



Center for
Children's
Advocacy

Preventing Suspension of Young Children from School
An Issue Brief from the Office of the Child Advocate and the Center for
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Over the last several years an alarming number of school suspensions are for very young children. For the 2014-15 school year, according to data published by the State Department of Education, there were approximately 2,600 incidents of suspension (both ISS and OSS) for children under the age of 7. This includes Pre-Kindergarten¹, Kindergarten, First Grade, and some Second Graders. Black and Hispanic students were significantly more likely to be the subject of exclusionary discipline than white students.

THE LAW

In response to the escalating number of suspensions of young children, in 2015 the Connecticut legislature passed a [law](#) prohibiting the use of out-of-school suspension for children in grades preschool to two except in those rare cases that a child exhibits violent or sexual conduct that endangers others.²

2016 UPDATE

In March, 2016, after receiving multiple complaints regarding incidents of very young children, typically children with special needs, being suspended from school, the Office of the Child Advocate requested data regarding school suspension from four urban school districts. The data revealed that despite some reduction in the use of out-of-school suspension for young children, the number of suspension incidents overall remained high during the 2015-16 school year, totaling 1,400 incidents of suspension in the four districts alone.

In response to a media inquiry regarding the high suspension numbers, the Bridgeport Superintendent of Schools told the Hartford Courant in July 2016, "I don't believe any K-to-two child should be suspended out-of-school,I've said that openly. I believe we should have programs and services in place for these students because for so many of them, their challenging behavior is due to trauma they have experienced. We have to find a better way of dealing with them."

¹ This data does not include suspensions from non-public preschool programs.

² The law that passed applies to public schools and does not apply to community-based preschool programs.

SUSPENSION HARMS THE MOST VULNERABLE STUDENTS AND WORSENS THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

State Department of Education [data](#) provides that students receiving disciplinary sanctions also experience substantial attendance and performance issues. [Research](#) confirms receipt of *even one suspension* is associated with higher likelihood of academic failure, school dropout, and involvement in the juvenile justice system.

TRAUMA in young children.

Children who have [traumatic](#) life experiences (extreme poverty/deprivation, witness to violence, abuse/neglect) are the most likely children to later be subjected to removal from school.

[Trauma](#) actually changes the structure and functioning of a young child's brain through activation of the "flight or fight" response, *leaving the child to live in a "constant state of emergency."*

(See [Issue Brief](#) from the Education Law Center on Trauma-informed Classrooms.)

According to [national experts](#): "young children who experience trauma are at particular risk because their rapidly developing brains are very vulnerable... [trauma affects] memory, attention, thinking, language and consciousness... the ability to regulate emotions.... Unlike older children, young children cannot express in words whether they feel afraid, overwhelmed, or helpless. However their behaviors provide us with important clues."

The United States Departments of Education and Health and Human Services issued a [joint policy statement](#) in 2014 urging states that "the disturbing trends [of suspending or expelling very young children from school] warrant immediate attention from the early childhood and education fields to prevent, severely limit, and work toward eventually eliminating the expulsion and suspension—and ensure the safety and well-being—of young children in early learning settings." The policy statement also included 18 resources for states to support efforts to exclusionary discipline.

Finally, there is a significant economic cost to over-reliance on exclusionary discipline. A 2016-published research paper from the [UCLA Civil Rights Project](#) demonstrated that overuse of punitive school costs taxpayers billions of dollars.

SOLUTIONS: SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND THEIR TEACHERS

In July 2016, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio [announced](#) the city’s plan to eliminate suspension of young children and provide schools with more resources to use restorative practices, and mental health counseling.

Next steps for Connecticut should include legislation to [eliminate suspension of children Pre-K through second grade](#).

Programs around the country are recognizing the harms and futility of exclusionary discipline for young children and putting in new supports to achieve better outcomes for children.

[Miami-Dade School District](#) has eliminated all out-of-school suspensions and created Success Centers across the district for students to continue learning.

[Syracuse Public Schools](#) prohibits suspensions for pre-kindergarten through second grade in all cases and prohibits suspensions for third through fifth grade except in the case of pervasive or egregious aggressive acts that cause injury or threaten children’s safety.

In [Arkansas preschools](#) certain procedures (observation, documentation, teaching of skills, modifications, discussions with parents, support services, etc.) must be followed before exclusionary practices can be considered. Arkansas also funds [Project PLAY](#), an early childhood mental health consultation program, to support providers and teachers.

Ohio has hired more [Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative consultants](#), who provide onsite supports including “art therapy, play therapy, physical health referrals for children, and training and professional development for the early childhood workforce.”

A Washington state elementary school principal on trauma-informed approach to discipline: **“So much is focused on instructional strategies — how to teach reading, how to teach math or science — but I firmly believe if we haven’t built the relationships, you won’t have instruction as rigorous as you want,”** she said. The school [reduced use of suspension](#) by 33 percent in 2014.

States and local school districts that are creating [“trauma-informed” school systems](#) emphasize strategic planning, staff training, linkages with mental health professionals, specific instructional strategies for children who have experienced trauma, and revised school policies.

One important program to know about in Connecticut is the [Early Childhood Consultation Partnership \(ECCP\)](#) which provides mental health consultation to meet the social and emotional needs of children birth to five in early care or education settings. The ECCP “builds the capacity of caregivers at an individual, family, classroom, or center-wide level. It provides support, education and consultation to caregivers to promote enduring and optimal outcomes for young children.” Connecticut is unique in its access to ECCP; federal experts have highlighted our state for the increased availability of mental health services for young students compared to the rest of the country.

Schools can also refer children to evidence-based home visiting programs such as [Child First](#) and [ConnPAT: Connecticut Parents as Teachers](#), which provide parent education and support for families of children with emotional or behavioral challenges. There are also [in-home treatment programs](#) that serve younger students and can also support the child’s need in the school setting.

[Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Services](#) (EMPS) should be used for true behavioral and/or mental health crises, and is accessible by calling 211.

NEXT STEPS

Work to eliminate the use of suspension for very young children in school. To close the achievement gap for children we must resource and encourage schools to support children in all areas of development, including social-emotional development. We must emphasize the need for trauma-informed academic and behavioral interventions whenever children need them.

RESOURCES

National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Trauma Toolkit for Educators.

NCTSN Training Resources

National Child Traumatic Stress Network Learning Center (<http://learn.nctsn.org/>):

Registering for this free online learning center provides access to several archived sessions of interest to education professionals. The Schools and Trauma Speaker Series has five archived sessions:

- (1) Trauma-informed IEPs
- (2) Evidence-based practices
- (3) Sudden death on a school campus
- (4) Trauma-informed understanding of bullying

Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports, Technical Assistance Center.

Education Law Center-PA Unlocking the Door to Learning: Trauma-Informed Classrooms & Transformational Schools

The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, Reducing Early Childhood Expulsion and Suspension, Resources.

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. Key concepts: toxic stress. http://developingchild.harvard.edu/topics/science_of_early_childhood/toxic_stress_response.