Positive Behavior Intervention Supports in Early Childhood Education

Statement of Problem

More than 5,000 preschool students are expelled each year in the United States—a rate that is more than three times higher than that of K-12 students. Recent studies demonstrate that racial disparities exist in rates of expulsions and suspensions: while African American students make up 18% of preschool enrollment, they make up 42% of preschool suspensions. Without proper support during these early years, a child is more likely to drop out of school, eventually receive welfare benefits and/or commit a crime. Therefore, it is imperative that we equip early childhood educators, child care centers, and parents with the knowledge and support to foster social and emotional development in all children to ensure school readiness and future success.

The traditional strategy of individual teacher training has not always been successful in addressing the issue of suspension and expulsion, and directors and leaders of child care centers are seeking solutions. A promising model currently being implemented throughout schools in Pennsylvania is Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). “Program-wide” PBIS covers early childhood and preschool environments, and “school-wide” PBIS is implemented in K-12 schools. The key components of PBIS include providing a framework to promote social and emotional competence in all children, addressing the social-emotional and behavioral needs of children who are at risk and providing supports for those with more persistent behavioral concerns. More research is needed, however, to determine the best approach to reduce suspension and expulsion in early childhood centers.

Description

In the first phase of our project, we selected three child care centers of similar size and population to test the effectiveness of PBIS in reducing expulsion and suspension among their students. What we found was encouraging: centers that implemented PBIS had lower rates of suspension and increased the quality of the preschool classrooms within the centers, including positive changes to classroom characteristics, the emotional and behavior supports, and supports for learning.

Building on these initial findings, the next phase of our project will implement program-wide PBIS into several additional child care centers, each of which provides services to children ranging from 6-week-olds to kindergarten age. We will also incorporate two unique subprograms into select centers.

Of the participating centers, some are using novel family engagement strategies alongside PBIS. As part of this program, called Homenotes, parents are encouraged to practice the same PBIS-based positive behavior supports used in the classroom at home with recommended age-appropriate activities and are given the opportunity to report back on their experience. In addition to Homenotes, we will ask parents who serve on the center’s core leadership PBIS team to participate in surveys and qualitative interviews to provide more information about their experience.

Other centers are also participating in a three-part training program, which focuses on how PBIS can support and promote equity. The first session focuses on person-to-person discrimination that particularly affects children in early childhood education using real-world examples. The session also examines appropriate mitigation strategies, such as stereotype replacement and individuation, which staff can implement in the classroom, fostering a culturally representative classroom environment, perspective taking and mindfulness. The second and third sessions focus on institutionalized racism and other oppressive acts that contribute to disparities in early child care, as well as internalized racism and how it affects children.

Our project is a system-wide initiative, with an emphasis on shared goals and center-wide values and rules. It includes the development of a core leadership team and use of data to drive strategies and family involvement. We have increased attention on how PBIS is implemented in toddler and infant classrooms, and on the role of the administrators and the administrative structures in centers to support the process of full implementation. PBIS external facilitators or coaches work on a weekly basis with the directors and teachers of the child care centers, providing periodic trainings and support to internal provisional coaches. We are also partnering with Philadelphia Health Management Center's Child Development and Family Services to provide PBIS support to the centers, as well as the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network, which provides training and support to PBIS facilitators.

Next Steps

PBIS provides a feasible and effective method for child care centers to provide social and emotional support to all children in their care and reduce the use of expulsion and suspension to address behavior concerns. Because PBIS requires system-wide buy-in and implementation is a multi-year process, our goal is to give each center the tools and resources they need to reach fidelity with PBIS and sustain their efforts without outside funding. We also hope the findings from this project can help inform early childhood policy efforts to ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive in the classroom and beyond.

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