Delivering on Affirming Early Childhood Education: Lessons from Community Voices

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The National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) is committed to supporting the success of our children by ensuring they have access to high-quality early childhood education (ECE). The first step is addressing racial bias in early childhood education systems. The evidence of racial bias in ECE is most evident in the disproportionate rate of suspensions and expulsions of Black children. Black children represent 19 percent of preschool enrollment, but 47 percent of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions. In comparison, white children represent 41 percent of preschool enrollment, but 28 percent of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions, according to data from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights released in 2014. Exclusionary discipline in the most critical years of learning has such detrimental, long-term effects on young children that advocates now describe the resulting continuum as the preschool-to-prison pipeline.

NBCDI launched the “Delivering on the Promise of Effective Early Childhood Education for Black Children: Eliminating Exclusionary Discipline and Concentrating on Inclusion” national campaign in 2017. This initiative is designed to dismantle the preschool-to-prison pipeline and address the rising rates of suspensions and expulsions in early childhood education. Through this initiative, NBCDI is supporting advocates and policymakers nationally who are seeking to ensure equal access to education for all young children by eliminating suspensions and expulsions in early childhood education and implementing positive discipline practices. This initiative was implemented in two phases: 1) releasing the Delivering on the Promise of Effective Early Childhood Education white paper with programmatic and policy recommendations to end exclusionary discipline and create inclusive, affirming learning environments; and 2) sharing findings from focus groups and convenings with parents, advocates and educators in this white paper and in the Call to Action Advocacy Toolkit: Delivering on the Promise of High-Quality Early Childhood Education.

In the Delivering on the Promise of Effective Early Childhood Education white paper, a core recommendation was to strengthen family-school partnerships in order to create inclusive, affirming learning environments. In Phase II of the “Delivering on the Promise” initiative, NBCDI used focus groups to take a deep dive into the issue of suspensions and expulsions in early childhood education and family-school partnerships with Black parents and caregivers. The focus groups gave us insight into how parents, families and educators are affected by suspensions and expulsions and the impact of banning suspensions and expulsions of young children, especially Black children on programs and communities. The ultimate goal of the focus groups was to document the perspectives of Black parents/caregivers on how to address the suspension and expulsion crisis in ECE. In Phase II of the “Delivering on the Promise” initiative, NBCDI also convened a “Delivering on the Promise” Community of Practice (CoP) designed to build coalitions of state and local practitioners, administrators and advocates equipped to advance racial equity in early childhood education by ending exclusionary discipline practices for all children.
Black families and residents of low-income communities, in particular, often face multiple barriers to forming partnerships with schools, including teachers and other program personnel who have low expectations for their engagement and little understanding or respect for their culture and experiences.

AISHA RAY

“Through the Lens of Culture: Envisioning Effective, Powerful Partnerships Between Black Families and Early Childhood Programs,” Being Black is Not a Risk Factor Statistics and Strengths-Based Solutions in the State of Illinois
In Phase I of the “Delivering on the Promise” initiative, NBCDI released the *Delivering on the Promise of Effective Early Childhood Education* white paper that included the following programmatic and policy recommendations:

**1. Ensure all children have access to the core elements of Affirming, Inclusive Early Learning Settings, which include:**
   a. Family-School Partnerships;
   b. Culturally-Responsive Practices;
   c. High Expectations of Children;
   d. Social-Emotional Learning;
   e. Developmentally-Appropriate Pedagogy with Positive Guidance; and
   f. Trauma-Informed Care and Services.

**2. Implement systems-level reforms to support the Core Elements of Affirming, Inclusive Early Learning Settings, which include addressing:**
   a. Licensing Standards;
   b. Professional Development and Training Standards;
   c. Quality Assurance Systems and Ongoing Continuous Improvement;
   d. Wraparound Supports and Mental Health Services; and
   e. Data Development and Monitoring.
The focus groups gave us insight into how parents, families and educators are affected by suspensions and expulsions and the impact of banning suspensions and expulsions of young Black children.
This paper includes the following findings and implications from “Delivering on the Promise” focus groups and Community of Practice.

Key Findings

• Suspensions and expulsions have a detrimental impact on children’s learning, social-emotional development and health.
• Suspensions and expulsions can create instability for families.
• Suspensions and expulsions undermine the role and impact of early education programs and schools. Banning these practices would be beneficial for schools, programs and communities.
• Use of suspensions and expulsions impacts educator-child relationships and interactions.
• Families need information and supports to advocate for banning suspensions and expulsions.
• Schools, educators and staff need anti-bias training and cultural competence along with patience.
• Communities with similar interests need to collaborate to deliver on the promise.
Implications

- There is an urgent need to support children’s emotional, social and holistic well-being.
- Home-school partnerships are not optional; they are a must.
- Schools must recognize the negative impact of suspension and expulsion practices on children and families’ functionality.
- Multi-systemic approaches are needed to combat and eliminate suspensions and expulsions and deliver on the promise.

Educators and administrators must balance recognizing and addressing trauma with also identifying and supporting the strengths and assets each child and family brings.
Focus Groups. Focus groups were conducted at six sites around the country: Far Rockaway, NY; Cedar Hill, TX; Beachwood, OH; Denver, CO; Poughkeepsie, NY; and Montclair, NJ from November 2018 through February 2019. These focus groups lasted approximately two hours and highlighted the following discussion topics (see Appendix for a copy of the focus group protocol):

- Impact of suspensions and expulsions on children, families, schools and educators, and communities;
- Perception of the commitment (or lack of commitment) to banning suspensions and expulsions of young children;
- Supports needed for parents to make sure that schools and programs stop suspending and expelling young children and end disproportionate discipline of Black children;
- Supports needed for educators and schools that are engaging with children who have experienced trauma and/or present challenging behavior.

Participants for the focus groups were primarily caregivers, such as parents and grandparents; groups varied in terms of age, gender, education level and employment status. Many participants had personal experience with a child who had been suspended or expelled multiple times. Some of the grandparents also experienced suspensions or expulsions with their children who were now parents experiencing it with their children. In one focus group, participants also included staff from child care centers, Head Start, and Early Head Start programs as well as representatives from public schools, higher education, community agencies and the state legislature. In addition to knowing someone who had been suspended or expelled, some participants had experience working with parents to get children re-enrolled in schools or child care programs following disciplinary actions.

Community of Practice (CoP)

The goals of the CoP virtual convenings included raising awareness of the inequitable suspension and expulsion rates of Black children; building coalitions committed to taking action to address this issue; and engaging with decision-makers (elected officials and ECE administrators) to advocate for systematic changes. The CoP network received support to advocate for research-based professional development related to racial bias, positive discipline practices, culturally-responsive pedagogy, trauma-informed care and tracking for racial equity in quality assurance systems. CoP members included NBCDI’s National Affiliate Network, university professors and graduate students, early childhood education practitioners and administrators, social service administrators, and advocates at the local, state and national levels dedicated to improving school discipline in early learning systems. Seven one-hour CoP meetings occurred between February 2018 and February 2019.
Suspensions and expulsions have a detrimental impact on children’s learning, social-emotional development and health. Analysis of the focus groups and CoP indicated that participants agreed that suspensions and expulsions undermine children’s learning, given they are missing instruction time and time to engage with their peers; leading them to fall behind and be less connected to their peers and educators. This also impacted other areas of children’s routines, including their nutrition, physical activity and sleep schedule, which have an impact on brain and cognitive development. Children also suffered emotionally, questioning why they were not in school like their peers and asking whether or not something was “wrong with them.” Parents reflected that children were placing the burden of suspensions and expulsions on their identity rather than their behavior. Participants also made note that when children were often targeted with suspension, other children took note, which resulted in forms of bullying from other children.

Participants also highlighted the importance of terminology, language and attitudes towards children. While it is important to recognize the preschool-to-prison pipeline, advocates should also consider strengths-based language, such as the cradle-to-college pathway. Addressing negative language may also make people more cognizant of negative attitudes toward Black children, especially boys. Black children are being viewed as too energetic, oppositional and bound for trouble no matter the intervention and supports. Focusing on assets those children bring to the learning experience may help educators view them as energetic, curious; and as children who love movement.

Suspensions and expulsions can create instability for families. When children are suspended or expelled, it means that a parent must either find another adequate arrangement with little notice, take time off, or take them to work. These options have negative consequences for families. Many parents do not work in child-friendly environments, forcing them to make tough decisions about child care. Parents who must miss work face reprimand and/or termination due to their absence. Parents who find child care, often face inadequacies that exacerbate challenging behaviors, put children in danger, expose them to traumatic experiences and provide little to no enriching opportunities. Suspending or expelling
children also negatively impacts the parent-educator/provider relationship, which is critical for children's positive experience in the early learning setting.

**Suspensions and expulsions undermine the role and impact of early education programs and schools.** Banning these practices would be beneficial for schools, programs and communities.

While early education programs and schools claim that they suspend and expel children due to behavior and to keep other children safe, there is a detrimental impact to these settings that is often not considered. Use of suspensions and expulsions may send the wrong message to other children and families about how challenging issues can best be handled, undermining the relationship between educators and the children and families that they serve. Also, they lose income from children being suspended or expelled, which is especially the case for school-based programs that depend on child attendance to receive education funds. Loss of funds may eventually impact the quality and retention levels of educators and staff to children ratio, as well as resources to support high-quality early learning environments. Participants recommended school districts offer financial incentives to early learning programs to employ either providers or behavior consultants to address the underlying factors of a child’s behavior.

Participants noted that banning the use of these exclusionary practices also meant that schools and education-based programs will need to work with families and children to deal with real underlying problems that exist for some children, from experiencing poverty to severe stress, rather than re-traumatizing the child through suspension or expulsion practices. If children are provided with the proper supports and services to deal with emotional and/or behavioral challenges, then they are placed on a better trajectory for school and life success. The partnerships developed between schools, programs and families to address behavioral challenging can result in more positive connections between parents.
and educators and more parent involvement, which will benefit schools, families and children. Participants also saw opportunities for schools to improve practices to support children, as well as to ensure children’s mental health needs are met.

Finally, these exclusionary practices also impact communities in the short- and long-term. Short-term impacts include children not having proper supervision and/or being in unsafe spaces. In the long-term, these suspensions may lead to low literacy rates and poor education outcomes, as well as to future unemployability and crime. Thus, suspensions and expulsions could have long-term impacts on children, families, schools and communities.

Use of suspensions and expulsions impacts educator-child relationships and interactions. Evidence points to the critical role of sensitive and responsive adult-child interactions. Participants noted that children can “feel the energy” [of educators], both positively and negatively. They voiced concern that teachers “don’t seem to care” about the quality of the learning environment, and are instead, “focused [only] on monetary gain.” Participants also observed that educators use suspensions and expulsions as a “method of controlling” children and lack positive discipline practices. In these schools and early childhood education programs, positive school culture has not been established, therefore, administrators cannot hold educators accountable for implementing positive practices in the classroom. Parents want educators to use positive guidance and classroom management to engage and educate children instead of relying on suspensions and expulsions. Parents were concerned that without structure or accountability from the educators, there are no established behaviors for the classroom. Further, if there is the notion that only certain children are being suspended, such as Black children or Black boys, then those children may feel less secure and safe in the classroom, leading to negative relationships with the educator.

As noted by one participant: “banning [of] expulsions and suspensions will add value to the [children] because they are not being dismissed, but the situations are being handled in a way where there is complete resolution.”

There is some evidence to indicate that effective use of anti-bias, culturally-responsive practices, positive discipline strategies, trauma-informed care and conflict resolution strategies are alternatives to suspensions and expulsions.

Families need information and supports to advocate for banning suspensions and expulsions. Participants in the focus groups noted that families need support from advocacy organizations to remain informed of policy changes and to organize parents to take action to ban suspensions and expulsions. Some noted the value of collaborating with existing groups who may have interests in addressing
suspensions or expulsions, improving school practices, or social justice issues in schooling. Since parents have limited time and travel funds for in-person meetings, participants recommended virtual engagement through video conference, phone meetings and social media. Social media could also be used to create communities for parental peer-to-peer support groups. Participants thought it was critical to provide supports for families to partner with their child’s school and/or early learning program to change discipline practices. There was particular emphasis on having a support group in the school that included school staff and parents to make stronger connections between home and school.

**Schools, educators and staff need anti-bias training and cultural competence along with patience.** Participants felt that a driving factor underlying higher rates of suspensions and expulsions for Black children is the unconscious bias of educators against Black children whom they view as “problematic” and “less” than white children. There was a strong desire that all forms of suspension, expulsion and exclusionary practices be banned. Participants stressed the need for more professional development and coaching in the areas of anti-bias and culturally responsive practices and a recognition of the destructive nature of bias in systems, schools and programs, which may be hard to combat. Participants also noted the need for educators and staff to understand social-emotional development and that they could benefit from specific trainings, such as Help Me Grow®. Furthermore, these trainings should be offered prior to educators and administrative staff receiving their degrees and credentials.

To further combat such unconscious biases, participants felt it was important for early childhood programs and staff to be more engaged with families and children and become familiar with their lived experiences. Programs should engage with families by having parent volunteers in every classroom and developing parent-family plans for each child that hold family members and educators accountable to support them. One participant noted that school staff and educators “need to see students and parents outside of school” and “have better awareness about today’s students.” Educators should engage with the communities that they are working in to create a deeper understanding and stronger bond with the children and families they serve. They also called attention to the need to provide classroom management and conflict resolution professional development to educators and staff. Counseling, mental health or behavior assessment and programs for children would help schools support children holistically. All of these supports will lead to more patience and empathy towards children and eliminate the use of detrimental exclusionary practices, such as suspensions and expulsions.

**Involvement from the whole community is needed to deliver on the promise.** Participants emphasized that parents, schools and educators need the support of community members and leaders to address this issue. Coalitions working to address this issue should include pediatricians, community organizations, coaches and faith leaders. Engaging the broader community may require a multi-media campaign, such as Public Service Announcements (PSAs). It is critical that individuals with similar goals find a way to come together to share strategies and amplify their voices to ban suspensions and expulsions from early learning programs through high school. Coalitions are needed to strategize and share tools, such as messages to connect with local policymakers and officials, and find data to support key concerns.
There is an urgent need to support children’s emotional, social and holistic well-being. Black children often hear negative messages about themselves or those who look like them. When children who look like them are pushed out of early childhood programs and education settings, they receive messages that reinforce negative perceptions of themselves, their families and communities. It is critical that children’s emotional, social and holistic needs are met, as well as their cognitive development. This means being proactive about the adverse childhood experiences and severe stress that young children may face that have an impact on their behavior regulation and brain development stages. Educators and administrators must balance recognizing and addressing trauma with also identifying and supporting the strengths and assets each child and family brings. Lastly, the language and terminology used to talk about Black children and families should be culturally-appropriate, positive and strengths-based.

Home-school partnerships are not an option, they are a must. Delivering on the promise of early education is not just about children, but it is also about families. Part of the importance of early childhood education is to support children to be ready for school and life, but it is also to ensure that families are being supported during these critical first years. Families have knowledge to share about children that should be heard and honored. Simultaneously, there is information that early education providers and educators can share with families about their child’s development, learning and potential. Research points out that culturally-affirming early learning environments are particularly critical for Black children. Parents must be provided with information about what it means to have an anti-bias, culturally-affirming early learning environment and how this can be achieved.
Schools must recognize the negative impact of suspension and expulsion practices on children and families functioning. A driving factor underlying the disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates of Black children compared to their peers is unconscious bias. It is clear that professional development, training and coaching in the area of addressing implicit bias and culturally-relevant pedagogy is needed for early learning programs and educators, including administrators and leaders. Early education program and school leaders, as well as educators, must recognize the trauma that is being placed upon children when they are suspended and expelled because of prejudice and racism. When child trauma in the classroom due to suspensions and expulsions persists, a family’s economic stability is at risk due to parent tardiness and unexpected time off work handling a myriad of resulting issues. Early learning leaders and educators are provided with professional development and courses on addressing racial bias and culturally-relevant practices prior to and after receiving their degree and certification. This will help to ensure that the culture of schools and early education programs have a basic foundation on culturally affirming practices.
To deliver on the promise of early education for our children, our work must begin at the local level. NBCDI has worked for more than 49 years to improve and advance the quality of life for Black children and families through education and advocacy. NBCDI continues to advocate for policies that support and positively impact our communities. With our National Affiliate Network, we are mobilizing locally to bring change to education systems. We have a clear agenda for action, one that will continue to challenge societal norms; change the trajectory of success for our children; and reshape the educational landscape in your neighborhood and communities across the country.

Here’s how you can get started in your community:

1. **Promote the value of early childhood education and demand adequate funding for early childhood education systems.** To create affirming and inclusive early learning settings that meet the needs of our children, systems-level reform will require significant investments in early childhood education systems. For example, updating licensing standards to reduce group/class sizes and child to adult ratios will require programs to have the funding to hire more early childhood educators. Professional development and wraparound supports are worthy investments to help deliver high-quality early childhood education that has positive, lasting impact on children and families. The return on investment from early childhood education has been well-documented for decades.

2. **Raise awareness about the importance of affirming and inclusive learning environments and the detrimental impact of expulsion, suspension and other exclusionary discipline practices in early childhood education.** Community voices and community organizing are vital to ensure that early learning settings meet the needs of our children, end suspensions and expulsions, and deliver on the promise of effective childhood education for Black children. Advocates must ensure that more people are aware of this issue. Much like electoral politics, advocacy campaigns need to garner widespread support from diverse stakeholders. Advocates should target core stakeholders like parents, caregivers, educators, community leaders, activists, clergy and child advocacy organizations; and focus on innovative partners like judges, pediatricians, business leaders and civic organizations.
3. Work in coalitions with other advocates to ensure you present a united front and strong voice in support of children. Elected officials have tough choices on their legislative agendas and competing budget priorities. Joining with other groups communicates the critical importance of this issue to policymakers. The structure of a coalition can support the long-term nature of campaigns to address exclusionary discipline practices.

4. Highlight progress in your city and state, and across the country. Advocating from a strengths-based perspective requires celebrating the wins along the way. If your state has already banned suspensions and expulsions in public pre-kindergarten programs or added professional development on culturally-responsive practice as required training, highlight the importance of these wins while challenging policymakers and administrators to do more.

5. Demand data and engage in independent data collection. Advocate for publicly-available data on suspensions and expulsions across early childhood learning settings and programs. If your city or state has not put data systems in place, implement independent data collection through focus groups and surveys. Advocates should engage with parents, caregivers and educators to learn about the lived experiences of families and educators and identify solutions and strategies designed to respond to local needs and environments. Through data collection, advocates have learned that preschool suspensions and expulsions occur at alarming rates; are associated with negative developmental and educational outcomes; and have disproportionately affected Black boys and girls, contributing to racial disparities in accessing educational opportunities. Comprehensive data collection and analysis at the state and local level is critical to continuing to raise awareness, drive progress on suspensions and expulsions in early childhood settings and track progress on reducing incidences.
Endnotes


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About NBCDI

For 49 years, the National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) has been committed to our mission to improve and advance the quality of life for Black children and families through education and advocacy. With our National Affiliate Network, we develop and deliver strengths-based, culturally relevant, evidence-based, and trauma informed curricula and programs that focus on health and wellness, family engagement and literacy. We support increased access to effective education by providing professional development scholarships for early childhood educators. NBCDI, the National Affiliate Network and our members advocate and inform education policies at the federal, state and local levels to ensure standards, regulations and resource allocations support equitable systems for Black children and families.