system and vulnerable to the adults around them.

Caregiver self-regulation is critically important and deserves more attention in telling the whole story of exclusionary practices that affect young children.

One interviewee echoed these research-based findings when she said,

“There's a lot of chaos happening in early care and education settings now because their turnover rates are even higher than before COVID. There's just a lot of instability in the early care and education system. And so, you know ... it's difficult to care for and be present and patient and sensitive to others' needs when they're [the educators] struggling with their own.” (Interviewee E).

The research base on caregiver self-regulation suggests that children learn less in classrooms where their teachers display inconsistent emotional responses (Curby et al, 2013). When caregivers are not self-regulated, they can create an environment of unpredictability or negativity, with an atmosphere of threat or uncertainty that makes focusing on learning difficult for the children in their care.

When our nervous systems are activated by stress, our attention is directed primarily to ensuring our physical and emotional safety. Stress is defined as our perception of an environment or situation that demands more from us than we have the capacity for (Anderson, 2017). Our interviewees described work settings that are overwhelming for early childhood educators:

“When I first started doing consulting in trauma-informed education, most of my work was in the school system, and it was during the pandemic, and I thought I was going to be talking to school staff and administrators about how to take care of children. But what I found very early on is that I needed to talk to school staff and administrators about how to take care of themselves, right, how to manage and navigate their own anxieties and things that they were dealing with around the pandemic, but still providing a safe and productive learning environment for students...”

...And so what I found, in addition to behavior being outside the norm, perhaps, you know, folks are dealing with their own difficulties. They're not staffed appropriately and things of that nature, and so they are not equipped to deal with some of the behaviors.” (Interviewee E).



A prerequisite to self-regulation is having our basic needs met. We note that in South Carolina, the average pay for early childhood teachers is less than \$25K per year, which ranks 47th nationally (Zippia, 2024). With such a low average salary, the argument could be made that teachers in South Carolina are unable to meet their own basic needs, which research shows negatively affects the ability to self-regulate, co-regulate, and function (O'Neill et al., 2021).

Self-regulation can be supported by familiarity, including people who behave as we expect them to and situations that we recognize and have dealt effectively with before. Through this lens, a “cultural mismatch” means that teachers and children from distinct cultural backgrounds are not used to each other; that is, familiar with and empathic toward each other’s behaviors and ways of expression. Interviewee A elaborated, “When you’re under a great deal of stress, you’re going to basically go to your people in response. [When your people aren’t there] You’re going to begin to just be automatically sort of like triggered.”

“We have so many more strict policies...and we have stripped teachers of autonomy.”

Unfamiliarity may activate some educators’ nervous system response, signaling the physiological equivalent of, Alert! Situation unknown! Threats may be present! For example, a child who speaks out in a big voice when excited by the discussion during Circle Time may disrupt a teacher’s view that children must use a low voice and raise their hands in that setting. The teacher may misread the child’s excitement as disrespect, particularly if they are already stressed: “If you’re more inclined to sort of view certain groups of children as problematic, then when you’re overly stressed, you’re probably likely to do that at a much higher level” (Interviewee A).

A more self-aware and well-prepared teacher may realize that she has drawn a particular, possibly biased or negative conclusion, and seek clarification about the child’s intentions before acting. An unaware or under-prepared teacher may discipline the child, and their self-regulation plays a role in how educators perceive children. For example, a post-COVID quantitative study asked 44 teachers to rate how likely four randomly selected children would be expelled. The study also measured teachers’ self-reported emotion regulation strategies, such as trying to *suppress* emotions, versus *reappraisal*, which refers to thinking about an event differently (Loomis et al., 2023). Teachers who reported relatively higher levels of suppression were more inclined to rate randomly selected children as being at risk for expulsion.

For those who care about young children, we pose the following big question: in a preschool classroom, who is expected to self-regulate and to exercise self-awareness, the teacher or the child? More specifically, in a situation with potentially conflictual interactions with a professional adult and child under the age of 5, who is in the best position—in terms of resources, maturity, preparedness, and self-awareness—to address any extremes of nervous system activation that may contribute to dysregulated behavior?

Program Expectations, Policies, and Supports

Teachers are not the only actors in the system that lead to removal practices. Another part of the equation that must be accounted for is program expectations, policies, and supports. Stricter standards in the higher grades mean that more structured learning has begun earlier (Bassok et al, 2016). The problem, though, is that rigorous, overly structured learning environments may not be developmentally appropriate for three-, four-, and five-year-olds.

From an interviewee with years of experience observing early childhood classrooms in Charleston County, we learned that “*Expectations for these young children are not developmentally appropriate.*” (Interviewee D). They reported that in multiple classrooms where they observed, children as young as 4 and 5 years old were expected to sit quietly and work independently for long periods of time.

Of course, many young children have not yet developed the capacity to engage in this manner, and national and international experts reiterate that they should not be expected to (Hirsh-Pacek et al 2009). Our interviewee explained what they saw in terms of the expansion of academically focused instruction and outcomes, tied to funding, that has famously turned kindergarten into first grade; two different interviewees, G and D, suggested that, “*Preschool is the new kindergarten.*”

“We have become so much more regulated. We have so many more strict policies and regulations, and we have stripped teachers of autonomy. So, they are not able to implement these developmentally appropriate practices that they are learning in their early care and education programs or these teacher certification programs. They cannot teach the way they want to teach. We have pushed down these thoughts about what school should look like. And so we’re expecting four-year-olds to do things that are just not developmentally appropriate. And so it has created all these issues in the classroom with what we call challenging behaviors. We’re asking them to do too much at too early of an age. We’re not allowing them to have time to play and be a child.” (Interviewee D).

Early childhood educational settings vary in curriculum, focus, and location, but they all share a lack of infrastructure; they have insufficient funding and less stringent preparation requirements than other grade levels.

Socially, early childhood care is also not perceived with the same respect and value as other teachers in higher grade levels. This contributes to high turnover rates, which contribute to a program’s leadership burden and the likelihood that the teachers don’t know and interact with children and families in a way that promotes mutual trust and understanding (Bassok et al., 2021).

The lack of infrastructure for early childhood care is not new. Poor funding and insufficient preparation are the results of historically contextualized implicit and systemic bias related to gender and race. One professional in the field said, *“The poor regard that society has for early care and education providers, particularly even infant toddlers, very much has roots in racism and sexism—that this is not important work, it’s not valued work, and that’s long-standing.”* (Interviewee E).

Another interviewee stated, *“We are talking about an early childhood system ... with mostly women who are underpaid, under-resourced, under-rewarded.”* (Interviewee A). Yet another interviewee mentioned, *“I think we’re so gender ... I don’t know that there is another field that is this gender biased.”* (Interviewee J). These responses suggest that the female-dominated field of early childhood education has been historically marginalized politically, financially, and culturally; relative to male-dominated sectors.

In this light, the consequences of racism are multifaceted. The field of early childhood care is not valued nationally, and the community schools serving Black children in Charleston are also overlooked: *“Well, I think the White schools have more support, more money. So, I think that’s the difference here. When I was in the White schools, they had more special educators, they had more coaches, they had more just like behavior management plans in place.”* (Interviewee D).

Indeed, multiple interviewees attributed funding disparities directly to racism, notably to district leaders ensuring that schools that serve Charleston’s wealthy White families are equipped with the best resources. Funding disparities contribute to some schools being equipped with adequate support staff, including professionals with a special education background, whereas others remain understaffed.

One person said of a suspension case involving a Black 4-year-old, *“It never would have happened in a White school because there are so many more supports in place in those schools.”* (Interviewee D). We should also note that in this case, Interviewee D noted that multiple decisions occurred before the suspension, with program leadership attempting to create a situation where the child could function, such as by shortening the child’s school day to a half day from a full-day program. However, there were no fundamental changes to classroom routines, supports, or behavioral expectations that succeeded in meeting the child’s needs.

Another structural disparity concerns adult-child ratios in South Carolina’s Pre-K and Kindergarten classrooms, where the maximum ratio is one adult per 28 students (1:28) based on average daily enrollment (SCDE, 2023-2024). Higher student caseloads can present challenges for teachers, impacting their ability to effectively implement behavioral management practices that reduce disciplinary exclusions. In contrast, Nevada requires a ratio of one adult per 16 children (1:16) in their Kindergarten classrooms (SNDE, 2022).

Moreover, Nevada reported only 21 total preschool suspensions, a stark contrast to South Carolina’s 438 suspensions in 2017-2018. Additionally, suspension disparities between Black and White students were also narrower in Nevada that year. In Nevada, Black students represented 10 percent of preschool enrollments and 14 percent of suspensions, while in South Carolina, Black preschool students accounted for 39 percent of enrollments and 61 percent of suspensions reported.

Conversely, White preschool students in Nevada constituted 36 percent of enrollments and 43 percent of suspensions, while in South Carolina, White students accounted for 31 percent of suspensions and 43 percent of enrollments (Office of Civil Rights, 2017-2018).

South Carolina’s high ratios may contribute to teachers exacting strict behavior policies and expectations for highly controlled child behavior, but that is not the whole story. Interviewee D recounted their experience observing in a kindergarten classroom where boys were kept apart and alone, but the teacher allowed girls to sit together and socialize. This person further shared that the teacher didn’t trust the boys (who were mostly Black) to socialize in a way that she would have found acceptable.

This example returns us to the theme of teacher stress and being asked to navigate situations beyond their skill set, which intersects with and may be exacerbated by racism, gender bias, and implicit bias.

Family Trust, Resources, and Advocacy

Families need to trust their child’s early childhood provider with so much: the safety and care of their child but also information about the child, their family, and their home. Trusting relationships and open communication, or the lack thereof, between families and early childhood professionals, is another factor in the system that contributes to exclusionary discipline. The importance of home-school relationships is revealed in both the interviews we held with participants and in the research literature (The Education Hub, 2019).

Based on our inquiry, there were three intersecting issues related to family trust in their child’s early childhood program: (a) home-school cultures and expectations; (b) communicating effectively with families when supporting child behavior that the educator finds distressing; and (c) accessing outside supports such as evaluation for therapy services.

Home-School Culture and Expectations

Teacher distress, based on perceived problematic behavior, serves as a starting point of the system’s view of early childhood exclusion. While some children’s behavior indicates that the child may also be distressed, at least some child behavior is developmentally appropriate and/or, as two interviewees put it, *“Just children being children”*. It is important to distinguish between child behavior that teachers misunderstand and child behavior that indicates a consistent mismatch where the child’s needs are rarely met.

Families and classrooms have their own distinct cultures; particular ways of communicating, moving, eating, learning, resting, celebrating, etc. One key insight is teachers may hold expectations of children that are not aligned with home and family expectations. These expectations, uninformed by knowledge of the child’s home culture, can lead to teachers finding behaviors problematic that the child typically and adaptively displays at home. It is incumbent upon teachers to become educated about individual children, their families, and the home/community culture. This wisdom can help teachers understand differences in how some children express themselves and behave in the classroom setting.

Communicating Effectively with Families When Supporting Child Behavior

We previously discussed adult-child ratios, as well as teacher preparation and skills related to working with children who have significant mental health concerns and who may qualify for special education services. When classroom staff are not able to provide interactions and experiences that meet the needs of individual children, this indicates a mismatch.

When a mismatch occurs, staff may try to communicate with families to learn sources of stress at home and/or strategies that may benefit the child. However, the communication may not acknowledge the program's own expectations and contributing factors to the mismatch, but may instead identify the child as a "behavioral child" or otherwise blame the child. Such a dynamic can contribute to families mistrusting their child's school.

In one qualitative study, the researchers described a turning point in trying to meet a child's needs where communication breaks down between the program and families (Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2022). Multiple interviewees similarly described a process where teachers may attempt to support children, but home-school communication is ineffective. One person stated, *"If families aren't responsive, they may suspend the child to punish the family."* (Interviewee D).

Accessing Outside Supports

If an educator believes that a child needs additional support, having earned the trust of families is critical because families must give permission for their child to be evaluated for additional services. One concern that interviewees local to Charleston shared was gatekeeping, where CCSD did not permit outside agencies to enter their schools to provide therapeutic services to students. Gatekeeping was reportedly happening at the district level, even when families and teachers had requested outside evaluation or consultation. One person, a mental health consultant, said, *"I'll say for Charleston specifically, they are so strict. We have not been able to get into the school system even when we get families that are referring ... I've tried to ask, hey, what is the boundary? What is the roadblock that we can't help these children within the classrooms or the preschool settings, particularly if they're five and under?"* (Interviewee I)

This interviewee referenced specific cases in which she experienced bureaucratic 'red tape' preventing her from providing consultation services to preschoolers in Charleston. Another interviewee confirmed: *"Charleston County School District has refused to let them in, even with support from the teachers, the parents, the principals."* (Interviewee K).



"Preschool expulsions and suspensions are not child behaviors; they are adult decisions..."-Walter Gilliam



Multiple Pathways to Keep Children in School

Families need their young children to go to childcare or preschool. To be able to work and care for other family members including younger children, means reliable and safe early education must be in place. Families of young children who were suspended or expelled report feeling a lack of communication with teachers or efforts to contact teachers and programs that went nowhere (Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2022).

Meanwhile, not every child with the same behavior ends up removed from their learning environment. We created two figures to illustrate the factors that contribute to a child being removed (Figure 6A) vs. those that allow a child to remain in school (Figure 6B).

Figure 6A synthesizes results to show that exclusion emerges from scarcity, when resources including time and outside supports are not available or not accessible. Decisions to remove children whose behavior distresses their teacher are actually supported by policy rather than individualized responses with the child's best interests in mind.

In contrast, Figure 6B shows multiple pathways to keep children in school. Depending on the situation and people involved, it may be appropriate to support teachers with a coach who can develop cultural awareness, to provide families with resources, or to ensure a child is assessed for additional support.

Figure 6A

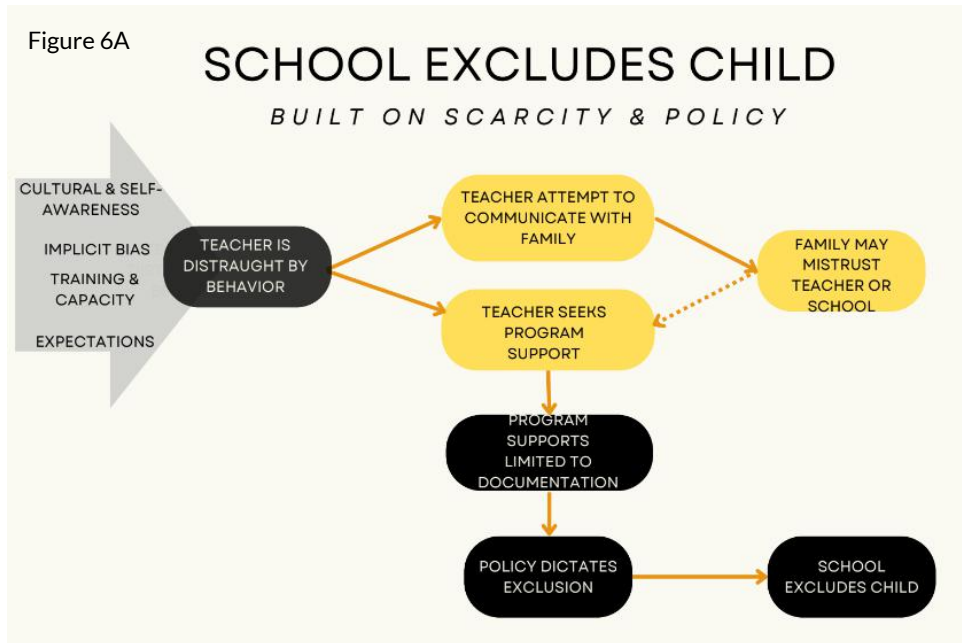
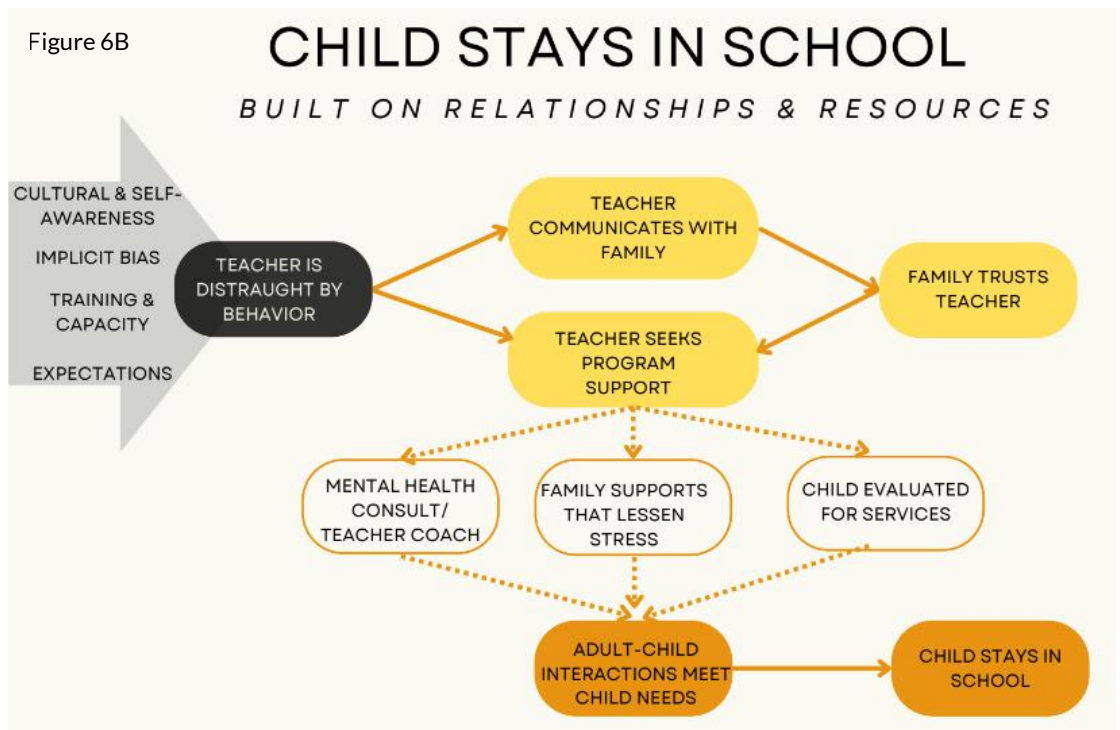
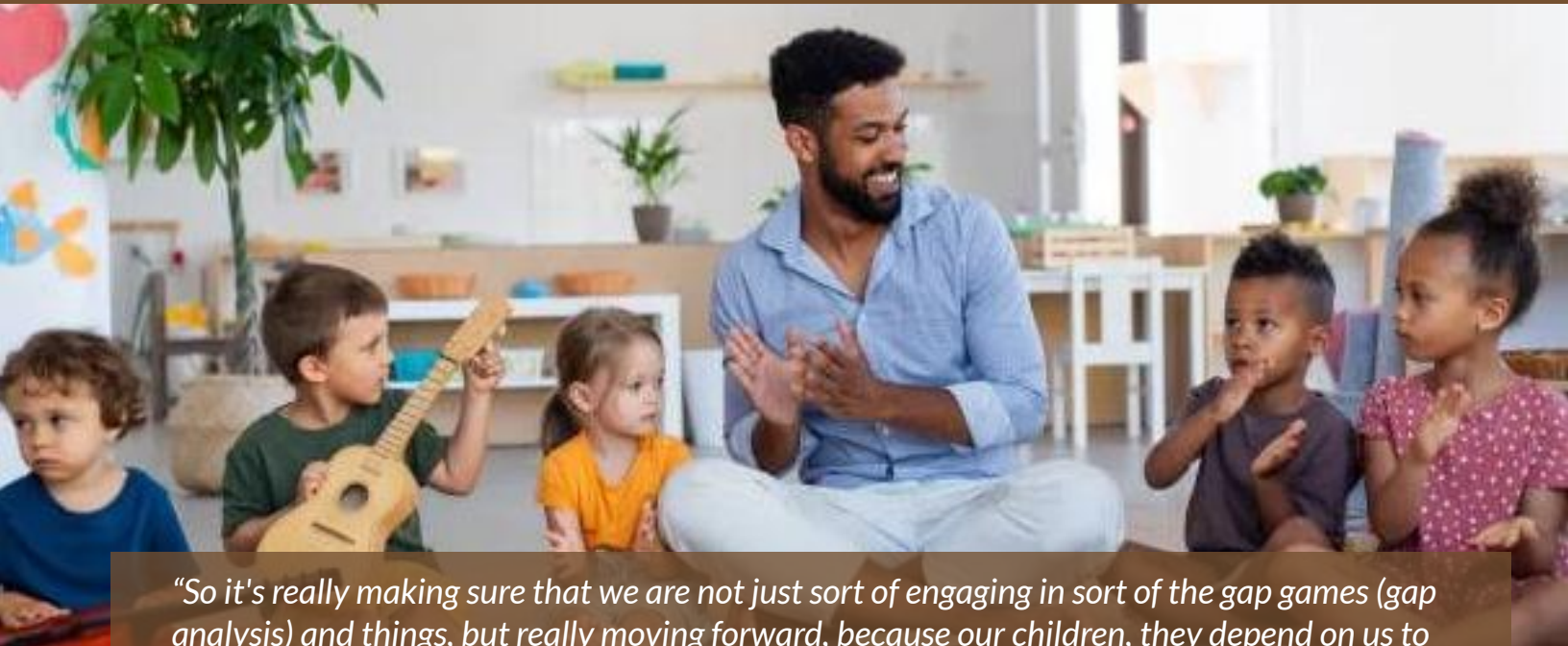


Figure 6B



RECOMMENDATIONS



“So it's really making sure that we are not just sort of engaging in sort of the gap games (gap analysis) and things, but really moving forward, because our children, they depend on us to find solutions to the problems that they're experiencing.” (Interviewee A)

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

The research, insights, and findings highlighted in this report underscore an urgent need to identify research-informed recommendations to prevent exclusion-based discipline generally and the disproportionate removal of Black preschoolers from their schools and classrooms, specifically.

State education and local program leaders can take actionable steps to promote safe, nurturing and inclusive environments for our youngest learners. Parents and family members can also play a role in preventing discriminatory removal of their child from the early learning environment.

Based on the collective knowledge from educators, parents, and early childhood development experts representing South Carolina, Charleston and beyond, we recommend the following:

CALL FOR BETTER DATA

The evidence is clear that high rates of suspensions and expulsions of Black preschoolers are not a child problem—this is a systemic problem rooted in adult behavior and decision-making. However, researchers and educators need better data to deepen our understanding of the institutional program-level factors that perpetuate inequities in preschool learning environments. Our data collection and analysis were significantly hindered by the lack of accessible disciplinary data disaggregated by various student characteristics including gender, age, race, income, and disability.

A “free and open data” approach, spearheaded by the U.S. Department of Education and Office of Civil Rights, should be part of a stronger effort in coordination with state education departments and local school districts to produce and analyze data that helps understand the early learning environments of our youngest learners—with a specific focus on the experiences of Black preschoolers. To that end, we provide three recommendations to better understand and address bias in the suspensions and expulsions of underserved preschool children.

- Require early childcare providers that receive public funding to report program data about removal practices, policies and strategies implemented to prevent them.
- Strengthen states' and school districts' capacity to collect and analyze data on removal-based discipline practices. This system should track incidents by demographics, reasons for disciplinary actions and outcomes; such detailed data is necessary to adequately inform policy and practice.
- Improve data linking and coordination across early childhood programming to better track referrals, services, and support offered to preschool children at risk of suspension and expulsion.



Education & Policy Leaders

- **Recruit Black educators, with particular attention to Black men**, while also actively seeking to increase male representation in general in early childhood education. Educators from diverse backgrounds, particularly males, can offer perspectives that challenge racial and gender stereotypes, thereby reducing misunderstandings or bias that might otherwise lead to exclusionary discipline. State, education, and policy leaders can invest in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that offer early childhood programs and expand initiatives like the Call Me Mister (CMM) program that has successfully recruited and retained Black male professional educators.
- **Allocate funding for early childhood education at levels comparable to K-12 education with specific funding for the following:**
 - **Increase pay for early childhood educators**, which can improve the field's professional regard and value and attract a more diverse and broader range of talent. We note that in South Carolina, the average annual pay for early childhood teachers is less than \$25K, which ranks 47th nationally (Zippia, 2024).
 - **Mandate and pay educators to complete ongoing unconscious bias training and professional development.** Unconscious bias training can help educators become aware that bias is a human tendency; acceptance and awareness of one's own biases can lead to greater understanding of how implicit prejudices can influence interactions with children and lead to harmful disciplinary decisions. Training should include strengths-based approaches to teaching Black children, promote building strong relationships with families and provide strategies to prevent removal-based discipline.
- **Allocate funding to increase professional resources**, including mental health consultants and professionals trained in culturally responsive practices. This can assist preschool teachers in recognizing and addressing underlying social-emotional challenges or effects of trauma that may appear as behavioral issues.
- **Decrease South Carolina's child-to-staff ratios** to improve educators' ability to manage behaviors, increase supervision, and implement culturally responsive practices in preschool classrooms. High child-to-teacher ratios are highly correlated with increased rates of removal. The 2023-24 SCDE Accreditation Standards allow a child-teacher ratio of 28:1 for Pre-K-5th grade classrooms based on average daily enrollment, which is significantly higher than the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) recommendations of 10:1 for preschool (30 months-5 years old); 12:1 for students enrolled in public or private Kindergarten and 15:1 for school age (K-3) students. The South Carolina Department of Social Services (DSS) and SCDE, responsible for licensing and regulating child development programming, should establish child-to-staff ratios based on evidence-based guidelines.
- **Raise awareness about new discipline reform** legislation prohibiting suspensions, expulsions, and corporal punishment in publicly funded preschools and early childcare settings. South Carolina was the last state in the country to repeal corporal punishment, which no longer allows children to be physically disciplined in early childcare centers. Raising awareness that this practice is now criminalized and punishable by law can mitigate harmful interactions between teachers and children and decrease preschool and school-age suspensions.



Educators

- **Learn about the impact of "soft" removal-based discipline**, where even instructing children to sit alone silently can negatively affect their social-emotional development. Such practices can deprive children of essential early learning experiences and the opportunity to develop self-regulation skills.
- **Act and advocate:**
 - **Request racial equity, unconscious bias, and restorative practices training.** Teachers must reflect on their biases and how it can influence interactions with children and disciplinary decisions.
 - **Provide proactive, strength-based, developmentally appropriate education.** Children under 5 years display a range of cultural and developmental differences that can be misinterpreted as behavior disturbances. Teachers can educate themselves with books about teaching children from diverse backgrounds and of African descent to create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment. We recommend: *We Be Lovin' Black Children: Learning to Be Literate about the African Diaspora* by Dr. Gloria Swindler-Boutte and *We Want to Do More Than Survive* by Dr. Bettina Love. Another example can be found at the University of Pittsburgh, which offers a course to cultivate adult and child social-emotional development through the lens of social justice and equity. By learning and appreciating children's cultural differences, educators can provide strength-based approaches to learning to enhance a sense of belonging and child development.
- **Build trust and strong relationships with families.** Educators are encouraged to get to know their children's families and prioritize building relationships with children from backgrounds they may be less familiar with or children they may perceive to be displaying disruptive behaviors. By fostering open communication and collaboration, teachers can gain valuable insights into cross-cultural differences in adult-child interactions and develop a more holistic approach to support the child's growth and well-being.
- **Engage all children.** Teach social-emotional learning through a cultural lens to promote self-regulation and empathy and create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all children. By recognizing and celebrating each child's unique identity, educators can foster a sense of belonging and promote positive social interactions.





Parents & Families

- **Build a relationship with your child's teacher** and share if there are any changes or family stresses in your child's life that may impact their behavior. Parents can stay informed about their child's progress and proactively address concerns using any of the following strategies:
 - **Ask about the good and challenging parts of your child's day** to maintain open communication with the teacher and program staff.
 - **Ask for resources to support your child** and collaborate on strategies that can be effective both at home and in the program setting.
 - **Volunteer in the classroom (especially male family members)** to create a stronger sense of community in the school, bridge cultural gaps and promote empathy and respect for diverse backgrounds.
- **Support your child:**
 - **Talk to your children about feelings** to help them understand and express their feelings in a healthy way. Also, let your child's teacher know about the strategies your child is learning, to assist in creating an environment where your child feels safe to share how they are feeling.
- **Engage your community:**
 - **Attend meetings or join your local school board, parent-teacher associations or non-profit organizations** to raise awareness of disparities in school-age and preschool suspensions. Parents can collaborate to advocate for legislative changes aimed at addressing inequitable resource allocation and promote policies that prioritize early childhood education.
 - **Request classroom observation** or an evaluation by a psychologist if you believe your child may need additional support. Work closely with the teacher and preschool program to ensure your child receives the appropriate intervention and accommodations to support their development to eliminate the need for removal-based discipline.



APPENDIX A

Front of "2-Pager" Initial Summary of Findings



South Carolina leads the Nation in preschool suspensions.

Black children represent the greatest proportion of suspended students in the state. Studies indicate that Black children are frequently impacted by educators' implicit racial biases. Black children are perceived as older, less innocent, more prone to aggression, and more deserving of harsher punishment compared to their non-Black peers.

For every **10** preschoolers suspended in the US, **1** is a Black child from South Carolina



Suspended and expelled preschoolers are

10 times

more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure, and face jail time.



Black Children in South Carolina make up 61% of the state's preschool suspensions but only 39% of enrolled children.

Home to the most Black children in Charleston County Schools, **North Charleston Schools** that offer preschool programming are overrepresented in suspension and expulsion rates despite representing only 28% of student enrollments.

> 46% **Out-of-school Suspensions**

> 37% **Arrest Referrals**

< 28% **Enrolled**

1. Equal Justice Society (2018). Breaking the chains 2: The preschool-to-prison pipeline epidemic.

2. U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2021). Discipline practices in public schools (2017-18).

3. South Carolina School Report Cards, Charleston County School District 2022-23, <https://screportcards.com/files/2023//data-files/>



APPENDIX B

Back of "2-Pager"

Initial Recommendations

Opportunities for Change



This is not a child problem.
This is a systemic issue
rooted in adult behavior and
decision-making.



What can early education and policy leaders do?

Recruit and train more teachers of color. This will take dedicated funding.

Provide, require, and pay for racial equity and implicit bias training that is strengths-based, inclusive, and historically aware.

Provide preventative care and mental health consultants and experts in culturally sustaining and anti-racist practice to assist preschool teachers in recognizing and addressing underlying social-emotional challenges or effects of trauma that may appear as behavioral issues.

Pass laws banning exclusionary discipline, allowing it only for immediate and serious safety threats, and mandating restorative practices to prevent suspensions and expulsions.

Require publicly funded early education providers to report data on exclusionary practices and supports used to prevent suspensions and expulsions, disaggregated by race and gender.



Preschool suspensions and expulsions are discriminatory and deprive Black children of crucial early learning experiences and have lifelong consequences.

What can families do?

Support your child

- Embrace teaching children about race
- Talk about big feelings
- Stay calm when disciplining
- Seek mental health support

Connect with your child's teacher

- Ask about the good and hard parts of your child's day
- Share family stresses with the teacher

Engage your community

- Find a community member who knows the resources available to support your child
- Request classroom observation or an evaluation by a psychologist, occupational therapist, or speech-language pathologist

What can teachers do?

Be aware

- Even requiring children to sit alone silently ("soft" exclusionary discipline) can be harmful to healthy development
- Children under 5 display a range of cultural and developmental differences that can be misinterpreted as behavioral disturbances
- Reflect on your implicit biases and how these influence your teaching

Act and advocate

- Request racial equity, implicit bias, and restorative practices training
- Provide proactive, strengths-based, and developmentally appropriate redirection

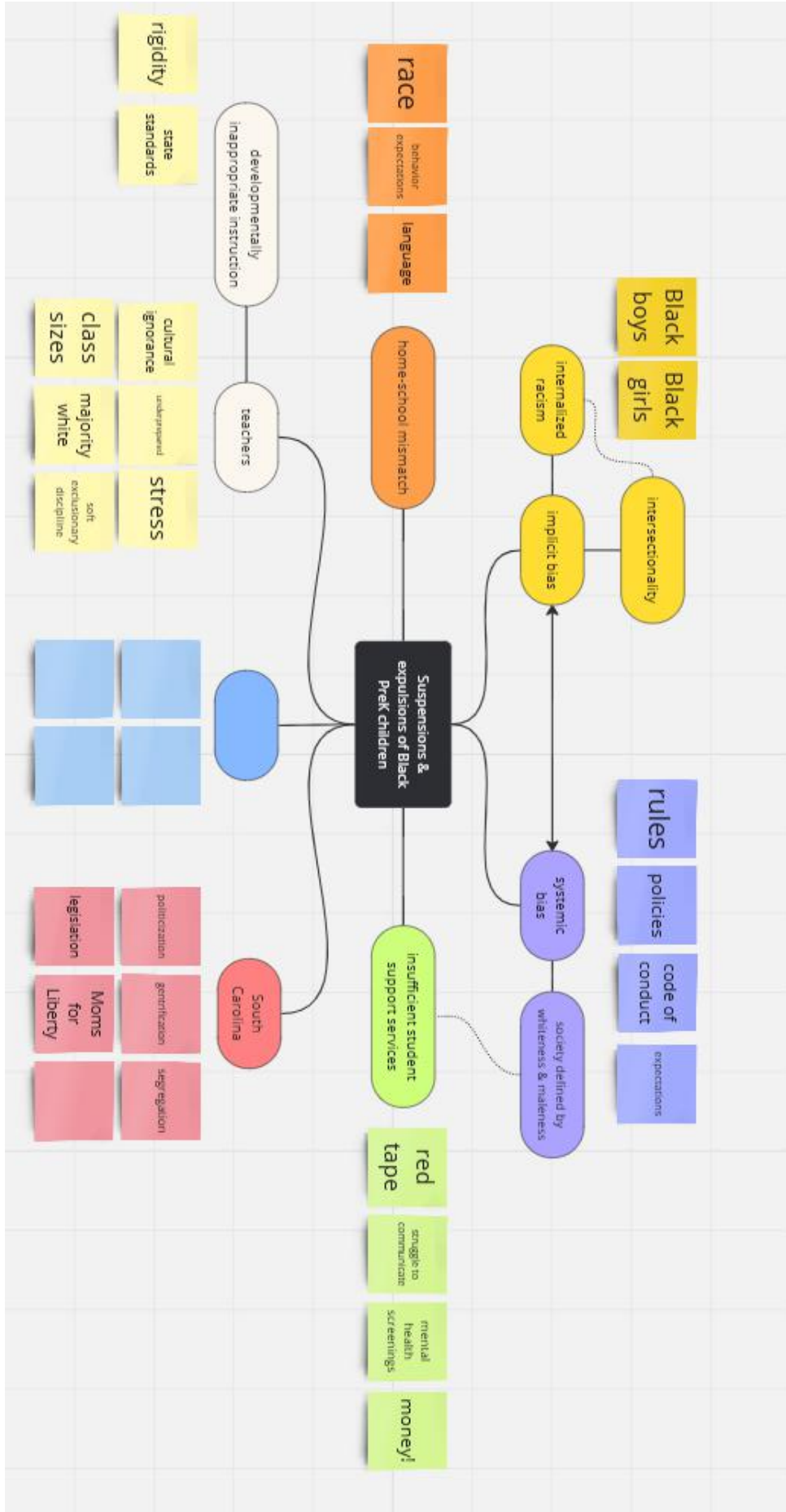
Engage all children

- Teach social-emotional learning
- Seek support for student behaviors
- Keep children in your classroom



APPENDIX C

Map of Qualitative Interview Themes



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