

Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood
**Examining Early Care and Education Expulsion and
Suspension Practices and Policies in Delaware's Licensed
Child Care Programs**



By: Annette Pic, Martha Buell, Kristy Sheffler, Rena Hallam, Roderick L. Carey

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Issue Series Overview

The Delaware Early Care and Education Expulsion and Suspension (DECEES) project is funded by the Delaware Department of Education and is a collaborative effort between the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood (DIEEC), the University of Delaware Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE), and the Delaware Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS). The DECEES project is designed to examine past and current Delaware initiatives that support continued enrollment of young children under age 5 in state-licensed early care and education programs; understand the state landscape for tracking the expulsion and suspension of young children; and uplift the voices of families impacted by expulsion and/or suspension through a three-part brief series. In the brief series, we define expulsion and suspension in accordance with the definition outlined by *Caring for Our Children*¹ that is used in the Delaware DHSS policy, *Best Practice Statement for the Prevention of Expulsion and Suspension In Delaware Early Programs*², as shown in Box 1.

This brief is the second in a three-part series and reports findings from a statewide survey examining expulsion and suspension practices in licensed early childhood programs and the resources used by programs for enrollment retention. We adapted the survey developed by Giordano and colleagues³ to the Delaware context.

Box 1: Expulsion and Suspension Definitionsⁱ

Expulsion—terminating enrollment of a child or family in the regular group setting because of a challenging behavior or a health condition.

Suspension—all other reductions in the amount of time a child may be in attendance of the regular group setting, either by requiring the child to cease attendance for a particular period of time or reducing the number of days or amount of time that a child may attend.

¹ American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, & National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education. (2011). *Caring for our children: National health and safety performance standards; Guidelines for early care and education programs*. (3rd ed.). American Academy of Pediatrics.

² Delaware Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Social Services Program, Policy and Development Unit, Purchase of Care (2019). *Best Practice Statement for the Prevention of Expulsion and Suspension In Delaware Early Childhood Programs*.

³ Giordano, K., Vega, V., & Gubi, A. (2022). Expelled from childcare: Suspension and expulsion practices in one state's community childcare centers. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 50(1), 135–144. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-01134-5>

Introduction

To examine suspension and expulsion practices among licensed child care programs in Delaware we developed a program-level survey. The aim of the survey was twofold: 1) to understand the prevalence of suspension and expulsion of children under age 5 in Delaware's licensed child care programs; and 2) to identify the resources and supports available and accessible to early childhood providers to aid children displaying challenging behaviors or signs of trauma and children with disabilities. The DIEEC distributed the statewide survey to licensed child care programs (center-based and family child care). The survey was administered between January 23 and February 26, 2024.

Key Findings

- Twenty-nine percent of respondents⁴, indicated their program sent home at least one child in the last 12 months.
- Thirty-one percent of respondents indicated their program dismissed/expelled at least one child in the past 12 months.
- Survey responses tell us children of color, Black or African American children, were more likely than White children to be sent home for whole- or part-day and more likely to be asked to leave a child care program.
- Center-based programs indicated they relied on formal resources (e.g., internal behavioral teams and external Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants) to support children displaying challenging behaviors, signs of trauma, or disabilities, while family child care (FCC) providers indicated they relied on informal resources (e.g. parent and staff) and formal (e.g., DIEEC Technical Assistance (TAs)).
- Only 34% of 92 respondents reported that their program collects suspension and expulsion data.
- Programs were more likely to have expulsion policies in staff and parent handbooks than policies on suspension.

Sample

The DECEES project survey was emailed to Delaware licensed child care programs. Contact emails were retrieved for 907 licensed child care programs from the Office of Child Care Licensing's December 2023 monthly alpha report. The report included 453 centers and 454 FCC providers. Missing data, such as program contact email, were manually added using the DIEEC program contact list. Contact information for one FCC program could not be located. Duplicate email addresses for programs operating multiple locations were removed. For multiple location programs, surveys were sent to the designated contact person and those individuals were asked to forward the survey link to their site-specific program leader. Respondents were offered an opportunity to enter a drawing for a \$50 e-gift card.

There were 782 emails sent by DIEEC to licensed child care programs, including single location programs (n = 729) and the primary contact for programs with multiple locations (n = 53). A total of 24 emails bounced back

⁴ Survey respondents included 59 directors/administrators/owner, 54 family child care (FCC) providers, two early childhood curriculum coordinators, and one each- assistant director, classroom teacher, operations manager.

or failed to send. Responses were received from 135 respondents. This brief presents results from 118 respondents who completed over 26% of the survey questions.

Center-based and family child care programs were about equally represented among respondents. Table 1 describes the respondent-identified characteristics. Of the 86 respondents that indicated receiving Purchase of Care (POC, Delaware’s child care subsidy program) reimbursement, 58.1% were center-based programs and 41.9% were FCC programs.

Table 1

Program Characteristics

Characteristic	N=118	%
Type		
Center-based program	61	51.7
Family child care	57	48.3
Location		
City of Wilmington	9	7.6
New Castle County (outside the City of Wilmington)	63	53.4
Kent County	19	16.1
Sussex County	28	23.7
Age group(s) served (check all that apply)		
Infants (up to 12 months)	78	66.1
Toddlers (12 - 35 months)	104	88.1
Preschool (36 months - 5 years, or school entry)	110	93.2
School-Age (5 - 12 years, in before/after care)	81	68.6*
Programs accepting Purchase of Care		
Yes	86	72.9
No	32	27.1

Note. *Total equals more than 100; age groups were reported as check all that apply.

Findings

Suspension (Out of Program Suspension)

Respondents were asked, Have you sent a child home for the whole day or part of the day for a reason other than illness in the past 12 months? Thirty-three respondents indicated one or more child(ren) were sent

home for a reason other than an illness. Specifically, 12 respondents indicated that at least one child was sent home for a whole- or part-day, seven respondents sent home two children, five sent home three children, one sent home four children, and one sent home five children. Seven respondents did not indicate the number of children sent home for part or whole day in the past 12 months.

Expulsion (Dismissal or Permanent Removal)

Respondents were asked, Have you asked that a family/child leave your program for any reason within the last 12 months? Thirty-five respondents indicated that one or more child(ren) were asked to leave their program. Seventeen of the 35 respondents indicated that they asked one child/family to leave, eight respondents asked two children, one respondent indicated they asked three or four children, two asked four children, and one respondent asked 11 children to leave their program. Six respondents did not indicate the number of children expelled in the past 12 months. Table 2 displays suspension and expulsion by program type.

Table 2

Number of Programs that Suspended or Expelled a Child in the Past 12 Months

Program Type	Suspended* N=105	Expelled** N=118
Center-based program	30	33
Family child care	3	2 [†]

*Four of the programs that sent a child(ren) home indicated that they serve only school-age children (children 5 years through 12 years in a before/aftercare program).

**Four programs that expelled a child(ren) only serve school-age children. One of the two FCC programs expelled/dissmissed a child for not attending for weeks. [†]One of the two FCC programs expelled/dissmissed a child for not attending for weeks.

Child Characteristics

Children who were identified as Black or African American were more likely to be sent home for whole- or part-day and more likely to be expelled from a program than their non-Black peers. Likewise, children three and four years of age were also more likely to be sent home or expelled. Table 3 depicts child characteristics identified by respondents.

Table 3*Characteristics of Children Suspended or Expelled in the Past 12 Months*

Characteristic	Suspended N=29	Expelled N=33
Ages of children*		
1-2 years	8	7
3 years	16	15
4 years	14	14
5 years	4	4
Older than 5 years	4	5
Race/ethnicity** of child most recently sent home/expelled		
Black/African American or Black/African American and another race/ethnicity	15	15
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	1	1
Multiracial or multiethnic	5	2
White	7	12
Unknown	1	2

*Ages of children suspended in the past 12 months were not reported by four respondents; ages of expelled children were not reported by two respondents.

**Race/ethnicity data are respondents' reflection about the last child who was suspended or expelled from the program. Race/ethnicity for the last child suspended were not reported by four respondents; race/ethnicity of children expelled were not reported by two respondents. Respondents were not asked about the gender of the last child sent home or expelled. We report responses that included Black/African American with those that included Black/African American and another race/ethnicity such as Hispanic. Responses that only reported multiracial or multiethnic were reported as such.

Reasons for Whole- or Part-day Suspension and Expulsion

Follow-up questions sought to understand the nature of whole- or part-day suspension. The reasons listed for sending a child home other than for an illness were attributed to child or parent behaviors. Likewise, follow-up questions also sought to understand the nature of expulsion. Most reasons listed for expelling a child were also attributed to child or parent behaviors. Table 4 describes the reasons selected by respondents for suspension and expulsion.

Table 4*Reasons Provided for Why the Most Recent Child was Suspended or Expelled*

Reasons (check all that apply)	Suspension N=30	Expulsion N=33
Child was hurting others	24	26
Child was displaying challenging behaviors that did not respond to typical discipline techniques	20	27
Child was at risk for hurting themselves	17	21
Child had uncontrollable temper tantrums	10	17
Child had special needs which the program did not have the resources to support/child was not a good match	0	14
Parent demonstrated “behavior problems” (ex: does not adhere to policies, verbally or physically threatens staff, failed to pay tuition, failed to complete required forms etc.)	8	7
The parent does not support staff in addressing the child's behavior problem	4	-
Other (please explain):		
Child brought a pretend gun to school and lied about it.	1	-
Child needed one-on-one support for most of the day to be successful.	1	-
Child was running out of the classroom and out of the building when they became angry.	1	-
Didn't show for weeks.	-	1
Parent watched child hit teacher and use profanity. Did not correct child.	-	1
The child's inclusion in the program was problematic for every teacher that had interactions with him and the concern was having him be present for full days in the summer. We asked that the parent find alternate care for the summer and that we would be happy to have him return for the school year. He had an uncanny ability to antagonize his peers and create conflict and chaos.	-	1

Note. Responses entered as “Other” text were edited for clarity purposes only.

Expulsion and Purchase of Care (POC) Reimbursement

Eighty-six programs report accepting POC funding. Twenty-nine of these programs reported sending home at least one child for a whole- or part-day (suspending) for a reason other than an illness. Of the programs reporting a suspension, 19 also reported an expulsion. Additionally, 10 other programs reported expelling a child in the last 12 months, for a total of 29 programs reporting an expulsion. Table 5 depicts suspensions and expulsions by program type and POC reimbursement.

Table 5

Suspension or Expulsion of at Least One Child by Program Type and POC Receipt

Program Type Reporting POC Receipt	Suspension	Expulsion
Center-based program	26	27
Family child care	3	2

Familiarity with Best Practice Statement and Licensing Policy

Respondents reported their knowledge of the Best Practice Statement and the Delaware child care licensing suspension and expulsion policy requirement. Table 6 depicts the responses to both topics.

Of the 93 responses, 54 reported they were either somewhat familiar or not familiar with the Delaware Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Best Practice Statement for the Prevention of Expulsion and Suspension In Delaware Early Childhood Programs. Conversely, more respondents indicated their familiarity with the suspension and expulsion policy requirement. Sixty-six out of 93 respondents reported they were very familiar or familiar with the Delaware child care licensing requirement for a program to have a suspension and expulsion policy.

Table 6*Respondents' Familiarity with Delaware's Suspension and Expulsion Policies*

Question	Total (N=93)	Center-based	Family child care
Familiar with Best Practice Statement			
Very familiar, I have referred to the statement in my work	18	10	8
Familiar, I have heard about it and read parts of the statement	21	11	10
Somewhat familiar, I heard of it but I have not read the statement	26	17	9
Not familiar, I never heard of it, nor have I read the statement	28	12	16
Familiar with Delaware child care licensing suspension and expulsion policy requirement			
Very familiar, I have referred to the statement in my work	42	23	19
Familiar, I have heard about it and read parts of the statement	24	15	9
Somewhat familiar, I heard of it but I have not read the statement	18	8	10
Not familiar, I never heard of it, nor have I read the statement	9	4	5

Program Policies

To follow up with understanding the prevalence of programs adhering to the child care licensing suspension and expulsion policy requirement, respondents were asked if their program included a suspension and/or expulsion policy in their staff and parent/family/caregiver handbook. Table 7 depicts their responses.

Table 7*Policies outlined in staff and parent/family/caregiver handbooks*

	n	Center-based	Family child care
Program has written expulsion policy in staff handbook (N=115)			
Yes	82	45	37
No	25	10	15
Don't know	8	4	4
Program has written expulsion policy in parent/family/caregiver handbook (N=75)			
Yes	70	38	32
No	2	1	1
Don't know	3	1	2
Program has written out-of-program suspension policy (N=103)			
Yes	51	30	21
No	42	14	28
Don't know	10	8	2

Resources Available to Respondents to Support Children Displaying Challenging Behaviors

All respondents were asked, “If children in your program begin displaying challenging behavior, do you have someone who you can turn to or resources to help you support this child?” Sixty-five of 96 respondents indicated that they have someone to turn to or resources available to support children displaying challenging behaviors. Forty-one of the 65 were respondents affiliated with a center and 24 were FCC providers. Twenty-five respondents, representing 8 centers and 17 FCC providers, indicated they do not have access to a person or resources. Six respondents indicated they did not know – two centers and four FCC providers.

The types of resources described were categorized into two primary categories- internal resources (within the organization) and external resources (outside the program). Each of these categories were subdivided into formal (offered by an agency, government department, corporation, or business) and informal (services that can be utilized by anyone, generally free and easy to access) resources. FCC respondents indicated they do not have access to any internal formal resources. Conversely, center-based respondents indicated they have access to internal formal resources like inclusion and behavior support teams. Likewise, center-based respondents were more likely to also use formal external resources such as Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants (ECMHC). Table 8 describes the resources identified by respondents.

Similarly, respondents were asked; 1) “If children in your program begin displaying signs of trauma, do you have someone who you can turn to or resources to help you support this child?” and 2) “If you encounter a child with disabilities (e.g., learning disability, autism, ADHD, etc.) do you have the resources to support the child?” Those who responded yes were prompted to provide specific types of resources available. Reported

resources and identified persons aligned with the supports identified for aiding children with challenging behaviors. Therefore, these findings are not reported separately. However, 42.2% of programs that dismissed a child in the past 12 months indicated that the *lack of resources for a child with special needs* was a reason for dismissal (reported in Table 4).

Table 8

Resources for Children Displaying Challenging Behaviors

Resource Type	Identified Resources	Center-based	Family child care
Internal Resource			
Formal	Inclusion Team	4	-
	Positive Behavior Support Team	1	-
Informal	Staff/management	4	3
	Parent	-	2
External Resource			
Formal	Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants (ECMHC)	24	2
	Behavior Specialists/Positive Behavior Support	3	-
	Technical Assistant (TA)	-	6
	Child Development Watch	2	2
	Child Find	2	-
	School district	3	-
	Easter Seals	1	2
	Family Child Care Networks/ provider support groups	-	2
	Department of Health and Social Services	1	1
	Professional learning experiences (FLIPT IT)/Child Development Associate courses	-	2
Informal	Other providers	-	4
	Family and friends	-	2
	Personal relationships	1	2
	Healthcare professional	1	1
	Books/ literature	-	3
	Online resources	-	2

Note: Resources mentioned less than once are not included in the table.

Program- and Child-level Data Collection

Respondents were asked about the types of out-of-school suspension and dismissal data collected at the program- and child-level. Thirty-two of 93 respondents indicated their program collects dismissal and/or removal data. Twenty-three of the 32 respondents indicated that the collected data is not shared with a state agency. Table 9 describes the types of out-of-school suspensions and dismissal data programs maintain.

Table 9

Types of Data Collected on Out-of-school Suspensions and Dismissals

Type of data collected	Suspensions		Total N	Expulsions		Total N
	Centers	FCC		Centers	FCC	
Reason for suspension or expulsion	8	5	13	19	12	31
Child's age	7	2	9	14	5	19
Child's race/ethnicity	4	1	5	7	3	10
Child's gender	-	-	-	7	4	11
Teacher/adult that made behavioral referral	-	-	-	10	4	14

Summary and Recommendations

Despite Delaware making significant strides in creating systems to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline, the use of suspension and expulsion in the early care and education sector remains a significant concern, with 28% of survey respondents reporting suspending at least one child and 30% of respondents reporting expelling at least one child in the previous 12 months.

Children who are suspended or expelled face educational inequities; they miss learning opportunities to develop and practice skills and socialize with peers.ⁱⁱ Consistent with previous research,^{iii,iv,v} children identified as Black or African American were more likely to be suspended or expelled in licensed Delaware child care programs than other children of color and their White peers. For children who are Black or African American, the educational inequities of being suspended or expelled are compounded by existing challenges rooted in past and current racial inequality within the child care and education systems.^{vi,vii,viii}

Inequities in suspension and expulsion practices in early learning settings are perpetuated by socially constructed norms about acceptable behaviors standards based on White, abled, and monolingual norms.^{ix} Additionally, behavioral expectations are nuanced and open to implicit bias.^x Implicit bias refers to unconsciously held prejudices and attitudes towards specific groups of individuals.^{xi} The suspension and expulsion of Black and African American children is related to educator implicit bias.^{xii,xiii,xiv} Over half (57.1%; $n = 91$) of the respondents indicated that they were familiar with the term “implicit bias” of which 90.2% ($n = 51$) also indicated they were aware of the role implicit bias plays in discipline practices. However, out of the 52 respondents, only 28.8% that reported expelling a child in the last 12 months indicated they are familiar with the term “implicit bias” compared to 71.2% who did not expel a child and indicated their familiarity with the

term. Similarly, 28.3% of 46 respondents who reported they expelled a child indicated they were familiar with the role implicit bias plays in discipline compared to 71.7% respondents who did not expel a child and indicated their familiarity with the role of implicit bias. To help prevent expulsion of young children the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends addressing educator implicit bias in conjunction with providing child mental health consultation to child care providers.^{xv} Consistently available and accessible training and coaching focused on implicit bias, adult-child interactions, trauma-informed practices, inclusion of children with disabilities, and practices to support social and emotional development can help improve educators' behavioral expectations and strengthen their usage of equitable strategies.^{xvi}

A concerning finding is that 33% of the programs that reported expelling at least one child in the last 12 months also reported they accept POC reimbursement; we did not specifically ask if the suspended or expelled children received POC. However, Delaware child care programs who accept POC families are required to have suspension and expulsion policies and use these exclusionary practices only as a last resort in instances where the child poses a serious safety threat and only after the program has employed and documented intermediate interventions for the child or others.^{xvii} Without a policy requiring program-level data to be collected it is not known whether or not documented intermediate interventions were used to try and prevent the expulsion.

The *Best Practice Statement* was designed as a guideline to prevent, severely limit, and ultimately eliminate exclusionary discipline practice such as suspension and expulsion. One of the policy recommendations is for programs to provide parents and staff a written expulsion policy. The majority of respondents (71.3%, $n = 115$) indicated that their program does have an expulsion policy. However, less than half of respondents (49%, $n = 103$) indicated their program has an out-of-school suspension policy. Specific expulsion, and more importantly out-of-school suspension, guidelines or an example template provided by the state could encourage additional child care providers to include an out-of-school suspension and expulsion policy in their staff and parent handbooks.

Reasons for Suspension and Expulsion

Overall, the top four reasons respondents reported for suspending or expelling a child were related to child behavior. More specifically, the primary reason children were expelled and secondary reasons for child suspension were due to children's behaviors respondents found challenging that did not respond to typical strategies and techniques. Suspending and expelling young children does not address underlying emotional and behavioral concerns.^{xviii} Effectively supporting young children's social and emotional competence requires providing support to the early care and education workforce, including but not limited to dedicated social and emotional training and access to mental health consultants and behavioral specialists.

Disability status is a persistently outsized (in addition to being Black or African American, or mixed race) driver of expulsion. Not having resources to support a child with special needs was the fifth most cited reason for expelling a child. Prior research documents that children with developmental disabilities who have behavioral problems are at increased risk for preschool expulsion and more likely to experience exclusionary discipline practices.^{xix,xx,xxi} Early diagnosis of developmental delay is instrumental to preventing or reducing the expulsion of young children.^{xxii,xxiii} When developmental delays are readily identified and measures are taken to address diagnosed developmental delays and disabilities, children and their families are able to

receive needed services earlier (e.g., IFSP, IEP). On July 1, 2023, Delaware implemented HB202^{xxiv} as a strategy to identify children under the age of 5 who may qualify for early intervention services. The policy requires newly licensed and programs renewing licensure to screen all children age birth to 5 years, not yet in kindergarten, by requiring the parent or guardian of an enrolled child to complete the Department's approved developmental and social emotional screening.

Another strategy implemented in Delaware that addresses expulsion of children with disabilities is outlined in the *Best Practice Statement*. This strategy advises child care providers serving children with an Individualized Family Services Plan (IFSP) or an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to implement procedures that safeguard the due process rights of children ensured under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), Parts C and B. Policy recommendations include preventive guidance and a uniform process for managing challenging behaviors prior to the use of an exclusionary measure. However, the policy guidelines do not define preventive guidance nor provide a template for constructing a uniform process for managing challenging behaviors.

Resources for Child Care Providers

Clearly defined discipline practices are an essential resource that should be readily available to program staff and families/parents. One of the *Best Practice Statement* recommendations is for programs to provide parents and staff a written expulsion policy. Additionally, DELACARE Regulations for Early Care and Education and School-Age Centers^{xxv} and Regulations for Family and Large Family Child Care Homes^{xxvi} required licensed programs to include a suspension and expulsion policy in their parent/guardian program handbook. The majority of respondents (71.3%, $n = 115$) indicated that their program does have an expulsion policy. However, less than half of respondents (49%, $n = 103$) indicated their program has an out-of-school suspension policy.

The types of resources respondents reported accessing were divided into two primary categories- internal (within the program) and external (outside the program) resources. These primary categories were subdivided into two types: formal (structured by an agency, government department, corporation, or business) and informal (services that can be utilized by anyone, generally free and easy to access). Respondents from center-based programs reported using more formal resources both internal (e.g., corporate inclusion team) and external (e.g., ECMHC). Whereas, respondents from FCC programs reported accessing more internal informal (staff and parents) resources and a mix of formal (DIEEC TAs) and informal (other providers) external resources. More specifically, 23 center-based programs reported reaching out to ECMHC while only two FCC respondents reported doing so. This finding suggests the need to identify approaches for connecting FCC providers to more formal resources. ECE administrators, center-based and FCC providers, and support staff should be supported with equitable access to system-wide resources program wide and anti-bias training.

Additionally, without adequate support, managing the needs of children with special needs can be overwhelming and burdensome for providers with the best of intentions. Child care providers serving children with developmental delays and disabilities should have access to readily available resources for themselves and their staff. For example, easily accessible services from ECMHC. Research supports the use of ECMHC in mitigating expulsion and suspension of young children.^{xxvii,xxviii} Our study found that of 97

respondents, 37.1% contacted an ECMHC for support for a child at risk of suspension; 77.8% of which found the services helpful for preventing the child's suspension. Thirty-six respondents who used ECMHC for a child at risk of suspension also reported using the services for children at risk of expulsion. A follow-up question inquiring whether the child was ultimately suspended or expelled revealed that 41.7% (n = 36) of children were later suspended and 33.3% (n = 33) were expelled.

Recommendations

An immediate step for mitigating suspension and expulsion in Delaware child care programs is to increase provider awareness about the *Best Practice Statement*. Just over 41% of respondents were very familiar or familiar with the *Best Practice Statement*. Drawing attention to the *Best Practice Statement* in a quarterly Delaware Early Childhood Council meeting, an Office of Early Learning email to providers, and the DIEEC Reach Newsletter are low-cost strategies to increase awareness. Low cost information sharing is only a first step to ensuring continued success for increasing retention; more long-term strategies are needed.

The following recommendations are more in-depth, long-term strategies that address three primary findings: 1) the current practice of suspension and expulsion; 2) the primary reason reported for suspending or expelling children—child behaviors; and 3) the resource differences by setting type. These recommendations include strategies that can be used to mitigate and ultimately eliminate suspension and expulsion practices. Three recommended strategies are: 1) maintaining suspension and expulsion data, 2) parents and families as a resource; and 3) equal access to formal resources. These strategies are discussed below.

Recommendation 1: Maintaining Suspension and Expulsion Data

The state of Delaware lacks the data infrastructure to evaluate the implementation of the *Best Practice Statement*. Collecting and analyzing data is essential in mitigating suspension and expulsion practices and increasing retention. Child care programs are already encouraged to collect data. More specific recommendations or requirements could be put in place regarding data collection. For example, to track trends over time, Illinois requires all licensed early care and education programs to maintain data including number of children who left the program, number of planned transitions to another program due to the child's behavior, the number of temporary removals, and to track this data by race, gender, disability, home language, class/group size, teacher-child ratio, and length of program day for each child who is removed temporarily or permanently.^{xxix}

The *Best Practice Statement* suggests programs collect baseline data but does not provide guidance on the types of data programs should collect. Clearly defining minimum data requirements is necessary for evaluating whether programs that receive POC are following the requirement to document intermediate interventions. Just over a third (34.5% n = 93) of respondents indicated that their program collects expulsion data, and only 13 collect suspension data. The types of suspension and expulsion data collected included child age, gender, race/ethnicity, and the reason for the suspension or expulsion. Data on the teacher or adult who initiated the behavioral referral was also collected for expulsions. Because the *Best Practice Statement* requires parental contact, this data should also be tracked as should the efforts made to retain the child. Data for both practices should include the reason for the suspension or expulsion. Additionally, suspension data should include the number of hours/days for suspensions.

Delaware programs can use the data to track their efforts to eliminate the use of exclusions. For example, using data to track children with identified disabilities and developmental delays to ensure children with IFSPs and IEPs are retained in the program. State agencies can also use the data aggregated from programs to monitor progress in preventing, severely limiting, and ultimately eliminating expulsion and suspension practices in Delaware early childhood programs. For example, data can be used by state agencies to determine if race, gender, ability, or income is associated with suspensions and expulsions. To determine disproportionality, researchers recommend noting when 10% or more of the population served is identified as experiencing suspensions or expulsions.^{xxx} It would then be the task of the state to aggregate the data from the child care programs in order to better target state resources that ensure discipline policies and practices are equitably applied, and ideally that exclusions are mitigated and ultimately eliminated. For example, data could be used to track access and use of ECHMC supports for FCC as well as for more center-based programs.

An actionable and important first step to collecting suspension and expulsion data in Delaware is developing consistent vocabulary and language that clearly defines suspension and expulsion and is used ECE system-wide. Head Start provides a comprehensive definition that includes “soft” suspension and expulsions such as telling a family their child is not ready for a group program (Head Start Center for Inclusion, 2019).^{xxxi} A second step is to determine the type of program-level and state agency-level data that should be collected and shared across agencies and departments. A third step is to identify or develop a database to house the information. The fourth step is to develop an evaluation process that ensures data is maintained and used appropriately. Training on data collection for administrators and providers in licensed child care programs and state agency staff would need to occur state-wide.

Recommendation 2: Parents and Families as a Resource

Program staff and teachers should engage with families as a first step in addressing children’s challenging needs with the intent of creating a collaborative partnership to support the child. Decades of research supports the benefits and importance of family partnerships;^{xxxii,xxxiii} and are also a part the Head Start Performance Standards.^{xxxiv} Further, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education released a policy statement in 2016 providing recommendations for family engagement in early childhood systems and programs.^{xxxv} The American Academy of Pediatrics also recommends the inclusion of families as partners for developing alternatives to expulsion.^{xxxvi}

Yet, out of all respondents, only two FCC providers listed parents as a resource for supporting children displaying challenging behaviors. Utilizing families’ community of knowledge by including parents as partners and obtaining their input is vital to facilitating the understanding of cultural differences between provider and child. Through open communication the provider can gain a deeper understanding about their own implicit bias and the child’s behaviors. Family-provider partnerships also provide parents information necessary to better enable them to support their child(ren)’s educational needs. Additionally building trust between families and providers opens space for parents to be open about their child(ren)’s behavior or ability. Honest and open communication is essential in retaining child(ren)’s enrollment.^{xxxvii} One strategy for open communication is working with families to reach mutual understanding about the developmental appropriateness of social and emotional development and displayed behaviors.

The *Best Practice Statement* contains the foundation for incorporating families as partners by suggesting programs clearly communicate their suspension and expulsion policies with families and communicate with parents about their child's behavior that is perceived as challenging.^{xxxviii} Establishing family partnerships as a component of a uniform process for managing challenging behaviors would require these suggestions to be requirements for all licensed child care programs.

Recommendation 3: Equal Access to Formal Resources

Knowledge about and access to supportive formal resources (e.g., free trainings, community- and state-partners, mental health support) is essential for child care providers and can be used to inform practices and improve children's development and health.^{xxxix} However, access to resources is not always equitably distributed. Specifically, five center-based programs reported the availability of internal formal resources such as inclusion teams and positive support teams to help them manage behaviors they identified as challenging. There were no internal formal resources identified by FCC providers.

FCC providers identified DIEEC TAs as their primary formal external resource. They also identified professional learning communities and family child care networks. However, formal external resources were more readily identified by center-based programs than by FCC. The differences in reports of accessing ECMHC between center-based programs ($n = 24$) and FCC programs ($n = 2$) suggests that FCC providers may not have information on how to access ECMHC resources. Establishing policies and operationalizing procedures to ensure equal access to and knowledge about statewide social and emotional supports and programs like ECMHC are vital for FCC and center-based programs to eliminate suspensions and expulsions.

Family child care programs have historically been less targeted by systems of formalized supports. While recent years have shown an increase in supports through home-based child care (HBCC) networks and TA support, there is still more work to do in making formal statewide supports available to home-based programs.

Conclusion

The early years are developmentally rich and lay the foundation for future academic and life success. Suspension and expulsion of young children removes children from their environment, disrupting learning and socialization. The *Best Practice Statement* was designed as a guideline for child care programs to prevent, severely limit, and ultimately eliminate exclusionary discipline practice such as suspension and expulsion. The survey findings suggest Delaware programs are generally aware of the *Best Practice Statement* and the child care licensing suspension and expulsion policy requirement. Yet children are being suspended and expelled.

Developing and implementing uniform data collection can inform program progress in increasing retention and ensuring equitable practices. Incorporating parents/caregivers into the conversation can support family-program cooperation and inform all parties on the best approaches for supporting the child. Furthermore, Delaware child care FCC and center-based programs would benefit from equal access to formal supports that are easily accessible, free, and widely promoted.

Limitations

This work provides a starting point for examining suspension and expulsion practices among licensed child care programs in Delaware. However, our data does not include overall demographics of the enrolled population of children. Specifically, if a program's enrollment only includes children identified as Black, a suspended or expelled child would be Black. Further, the respondents represent various roles (e.g., directors, curriculum coordinators, family child care providers) within the child care program which may influence the integrity of the reported information. Additionally, we did not collect child gender data. Future research should include program-level race and ethnicity data and child gender.

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About the Authors:

Annette Pic, PhD: Dr. Pic is a researcher for the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood at the University of Delaware. Her work supports federal, state, and foundation funded projects centered on improving the quality and equitable access of early care and education. She supports the National Early Care and Education Workforce Center as a methodology lead for the Research and Knowledge Development team. Her primary research interests focus on families experiencing homelessness with young children.

Martha Buell, PhD: Dr. Buell is a Professor and Chair in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences. For close to thirty years, Martha has lived and worked with Delaware's ECE programs, including as the former director of both the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood and New Directions Early Head Start. Her current research focuses on state ECE policies in terms of systems alignment; and suspension, expulsion and exclusionary discipline policies. She lives in Wilmington with her husband and two daughters.

Kristy Sheffler, PhD: Dr. Sheffler is the deputy director of the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood. She has been with the Institute since 2014, and her work focuses on the development, implementation, and evaluation of supports for the early childhood workforce, with goals to improve children's early experiences and promote young children's mental health.

Rena Hallam, PhD: Dr. Hallam is a professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences and also serves as Director for the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood. Her research focuses on strategies for improving quality of both center-based and family child care environments with an emphasis on the design and implementation of state systems and policies.

Roderick L. Carey, PhD: Dr. Carey is an associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences. He teaches courses on mentoring and helping relationships and families and children at-risk. He directs The Black Boy Matter Project, a partnership with Delaware schools that studies how youth perceive their significance to others. He also publishes on how family and school factors influence adolescents' ambitions. Prior to earning a PhD at the University of Maryland College Park, Dr. Carey taught high school English in Washington, DC.

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