Opportunities to Address Philadelphia's Preschool Expulsion Problem

Health Equity

Date Posted:

Aug 29, 2017

What if I told you that Philadelphia's preschoolers are being expelled from classrooms at high rates? Would you believe me if I told you that the rate of expulsion for these young children nationwide is even higher than for high school students?

It's hard to imagine a three-year-old being told that they can no longer come to school, but preschools are expelling children at a rate three times higher than K-12 schools. In Philadelphia, 26 percent of child care settings reported in a survey we conducted last year that they expelled at least one child, and 37 percent reported having suspended a child under the age of five in the 2015-2016 school year. This is not just a preschool issue, but occurs across a variety of child care settings.

Furthermore, minority children nationwide are expelled or suspended more often than their peers; Hispanic and African American boys combined represent 46 percent of all preschool-age boys, but 66 percent of preschool suspensions.

The Impact of Expulsion and Suspension

Why are these children being asked to leave school or child care? Our survey revealed that the primary reason cited for expelling students is aggression – hitting, kicking, biting or otherwise physically lashing out – followed by poor control of emotions, including frequent tantrums and angry outbursts. For teachers, these behaviors are challenging and they worry about the safety and well-being of all of the children.

Child care settings should be inclusive of all children, including those with behavioral issues and those with special needs, and early childhood leaders need to take additional steps to build those inclusive environments. Unfortunately, early childhood leaders face a number of challenges:

- Currently, teachers cannot always access the appropriate training or support to help all preschoolers excel.
- Support is also lacking for parents who may be reluctant to use mental health services because of the stigma involved.
- Communication and collaboration is not common among service providers working with young children.
- Finally, there are no mechanisms for tracking outcomes for those children who are expelled or for helping expelled children find support or the next location for child care.

High-quality, inclusive child care and preschool programs not only prepare students for elementary school, but provide them with important cognitive, academic and social-emotional skills that are necessary to succeed at every education level. In fact, children who attend preschool are much more likely to graduate high school and less likely to have children as a teen or find themselves in jail.

So, not only does expulsion or suspension hinder a child's social-emotional development, but it also removes them from early learning programs that are known to contribute to academic success.

Opportunities to Ensure Early Childhood Success

The high rates of preschool expulsions and suspensions have become so troubling nationwide that, in 2016, two federal agencies jointly released recommendations for how early childhood programs and state governments can work to reverse these trends. They advocated that states develop and clearly communicate statewide expulsion and suspension policies, invest in workforce training, and establish and implement policies for high-quality early care and education programs. These are just recommendations – it's up to the states to create plans and find the funding and the will to carry out these efforts.

Here in Pennsylvania, we've made strides towards helping more children succeed in early childhood programs with the Office of Child Development & Early Learning's (OCDEL) release of policy statements on inclusion and expulsion and suspension. Additionally, the Pennsylvania Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 budget, though not yet funded, includes an expansion of investments in preschool and child care services that would go a long way to help young children and their parents.

This effort is just beginning and we will need to monitor the implementation of these new policies as time goes on. In the meantime, there is more that we can and should be doing to support families who need behavioral health supports to help keep their children in school and on track for success.

For instance, we can provide services for parents and all children, not just those as risk for removal, by connecting mental health services and other community programs with the child care system. We can develop more robust methods of measuring and tracking children in child care to evaluate the current Early Intervention programs and teacher trainings. Finally, we can make significant progress in achieving behavior change and reduction of unnecessary suspensions and expulsions by providing more effective trainings for teachers.

To make some of these solutions reality, PolicyLab and Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC) are working collaboratively to bring more social-emotional support into Philadelphia's child care settings and reduce instances of expulsions, suspensions and challenging behaviors in the classroom. The group is studying the effectiveness of using the Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) model, a three-tiered model that provides school-wide support for all children, classroom-level support, and individualized support for children with greater behavioral challenges to a child care center in Philadelphia. In our program, we utilized PBIS strategies in a child care center and ultimately incorporated a parent nights with teachers, held monthly core team meetings with participation from a parent advocate, and taught all staff how to manage challenging child behaviors.

As a psychologist at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, I value the positive experiences preschool gives children and want to advocate for all children to be able to have those opportunities, especially those with behavior problems that I see in my practice. With Philadelphia just starting its second year of universal preschool enrollment, there will be even more children who could face suspension or expulsion because of a child care system that doesn't have all the supports to allow children to succeed. Let's take this as an opportunity to build on the progress we've made so far do what's right for all of our children's futures.

This post is part of a collection of back to school-related research and information that we're curating for the new school year. Follow our hashtag #PolicyLabGoesBacktoSchool for more.