



End Early Childhood Suspensions and Expulsions: Developmentally Appropriate Practices and Policies For Addressing Behaviors In The Early Elementary School Grades

WHY SUSPENSIONS AND EXPULSIONS?

The Trying Together public policy agenda calls for an end to suspensions and expulsions for children birth through age nine in all early childhood settings. Children cannot learn if they are excluded from places of learning. Exclusionary discipline practices like suspensions and expulsions threaten the well-being of children during an important time in their development. Our vision to eliminate exclusionary discipline focuses on preventative and responsive strategies for healthy child development. We understand that in order to move away from suspensions and expulsions there must be supports, resources, and reliable alternatives for educators and families. Developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) and policies are solutions grounded in child development research that benefit students, educators, caregivers, and families. The focus of this paper is on the early elementary grades - pre-kindergarten through third grade.

WE KNOW EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE IS A PROBLEM.¹

- According to national Civil Rights Data Collection, Black students are three times more likely to be suspended and expelled than white students in K-12 public schools.
- Students with disabilities are two times more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions.
- Pennsylvania is one of eleven states to report a disproportionately higher suspension rate than the national average for Black students compared to white students regardless of sex:
 - 22% Black boys compared to 5% white boys.
 - 13% Black girls compared to 2% white girls.
- Similar to the state, Allegheny County suspension data also shows stark racial disparities. The suspension rate for Black students is 7.3 times higher compared to non-Black students.²

WE KNOW SUSPENSIONS OR EXPULSIONS ARE NOT DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE WAYS TO ADDRESS BEHAVIORS.

- Young children who are suspended or expelled are 10 times more likely to dropout of high school, hold negative school attitudes, and face incarcerations. Suspensions during the early years may increase the likelihood of suspensions throughout the school career.³

- Imposing negative consequences may increase negative behavior. Children who are removed from the classroom return to school farther behind and have little or no support to catch up.⁴
- Often young children who are pushed out of the classroom need intervention and support. Some children may have undiagnosed behavioral or developmental disabilities mislabeled as a “challenging behavior”.⁵ This impedes the intervention process to get children the services they are entitled to under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
- Expulsions and suspensions are adult decisions. Research from the Yale Child Study shows implicit bias leads to a disproportionate impact for Black pre-kindergarten students. Dr. Walter Gilliam found teachers tend to observe Black students, especially Black boys, when expecting a negative behavior.⁶

POLICY BACKGROUND

FEDERAL CONTEXT

In 2014, the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education policy statement on expulsion and suspension raised awareness about the negative educational and life outcomes associated with suspending students in the early years.⁷ Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education released a resource guide to support states and local school districts to develop positive school climates and improve school discipline policies. The federal guide emphasizes best practices and research for (1) creating positive climates and focusing on prevention; (2) developing clear, appropriate, and consistent expectations and consequences to address disruptive behaviors; and (3) ensuring fairness, equity, and continuous improvement.⁸

PENNSYLVANIA CONTEXT

The Commonwealth is also working to address the problem of exclusionary discipline in the early years. The Pennsylvania consolidated state *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) plan prioritizes positive school climate and social emotional learning. The plan highlights the school climate survey and school climate leadership initiative which aims to increase the capacity of educators to lead school climate improvement efforts.⁹ The Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) released announcements and tools to accompany the federal initiatives.¹⁰ Additionally, two bills introduced in the Pennsylvania House in 2017 proposed a ban on out-of-school suspension and expulsion for non-violent behaviors for students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Other state legislatures are responding to the issue of exclusionary discipline. California¹¹, Maryland¹², and Connecticut¹³ passed state laws prohibiting the use of suspension for minor offenses for children in third grade or younger.

REGIONAL CONTEXT

The Center on Race and Social Problems at the University of Pittsburgh released a report in August 2018 entitled, *Just Discipline and the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Greater Pittsburgh: Local Challenges and Promising Solutions* (herein referred to as the *Just Discipline* report). The report, which was funded by The Heinz Endowments African American Men and Boys Initiative, examined the suspension data of 51 traditional public school districts and charter networks in Allegheny County in the 2012-2013 and 2015-2016 school years. The data shed light on the challenges and problems with suspension across the county including that one third of districts have higher suspension rates than the County and state as well as a breakdown of suspension ratios for Black vs. non-Black students in 2015-2016 - showing disproportionate suspension rates at nearly half the districts and networks in the County. It is critical to recognize the trends of suspension in Allegheny County in order to address the problem and mitigate the school-to-prison pipeline. In addition to highlighting the challenges and needs for improvement, the report also

outlines a robust guide for solutions - labeled the *Just Discipline and Climate Model* which is an integrated approach that acknowledges the resources needed to support the sustainable implementation of district and schoolwide policies. As the state and districts encourage (and in some instances require) a shift away from the use of exclusionary practices, the report provides the context for our region and a solid foundation for promising practices that will support educators with alternative solutions to address student behaviors.¹⁴

SCHOOL DISTRICT CONTEXT

The Education Rights Network, an initiative of One Pennsylvania, led the “Solutions, Not Suspensions” campaign to end the overuse and disproportionate impact of suspensions in Pittsburgh Public Schools. In December 2017, the Pittsburgh Public School Board voted to eliminate suspensions for minor, non-violent offenses for students in pre-k through second grade, which made the district the first in the state to pass a ban.¹⁵ Similarly, in June 2018 the Philadelphia School Reform Commission adopted a change to the Student Code of Conduct to expand the out-of-school suspension ban to include first and second grade in addition to kindergarten. The Education Law Center, ACLU of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Student Union, and One Pennsylvania advocated for the ban and collaborated with the district to make it happen.¹⁶ The passing of the ban is a first step in addressing disparities in exclusionary discipline and supporting students to rightfully remain in the classroom. Pittsburgh and Philadelphia have the opportunity to serve as an example for how the implementation of a suspension ban rolls out in Pennsylvania school districts. Both policies took effect at the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year.

RESPONDING TO THE DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN

State and district policy changes must be accompanied by thoughtful planning and strategies at the school and classroom level. Along with pursuing policy changes that eliminate exclusionary discipline, we recognize effective resources need to be in place to support children, educators, and families. Teachers and school leaders must be supported to confidently and effectively implement responsive alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices. Trying Together supports policies and practices that respond to children in ways that are intentional, developmentally appropriate, culturally competent, gender responsive, and trauma informed. Below are recommendations for school district leaders, administrators, and educators to consider, all of which contain key components of developmentally appropriate practice.

1. Establish developmentally appropriate expectations and policies

High-quality early education requires educators to meet children where they are, using classroom rules and practices to create a positive learning environment. DAP acknowledges the role of play in early childhood learning and development. Children authentically learn cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills through play. DAP and play are essential in developing the whole child. Young children need to learn social and emotional skills just like they need to learn cognitive skills.

Often removal from the classroom is a response to a minor, non-violent infraction that should be solved by supporting social and emotional development. The *Just Discipline* report found nearly 70 percent of suspensions in Allegheny County were for minor issues related to “conduct.”¹⁷ While suspension for an abstract, non-violent issue is not a productive solution at any grade level, it is especially inappropriate and unreasonable for children in the early elementary grades.

Adults are responsible for setting developmentally appropriate expectations and interactions with children - whether they are preventative or reactive to a particular behavior. Most often the youngest students need to be taught social

and emotional skills to address any behaviors labeled as “conduct.” Just as students are not punished for needing to develop a specific cognitive skill, they should not be punished for needing to develop a social or emotional skill. Content knowledge in child development provides principals and teachers with the skills to support young children’s social and emotional development. Teaching social and emotional skills helps reduce negative behaviors or address them in a way that enables children to learn and understand from their mistakes.¹⁸

RESOURCES

- *Advance Developmentally Appropriate Practice* is a Trying Together white paper that focuses on how young children learn. It provides research, best practices, and strategies for engaging young children. As a way to connect policy to practice, Trying Together offers professional development based on the research and policies highlighted in the paper. View the [DAP white paper](#) and [request professional services](#) at the Trying Together website.
- *Too Mad & Too Sad to Add: The Impact of Childhood Trauma* was an online professional development created by Project LAUNCH in partnership with Trying Together. It’s critical for educators to know about how trauma impacts early childhood development and how to work with a child who has experienced trauma. The course provided an overview of brain development in the first few years and the negative effects of trauma on child development. Trauma-informed systems recognize and respond to the impact of trauma in a child. The course material provided examples of behavioral manifestations of trauma and strategies and interventions to support children.

CASE STUDY

- The [Environmental Charter School](#) (ECS) serves students in kindergarten through eighth grade in Pittsburgh. ECS proactively reflects and acts on how to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for children. This includes factoring in all the components that make up their students’ day including appropriate materials, classroom design, flexible seating, child-centered curriculum, movement, and teacher-student interactions.

According to the *Just Discipline* report, ECS suspension data exhibited racial disparities for suspensions in the 2015-16 school year, however ECS’s disparities were lower than both the county and the state. The report also showed ECS suspension rates decreased by 44 percent from the 2012-13 to 2015-16 school years.¹⁹ The school remains focused on creating a culture of prevention by integrating social-emotional lessons and strong community ties beginning on the first day of school. Students are intentionally taught to recognize their emotions and how to use a relaxation station (located in every classroom) where they can employ strategies to help them calm down. The relaxation rooms were a new component in the 2017-2018 school year to support students and educators with preventative ways to address emotions and behaviors without removal from the classroom.

2. ADDRESS CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS AND IMPLICIT BIAS

Research shows this effort requires a shift in culture to acknowledge racial, cultural, language, gender, gender-expression, and disability biases. Professional development opportunities, trainings, and coaching that address bias and cultural responsiveness must be made available for educators. Teachers working to intentionally recognize biases will be more likely to understand their students and reflect on positive ways to address behaviors.

Addressing cultural awareness and implicit bias is critical for effective implementation of inclusive, positive discipline practices.²⁰

RESOURCES

- The Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education (P.R.I.D.E.) Program developed from a partnership with the University of Pittsburgh School of Education's Office of Child Development, Center for Urban Education, and Supporting Early Education and Development (SEED) Lab. The P.R.I.D.E. Program began as a result of an environmental scan to identify existing knowledge, practices, and resources available in Pittsburgh that support positive racial identity development in early education. The scan focused specifically on caregivers and teachers of African American children ages three through eight. The P.R.I.D.E. Program includes Pop-Up Mini Art Festivals, tailored professional development, a speaker series, Parent Village (a parent learning series), and a research and evaluation component. All aspects of the program are designed to provide the important adults in children's lives with the knowledge and skills to support the development of positive racial identity in young children. The P.R.I.D.E report is available [here](#).
- [*Courageous Conversation*](#)TM is an award-winning protocol for engaging, sustaining, and deepening dialogue about race from the Pacific Educational Group. Professional development, coaching, and consulting services support educators in intentionally addressing racial disparities. The *Just Discipline* report showed Pittsburgh Public Schools had higher suspension rates than the County and a disproportionate impact on Black students, however it also showed the district decreased suspension rates by nearly 20 percent between 2012-13 and 2015-16.²¹ PPS has made equity and diversity a priority and invested in the *Courageous Conversation* model. The district showed its' continued commitment to intentionally engaging in meaningful supports and services by training their own staff to become *Courageous Conversation* trainers for the district.

CASE STUDY

- Denver Public Schools (DPS) is at the forefront of addressing cultural responsiveness and implicit bias at various levels. The Office of Equity and Inclusion was created to make a stronger commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity in DPS. The office strives to create awareness and understanding of implicit bias and the impact on relationships with others. Additionally, DPS offers training on implicit bias awareness, and serves the diverse student body through a more inclusive culture while also working to recruit and retain educators who are representative of the student population. DPS outlines the timeline and vision for their commitment to equity and inclusion on their [website](#).

3. EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF POSITIVE INTERACTIONS

Young children thrive from stable, supportive relationships with adults who love, teach, and care for them. Suspensions and expulsions threaten young children's development and may be a result of a lack of positive relationships between educators, families, and children. Restorative practices provide a positive alternative to exclusionary discipline used across all grade levels. These practices are grounded in building and restoring positive relationships between educators and students, a component of developmentally appropriate practice and high-quality early childhood education. Well-implemented restorative practices have the potential to reduce problems with behaviors and the need for exclusionary discipline over time.²²

RESOURCES

- *Simple Interactions (SI)* is a program of the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media at Saint Vincent’s College. The program uses a strengths-based, practice-based, and community-based approach to improve the quality of interactions between children and adults. The *SI* tool has been used in local districts such as Pittsburgh and Montour, and has expanded to other states throughout the country. Regionally, Trying Together leads the *Everyday Interactions Matter* professional development initiative to help early childhood educators learn and grow from their own practice. This program is also used internationally in parts of Canada, China, and Scotland. Resources and research on the *SI* tool can be found [online](#).
- A+ Schools serves as Pittsburgh’s community alliance for public education and advocates for equitable education for all students. The organization has dedicated efforts to raising awareness about the benefits of restorative practice in a variety of ways through developing a community brief, hosting panel discussions, and offering parent and educator training. Trainings for the 2018-2019 school year include *Restorative Practices* that will explore the basic content of restorative practices and how to utilize them in a variety of settings. A+ Schools will also host a *Restorative Parenting* community conversation which teaches parents about restorative practices in schools and restorative parenting in the home. The conversation covers trauma and its impact, building relationships, and providing the opportunity to transform parent-child and teacher-student relationships. The [Restoration Over Criminalization](#) report and [videos](#) highlighting restorative practices in Pittsburgh are located online.

4. USE SUPPORT AND SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES APPROPRIATELY

First and foremost, students with disabilities have special legal protections under the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 (of the Rehabilitation Act). While children may not be removed due to a behavior that is a manifestation of their disability, a fair and appropriate education addresses behaviors and provides the support children need to be successful in their learning environment.²³ The IEP or 504 plan should be used as a vehicle for addressing and preventing behavior problems. Special education is a service, not a place. Inclusive best practices should be used as a model and special education staff should be considered a resource.

RESOURCES

- *Optimized Inclusive Practices (OIP) in Pennsylvania* is a framework and professional development series offered by PaTTAN. The purpose of *OIP* is to support district and school leaders, classroom teachers, and related service providers in the implementation of inclusive best practices. The framework and the description for the PD modules are available on the PaTTAN [website](#).
- The [Include Me](#) program is an initiative from The Arc of Pennsylvania. The program offers on-site training and technical assistance for administrators, general and special education teachers, guidance counselors, school nurses, support staff, and families. *Include Me* began with a school age program and now offers programming for pre-kindergarten as well.
- Education Law Center (ELC) developed *A Family Guide to Inclusive Early Learning in Pennsylvania* to provide families tools, problem-solving tips, and information about legal rights. ELC has been a part of leading the work across Pennsylvania, specifically in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia to ban the use of suspensions and

expulsions. While the toolkit is geared toward families, it may be helpful in breaking down the law for professionals as well. The toolkit is available [here](#).

5. UTILIZE SOCIAL WORKERS, COUNSELORS, AND MENTAL HEALTH SPECIALISTS

Individualized care to support students with greater needs will only come with more staff. Policy and practice in the K-12 sector should consider the developmental need for more appropriate adult to child ratios in the early elementary years. Head Start and Pre-K Counts provide class size and student/staff ratio guidelines for three- and four- year olds but should serve as an example for kindergarten through third grade. Teachers must be supported to confidently and effectively implement changes to discipline policies, however, students need more caring adults to support them in the school environment. The importance of trusting relationships and serve-and-return interactions with teachers, counselors, and social workers cannot be understated. Increased wraparound services and more adults with backgrounds in counseling and mental health are an important component in addressing behaviors. Education Rights Network recommends at least one counselor or social worker for each school to coordinate the appropriate intervention and supports for children.²⁴

RESOURCES

- HealthyCHILD is a developmental healthcare support program under the Office of Child Development at the University of Pittsburgh. The collaborative program works with parents, caregivers, teachers and administrators to promote social emotional development in young children. The team is made up of school psychologists, child life specialists, behavior specialists, social workers, a pediatric nurse practitioner, the child’s teacher, and family. HealthyCHILD provides on-site consultation and mentoring and resources to strengthen the skills of teachers and caregivers interacting with children. To learn more visit the [Facebook page](#).

CASE STUDIES

- The Early Childhood Education Department of Pittsburgh Public Schools partners with mental health consultants through two agencies - System 1-2-3 and HealthyCHILD. The mental health consultants provide on-site consultation, professional development and technical assistance to early childhood professionals and caregivers to promote young children’s social emotional competence and mental wellness.
- Chicago Public Schools paired a “no suspension” policy for children in pre-kindergarten through second grade with on-the-ground support from a social-emotional learning team. The team includes learning specialists to assist school staff in behavior management and social-emotional development. The number of children receiving out-of-school suspensions in pre-k through second grade dropped from 1,800 to 94, none of whom were preschoolers.²⁵

6. STRENGTHEN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Families are a child’s first teacher. Research shows children benefit when families and schools work together.²⁶ Establishing positive relationships with children and families requires that educators have an understanding of the backgrounds of the children and families they serve, which can help educators better understand the motive of a child’s behavior and how to address it in the classroom and with their parents and guardians. Families can play a role in developing expectations and procedures around discipline. Reciprocal partnerships between families and the school provide a solid foundation that includes the family in a positive way from the beginning rather than only

contacting a family when a problem arises. Parents and guardians are more likely to be engaged and helpful if they feel supported and understood.²⁷

RESOURCES

- [Message from Me](#) helps facilitate children’s communication about daily learning experiences in their classroom with the important adults in their lives. The program is a collaboration of the CREATE Lab at Carnegie Mellon University, Trying Together, and PNC Grow Up Great. *Message from Me* supports the development of a child’s language and social skills and serves as a communication tool for sharing positive behaviors and expectations with parents and guardians.

CASE STUDIES

- The Jefferson-Morgan School District uses *Message From Me* to communicate with their students’ families. Both teachers and parents feel it creates a meaningful dialogue between school and home - promoting discussion of the day’s events. *Message From Me* connects parents with the school and provides a consistent update as to what is happening in their children’s classroom including lessons, projects, activities, and behaviors. The communication lets families know their children are engaged and safe while in school.
- The Family Services Specialists at Pittsburgh Public Schools provide a variety of supportive services to families. The specialists plan and conduct monthly parent meetings in the children’s classrooms, as well as help facilitate understanding of families’ backgrounds and circumstances for the classroom teachers. Other supports include home visits, attendance monitoring, counseling and/or referrals, assisting parents with required health forms.

7. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND PLAY

Physical activity and play throughout the day, including recess and in class physical activity breaks, can help improve behavior. This is not the ultimate solution to eliminating suspensions, however, it is a developmentally appropriate way for children (and people of any age) to alleviate stress. Physical activity improves attention and on-task behavior in the classroom. Research shows taking away recess as a consequence for negative behavior may be counterproductive.²⁸ Providing recess during the school day proactively responds to the developmental needs of young children and may address some root causes of negative behaviors. Recess gives children a necessary break for free play during the rigorous school day. Experts recommend at least one period of recess for 20 minutes a day, in addition to physical education and classroom physical activity.²⁹

RESOURCES

- The Recess Advocacy Team is a group of organizations dedicated to health and wellness, education, and play with a focus on recess practices and policies in pre-k through sixth grade in Allegheny County. Email the team at recess@tryingtogether.org for resources related to recess and play or visit the Playful Pittsburgh Collaborative [page](#) for more information.
- [Go Noodle](#): Movement and Mindfulness for Kids is a website with videos promoting physical activity along with academic, social, and emotional learning. It is great for a quick classroom physical activity break.

CASE STUDY

- The Environmental Charter School provides a longer school day and intentionally structures many opportunities for movement, physical activity, and free play into the daily schedule. The students in the lower school, which serves kindergarten through third grade, receive at least 30 minutes of recess a day. Recess is never taken away as a consequence and when students need more social-emotional support often principals and teachers take them for a nature walk to discuss behavior during this time. Academic-based hikes are integrated into lesson plans ranging from environmental science hikes in the park, Pittsburgh history hikes in surrounding neighborhoods, and community hikes to identify shapes in everyday objects. Numerous research studies and publications show the positive impact on children connecting to nature. The outdoors benefit children’s intellectual, psychological, academic, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual domains.³⁰ Additionally, students have the opportunity to practice mindfulness and yoga during discovery blocks at least once a week.

8. PROMOTE PROFESSIONAL GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATORS

Research has shown that most social-emotional and behavioral issues can be resolved through nurturing relationships and high-quality learning environments.³¹ Educators must have the opportunity to participate in ongoing development to foster their content knowledge, as well as the skills and strategies appropriate for meeting children where they are. The knowledge and skills for the solutions mentioned above can be addressed through ongoing professional development, coaching, and technical assistance.

RESOURCES

- The *Pennsylvania Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* Plan states the department will provide technical assistance for *Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS)*. The *PBIS* technical assistance will address social-emotional barriers to success by providing interventions for the student, school, and district.³²
- Professional growth opportunities intersect with nearly all the other recommendations. As discussed in previous recommendations, important topics to prioritize for professional development include relationships and interactions, implicit bias, cultural responsiveness, DAP, and mindfulness:
 - [Simple Interactions](#)
 - [HealthyCHILD](#)
 - [Go Noodle](#) - Movement and Mindfulness for Kids
 - Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education ([P.R.I.D.E](#)) Program
 - [Courageous Conversations](#)
 - Trying Together offers professional growth opportunities both in person and online. Custom courses can be created and developed to target goals, interests, and needs of individuals, a school team or district, or an organization. Request professional services [here](#).

9. COLLECT AND MONITOR DATA ON BEHAVIORS AND CONSEQUENCES

All schools and programs need to improve data collection and public reporting of expulsion and suspension data that is disaggregated by gender, race, ethnicity, and disability status. The Department of Education encourages schools to set their own goals, monitor data to assess progress, and modify practices to meet fairness, equity, and improvement

goals.³³ While data is not a preventative measure, it can help shed light on problems and inform decisions for future practices to support children by keeping them in the classroom.

RESOURCES

- The [*Alternative to Suspensions and Expulsions: A Teacher and Administrator Guide to School Discipline*](#) was developed by the Indiana Resource Network as a guidance document to support schools for more effective, evidence-based methods of behavior management and school discipline. The guide provides processes and policies, collection methods, analysis, interpretation, and planning checklists to support data-driven decisions. The checklist of strategies are broken down for the individual/classroom level and the school or district level.
- The [*School Discipline Data Indicators: A Guide For Districts and Schools*](#) was designed by the Institute of Education Sciences and Regional Educational Laboratory at Education Northwest to help educators select indicators and analyze data to determine whether a racial or ethnic disproportionality exists in a school or district's discipline practices. The guide also helps to think through interventions and use indicators to determine if progress is made using examples from school districts in Oregon that have made reducing racial disproportionality a priority.

MOVING FORWARD

The elimination of suspensions and expulsions in early childhood settings must simultaneously occur with policies and practices that increase resources and supports for educators. We can achieve what's best for children by prioritizing developmentally appropriate practice and responsive approaches to eliminate exclusionary discipline in school. Trying Together will continue working to ensure that all children learn in environments that are developmentally appropriate, culturally-competent, gender responsive, and trauma informed.

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