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Press statement

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Foundation for Child Development (FCD) policy brief:

Implementing Policies to Reduce the Likelihood of Preschool Expulsion

Walter S. Gilliam, PhD

One of the questions asked in the opening pages of this policy brief is “What do we know about expulsions in preschool?” The answers given are

- the rates are highest for older preschoolers and African Americans;
- boys are four and a half times more likely to be expelled than girls (*page 3.*)

When one looks more closely at these data in the original 2005 report (**Prekindergarteners Left Behind: Expulsion Rates in State Prekindergarten Systems**) among the African-American preschool children expelled, 91% were boys.

We applaud Dr. Gilliam and FCD for following up that finding with two specific recommendations that researchers should:

- Focus on understanding why boys and African-Americans are at greatest risk for prekindergarten expulsion and how prekindergarten programs can best respond to these disparities.
- Investigate the effectiveness of teacher preparation and on-the-job professional training to improve the ability of teachers to teach children from a variety of cultural backgrounds

While these are important recommendations *for researchers*, the finding that 91% of the Black children expelled are boys reveals a shocking trend and requires a policy response. It rings an alarm bell with regard to the ways in which schools are responding to the African American male population, further mirroring trends that have been consistently cited by researchers and writers through the years (Oscar Barbarin, Juwanza Kunjufu, Ronald Ferguson.) The differential impact on Black males requires a policy response that specifically addresses reducing the disparity between them and other groups of children. *Policies that reduce the likelihood of preschool expulsion in general are not enough.*

The National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) would suggest that what the FCD recommendations need is language that is specific to sharpening a perspective and consciousness around the **cultural issues** that may be at work, and as an extension, around the **issues of race and gender bias**. These are needed in order to assure deliberate and intentional strategies to address African American males as program policy unfolds in practice.

For example, one recommendation might call for early education programs to employ teachers who are culturally and linguistically competent.

While we may not find within Dr. Gilliam’s study a basis for this suggestion nor clues to where we might start, there are numerous places in the social science literature that would be helpful.

One good example is the Schott Foundation 2006 study *Public Education and Black Male Students* that cites state by state, various gaps and disparities in graduation rates, in special education and discipline. The report argues that one can do something about these situations to make life better for Black boys by implementing policies that indeed lead to change. The report suggests for instance:

- Schools of education can train future teachers to have expectations as high for their Black male students as for White male (or for that matter Black female) students and equip those future teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to help their students meet those expectations.
- Schools of education can train administrators to use data and personal observations to focus on closing achievement gaps from the earliest grades.

We at NBCDI firmly believe that teacher preparation is an avenue to pursue to make a difference in the education trajectories of African American children. We call for policy that yields cultural competence as a demonstrated proficiency for teachers preparing to work with urban children and youth. We also call for schools to employ teachers who understand the role of culture in the behavioral manifestations of children.

Without doubt, there are ways to reduce the likelihood of expulsion in prekindergarten programs, but the differential rates between Black boys and other groups of children will only change by directly recruiting and training personnel who are skilled and adept at supporting their positive development and learning.