



STRENGTHENING THE FOUNDATION: NATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO END DISCRIMINATORY PRESCHOOL SUSPENSIONS

"It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men," Frederick Douglass once said, emphasizing the critical need to nurture and guide young children's development, rather than turning to ineffective punitive measures. In the United States, the disproportionately high rates of suspensions and expulsions among Black preschoolers have become a significant concern, with far-reaching consequences for both children and families. Each year, approximately 17,000 preschoolers are suspended or expelled, and half of these children are Black boys (Zeng et al., 2019). These practices deny children access to critical early education and place additional strain on families who rely on preschools for care and early development (Gilliam et al., 2016; U.S. Departments of HHS and ED, 2016).

At the heart of these disparities is implicit bias, which often leads educators and staff to view Black children's behavior more negatively than their White peers, resulting in harsher disciplinary actions. However, the issue goes beyond individual actions; it is rooted in systemic inequality, a lack of resources, and insufficient training for educators. Addressing these issues is essential to ensuring that preschool classrooms become environments where all children can thrive, particularly Black children who are disproportionately affected by exclusionary practices.

ImpactSTATS Inc.'s recent report, *Facing a Broken System: Addressing Suspensions and Expulsions of Young Black Children in South Carolina*, highlights these inequities, revealing that South Carolina leads the nation in preschool suspensions, with Black preschoolers disproportionately affected.

The report's findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reform at both national and local levels. These recommendations build on those findings, advocating for a shift from exclusionary discipline to strategies that prioritize early intervention, support, and equity.

Moving forward, the recommendations outlined in this brief provide targeted strategies to reduce exclusion-based discipline. Key areas of focus include recruiting Black educators, particularly Black men, into early childhood education, improving data collection to better track disparities, increasing support for educators through unconscious bias training, and fostering partnerships with families to ensure that children's needs are met both in the classroom and at home. Moreover, the "Multiple Pathways to Keep Children in School" chart on page 5 illustrates ways to support children, educators, and families in preventing removals, ensuring that children remain in classrooms where they can grow and learn.

As we work toward solutions, it is important to remember the essence of Frederick Douglass's words: by focusing on prevention and support during a child's earliest years, we are not just avoiding future challenges—we are building the strong, resilient children who will form the foundation of a better society for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS



OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

There is an urgent need for targeted action to prevent exclusion-based discipline and address the disproportionate removal of Black preschoolers from classrooms across the United States. National education and early childhood program leaders must take steps to ensure safe, nurturing, and inclusive environments for all young learners. Parents and family members also play a critical role in preventing discriminatory removals from early learning settings.

Drawing on insights from educators, parents, and early childhood development experts across the country, we propose the following recommendations:

CALL FOR BETTER DATA

1. Recommendation: Expand the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) to Include Early Childhood Education

To address the disparities in exclusionary discipline practices for preschoolers, we recommend expanding the scope of the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) to include publicly funded early childhood programs.

The CRDC's existing framework for collecting disaggregated data by race, gender, and disability provides a strong model for tracking disciplinary actions in K-12 settings and can be adapted to ensure similar data is collected for preschool-aged children.

Key elements of this expanded data collection should include:

- Annual reporting on suspensions, expulsions, and "soft" exclusionary discipline practices by publicly funded preschools and early learning centers.
- Disaggregation of data by race, gender, income level, disability status, and other key demographic factors to better understand the root causes of disparities.
- Public access to the data, ensuring that researchers, policymakers, and advocates can use the information to drive policy reforms and equity-based interventions.

By building on the CRDC's successful data collection infrastructure, this expansion would provide the detailed information needed to address exclusionary discipline and improve equity in early childhood education.



Proposed Solutions for Education & Policy Leaders

2. Recruit Black Educators, Particularly Black Men, and Increase Male Representation in Early Childhood Education

Recruiting Black male educators is key to challenging racial and gender stereotypes and reducing exclusionary discipline in early childhood education. Federal and state leaders should invest in HBCUs offering early childhood programs and expand successful initiatives like the **Call Me MISTER** program, which recruits, mentors, and supports Black male educators.

Model Policy: Call Me MISTER Program

The Call Me MISTER program recruits Black men into teaching by providing mentorship, financial support, and academic guidance, particularly in early childhood and elementary settings.

Expansion Opportunities:

- **Increase Funding for HBCUs:** Allocate federal and state funds to expand Call Me MISTER across more HBCUs, building a pipeline of Black male educators.
- **National Expansion:** Replicate the program at institutions nationwide to diversify the early childhood education workforce and reduce disparities in discipline.
- **Professional Support:** Enhance the program with culturally responsive training and ongoing mentorship to ensure long-term success for Black male educators.

3. Expand Access to Professional Resources

Providing access to mental health consultants and culturally responsive professionals is essential for helping educators address students' social-emotional challenges. **The Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC)** model offers a proven framework for reducing behavioral issues and exclusionary discipline.

Model Policy: Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation

The ECMHC model helps reduce suspensions by giving educators access to mental health consultants who support strategies for managing challenging behaviors.

Expansion Opportunities:

- **Scale Nationwide:** Federal and state governments should fund ECMHC programs nationwide, ensuring all educators have access to mental health professionals.
- **Integration with Teacher Training:** Incorporate ECMHC into teacher training programs, equipping educators with the skills to manage social-emotional challenges.

4. Reduce Child-to-Staff Ratios

High child-to-teacher ratios increase the likelihood of removals, particularly for children with challenging behaviors. Federal regulations should adopt NAEYC standards for optimal ratios to improve teacher-child interactions and reduce exclusionary discipline.

Model Policy: NAEYC Standards

NAEYC guidelines recommend smaller class sizes, which research shows reduce behavioral issues and promote better teacher-child engagement.

Expansion Opportunities:

Federal Adoption: Implement NAEYC's evidence-based child-to-staff ratios nationwide through federal regulations.
State Funding: Provide state-level funding to help programs hire more staff and meet ratio requirements.

Educators

5. Address the Impact of "Soft" Removal-Based Discipline

Model Policy: Pyramid Model for Promoting Social-Emotional Competence The Pyramid Model offers a framework for reducing exclusionary practices, including "soft" removals, which can harm children's social-emotional development. By encouraging active participation and promoting self-regulation, this model fosters inclusive, supportive learning environments.

Recommendation: Educators should adopt the Pyramid Model to prevent the use of "soft" removals, ensuring that children are fully engaged in learning and developing essential social-emotional skills.

6. Advocate for Racial Equity, Unconscious Bias, and Restorative Practices Training

Model Policy: Restorative Justice Practices Restorative justice training, alongside unconscious bias training, equips educators to reflect on how biases influence disciplinary decisions and to foster racial equity in classrooms.

Recommendation: Implement restorative justice and unconscious bias training in all early childhood programs, ensuring educators are prepared to address biases and promote racial equity in discipline.



7. Use Proactive, Strength-Based Approaches

Model Policy: Strengths-Based Approach to Early Childhood Development The strengths-based approach, integrated into programs like Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC), helps educators use proactive, developmentally appropriate methods to address behavioral differences, particularly in diverse classrooms.

Recommendation: Expand the use of strengths-based approaches such as those outlined in the ECMHC model to promote positive, developmentally appropriate behavioral interventions in early childhood settings, especially for children from diverse cultural backgrounds.



Parents & Families

8. Build Relationships with Teachers and Share Information

Model Policy: Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education (Head Start Standards)

The Head Start Family Engagement Framework emphasizes strong partnerships between families and educators. It encourages families to share important life changes or stressors that may impact a child's behavior, ensuring teachers can provide the necessary support.

Recommendation: Early childhood programs should follow the Head Start model by facilitating regular family-teacher communication, encouraging parents to share insights that help educators understand and respond to children's behavioral needs.

9. Volunteer in Classrooms to Promote Cultural Diversity

Model Policy: Male Involvement in Early Childhood (Watch D.O.G.S. Program) The Watch D.O.G.S. (Dads of Great Students) program encourages male family members to volunteer in schools, enhancing male engagement and promoting a respectful, culturally inclusive learning environment.

Recommendation: Early childhood programs should expand on models like Watch D.O.G.S. to encourage male family members to volunteer in classrooms, helping to build strong community ties and respect for cultural diversity.

10. Engage with the Community to Advocate for Legislative Reforms

Model Policy: Community Advocacy for Equity (Stand for Children) Stand for Children empowers families to engage with local schools, school boards, and policymakers to address disparities and advocate for equitable educational reforms.

Recommendation: Encourage families to engage with advocacy programs like Stand for Children to raise awareness of disparities in preschool suspensions and work toward legislative reforms that ensure more equitable disciplinary practices.



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 1A) vs. those that allow a child to remain in school (Figure 1B).

Figure 1A 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 1B 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 1A

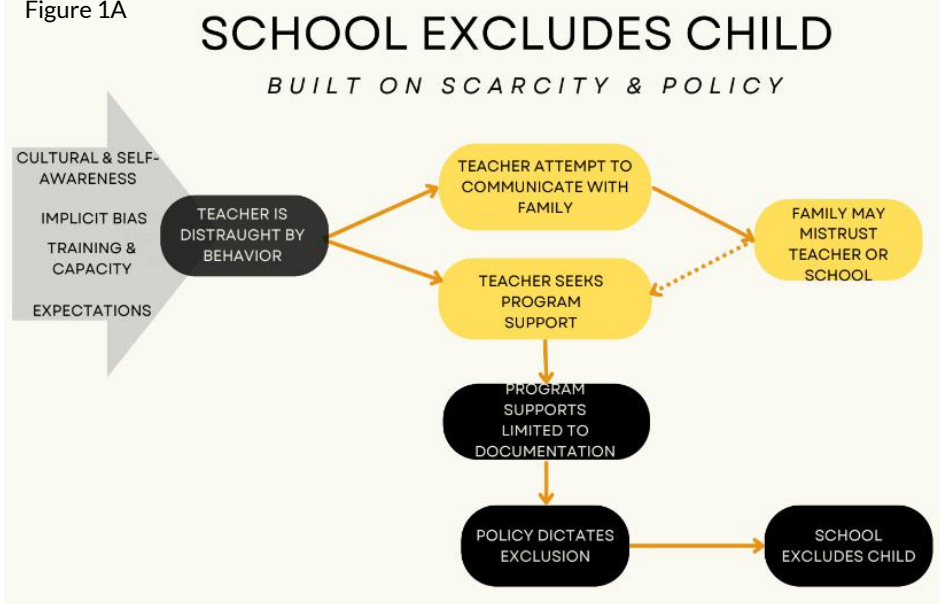
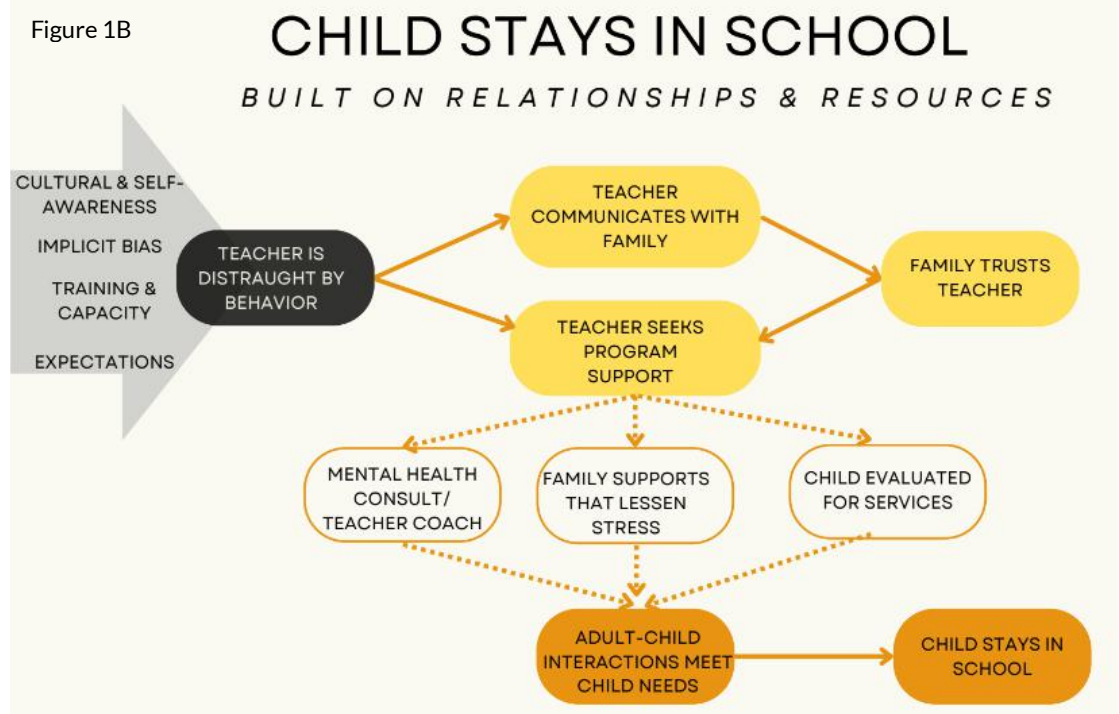


Figure 1B



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