



## Why Ending Expulsions from U.S. Preschools Requires More than Passing Laws to Ban Them

**Kate Zinsser**, University of Illinois at Chicago

According to the U.S. Department of Education, 17,000 three- and four-year old children are expelled or suspended from preschool each year. In fact, preschoolers are three times more likely to be expelled than children in kindergarten through 12th grade. Boys and Black children are at heightened risk of being expelled from the early learning programs, in part because caregivers have racial and gender biases about inappropriate or dangerous behavior.

Research has consistently shown that high-quality preschool programs significantly improve children's readiness to learn at school — and the preparation is social and emotional as well as academic. Yet very young children who struggle to manage strong emotions or control their behavior are quickly excluded from classrooms and opportunities to practice the skills they will need for kindergarten — including such skills as being able to listen and follow instructions, regulate one's feelings and behaviors, make friends, and ask for help. The very children expelled for behavioral reasons are often those who can benefit the most from preschool.

Efforts are under way to reduce expulsions by law. But my research indicates that legal steps alone will fail to address the problem. Curtailing harmful expulsions requires more basic changes, including improved teacher preparation and increased funding for intervention services.

### Attempts to Ban Expulsions

The 2014 Child Care Block Grant stipulates that beneficiaries must reduce expulsion rates. To comply, states across the country are finding ways to ban the expulsion of young children from preschool and early learning programs. Some, such as Colorado and Louisiana, address expulsion by denouncing the practice in administrative guides and in reporting and reimbursement requirements. Fifteen other states have passed or are working towards passing legislation. States differ in the types of programs they target with these efforts, such as public Pre-K and publicly funded child care. One of the most progressive and potentially influential policies is Illinois Public Act 100-0105 which went into effect on January 1st of 2018 and stipulates that no child in any of the state-licensed or publicly funded child care or early education program (birth through age five) may be expelled. It also specifically encourages programs to seek training for teachers to address implicit bias in disciplinary practices. This sweeping legislation will impact nearly every program in the state, from public pre-kindergarten programs in elementary schools to for-profit center-based child care.

Though such groundbreaking legislative momentum is exciting, many of the laws aiming to ban expulsion have been passed quickly and are not grounded in research. They are legislators' "best-guesses" at how to solve this problem. It is evident that Illinois, in particular, is concerned about curtailing high rates of exclusion and discriminatory patterns overall, but unless underlying issues are addressed, the new rules may have limited impact and or result in unintended consequences, especially for teachers.

### The Real Problem

Each child's expulsion is symptomatic of a much larger problem — an overburdened, underfunded, undervalued, and fragmented early education system. A small but growing research literature indicates that expulsions of young children result from exhausted and underpaid teachers deciding how to expend limited attention in chaotic classrooms, as well as from administrators operating on razor-thin budgets. The current early childhood workforce is ill-equipped to deal with troubled children and comply with legislation that prohibits expulsion. Teachers, faced with children biting, throwing chairs, inconsolably screaming, or

otherwise disrupting the classroom, must decide how to meet the needs of the individual child, the whole class, and their own emotional and physical well-being. Teachers who have requested expulsions often report higher levels of stress and depression. Legislation that bans expulsion simply removes that tool from teachers' classroom management toolbox and provides nothing to replace it.

Early childhood teachers not only disproportionately suffer from stress and depression but are so poorly compensated that one in seven live in families below the poverty line. They receive limited training (if any) in the skills that would best support them in these challenging situations. Poor workplace climate, poor compensation, a lack of respect, and the physical and emotional strain of caring for young children all negatively affect teachers' ability to retain children with challenging behaviors and limit their ability to positively guide children's development.

Passing legislative bans on expulsion without allocating funds to improve teacher-student ratios or provide mental health services will lead to muted effects on expulsion rates. Teachers are being told that, on top of meeting the needs of the whole class, they must also find the time, energy, and skill to work intensely with behaviorally challenging children and their families. Programs that simply comply with the new legislation without also providing additional support and resources to teachers will likely see higher rates of teacher turnover and burnout. Ultimately, this will result in poorer quality care for many preschool children.

## **A Time to Invest More in Early Childhood Education**

To truly enable every child to build the skills and knowledge that will ensure their success in kindergarten and beyond, policymakers and school administrators must invest in the programs and caregivers who support their learning. Congress recently passed a historic increase in child care funding for low-income working families. But this is only a down payment and will not adequately improve teacher compensation or address their skills and emotional resources. Nor will the existing funds ensure equitable access to intervention services, such as mental health consultation, which have been shown to improve program practices, reduce teacher stress, reduce negative perceptions of children's behavior, and reduce expulsion requests. There is much more work to be done — and governments will need to invest in early childhood education to get the job done.

**Read more in Kate Zinsler, Courtney A. Zulauf, Vinodharen Nair Das, and H. Callie Silver, "Utilizing Social-Emotional Learning Supports to Address Teacher Stress and Preschool Expulsion," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* (2017).**