

RESEARCH BRIEF

Prekindergarteners Left Behind: Expulsion Rates in State Prekindergarten Systems

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Introduction

Expulsion, defined as “a complete cessation of educational services without the benefit of alternative services provided by or through the educational program that has expelled the child,” is the harshest disciplinary action that an educational institution can impose upon a student (Gilliam, 2005, p. 1). Typically, expulsion is the final disciplinary action taken within a series of punishments intended to correct behaviors that the institution considers problematic.

Existing literature on expulsions is limited. Very little research has been conducted on expulsions for grades K-12, and even less for children younger than kindergarten age (children approximately 3-5 years of age enrolled in childcare and early education classes). **This research brief highlights findings from an article, entitled “Prekindergarteners Left Behind: Expulsion Rates in State Prekindergarten Systems,”¹ that examined expulsion rates for children in state-funded prekindergarten systems across the nation.²**

Methods

Telephone interviews were conducted with the prekindergarten teacher most responsible for day-to-day classroom operations during the 2003 and 2004 academic years. Expulsion data for grades K-12 were obtained from the “Elementary and Secondary School Survey: 2000.”³ Rates of expulsion were computed for both prekindergarten and aggregated K-12 data and compared within same states. Expulsion rates were also compared by child demographics, type of educational setting, and access to class-based mental health consultation services.

Results

Overall, 9.5% of state-funded prekindergarten teachers reported expelling at least one child in the prior twelve months. Of those teachers who reported an expulsion, 78.3% expelled only one child, 15.2% expelled two, 5.5% expelled three, and 1.0% expelled four.

¹ Gilliam, W. S. (2005). *Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems*. Yale University Child Study Center.

² 52 State-funded prekindergarten systems operate in 40 states across the nation.

³ ESSS; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001.

The table below includes prekindergarten systems with the ten highest rates of expulsion:

Table 1. Expulsion Rates per 1,000 Students

State Prekindergarten System	Expulsion Rate per 1,000	% Pre-K Teachers Expelling
New Mexico Child Development Program	24.3	16.7
Maine State Funded Head Start	18.4	20.7
New Mexico State Funded Head Start	15.8	28.6
Alabama Office of School Readiness Prekindergarten	14.1	12.5
Delaware Early Childhood Assistance Program	13.0	11.5
North Carolina More at Four Pre-kindergarten Program	13.0	14.7
New York State Experimental Prekindergarten Program	12.7	16.4
Tennessee Early Childhood Education Pilot Program	12.5	20.7
Connecticut School Readiness and Child Care Initiative	12.5	16.3
Missouri Preschool Project	12.0	20.0
NATION	6.7	10.4

- North Carolina’s More at Four Pre-kindergarten Program’s rate of expulsion is nearly twice the national rate of prekindergarten expulsion (13.0 and 6.7, respectively).
- 14.7% of North Carolina’s prekindergarten teachers reporting expelling at least one student, approximately four percent higher than the national average.

Table 2 includes K-12 comparison data⁴ for states whose prekindergarten systems have the five highest expulsion rates:

Table 2. Expulsion Rates for Prekindergarten and K-12 by State

State	Pre-K Expulsions per 1,000	K-12 Expulsions per 1,000
New Mexico	21.1	1.5
Maine	14.7	0.7
Alabama	14.1	1.0
Delaware	13.0	1.5
North Carolina	13.0	1.9

- North Carolina teachers expelled 13.0 per 1,000 children in state-funded prekindergarten classes compared to 1.9 per 1,000 in grades K-12 combined.
- North Carolina preschoolers are expelled at a rate more than six times greater than students in grades K-12.

Male children were expelled at a rate more than four times higher than females (10.5 and 2.3 per 1,000, respectively). Tables 3 and 4 provide expulsion rates by additional child demographics:

⁴ K-12 data is aggregated.

Table 3. Prekindergarten Expulsion Rates by Age

Age	Expulsions per 1,000
2 Years	3.8
3 Years	4.0
4 Years	5.9
5-6 Years	11.6

- Older children were expelled at a higher rate than younger children. Children between the ages of five and six years more than three times as likely to be expelled from a prekindergarten education program.

Table 4. Prekindergarten Expulsion Rates by Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Expulsions per 1,000
African-American	10.0
Caucasian (non-Latino)	5.8
Latino	4.4
Asian-American	1.8
Other	6.8

- African-American children were expelled at a rate almost twice as high as Caucasian classmates, more than twice as high as Latino classmates, and more than five times the rate of Asian-American classmates.

Table 5. Prekindergarten Expulsion Rates by Type of Setting

Setting	Expulsions per 1,000
School	6.2
Head Start	6.6
Other	7.6
For-Profit Child Care	11.9
Faith-Affiliated	12.5

- Children attending prekindergarten programs in faith-based settings were most likely to be expelled from a program, while children in school-based prekindergarten programs were the least likely to be expelled.
- Children attending prekindergarten programs in faith-based settings were twice as likely to be expelled as children who attended a school-based prekindergarten program.

Teacher access to classroom-based mental health services was negatively correlated with expulsion rates: as access to mental health consultation increased, rates of expulsion decreased. Teachers with access to classroom-based mental health services, such as an onsite or regularly visiting psychologist, psychiatrist, or social worker, expelled students at a lower rate than teachers with limited or no access to services. Table 5 provides expulsion rates by access to mental health consultation:

Table 6. Prekindergarten Expulsion Rates by Access to Mental Health Consultation

	Expulsions per 1,000
Psychologist/Psychiatrist	
On-Site or Regular Visits	5.7
On-Call	6.2
No Access	10.8
Social Worker	
On-Site or Regular Visits	6.3
On-Call	6.6
No Access	8.6

Discussion

A variety of factors may affect a teacher’s decision to expel a student. As shown in this study, gender, age, race/ethnicity, type of setting, and insufficient access to class-based mental health consultations contribute to disproportionate rates of expulsion among prekindergarteners. However, of these identified influencing factors, access to class-based mental health consultations is the least static in nature which may make it the most appealing for system-wide modifications. With limited access to consultation services, educators are left with few options to address problematic behaviors. Unacceptable behavior is penalized in lieu of diagnosing and treating its underlying cause.

Active collaboration between teachers and behavioral consultants may provide a support system through which children with severe behavior problems can be identified, receive treatment, and avoid severe disciplinary actions such as expulsion. Onsite behavioral consultants can provide educators with information regarding an individual child’s behavior, as well as more general classroom behavior management techniques. Enhanced teacher education programs with an emphasis on behavior management techniques may foster more supportive classroom environments for children with behavior difficulties by providing educators with alternative options to manage inappropriate behaviors.