

Suspensions & Expulsions in Early Grades:

A Problem Texas Can Fix with Strategies to Support Teachers and Students

All too often, Texas students in pre-k and other early grades are removed from their classes for challenging age-appropriate behavior or more challenging behavior stemming from childhood trauma or developmental concerns. We welcome the growing interest among school boards and state legislators in reducing suspensions and expulsions of students in these early grades. Efforts to keep these children in class will be most successful if they include training and technical assistance for teachers and administrators and other steps to address the challenges that school personnel and students face.

Student behavior in pre-k and the first few years of elementary school is often a challenge for teachers and administrators. In many cases that challenging behavior is developmentally appropriate and common, and in some cases it is also a product of childhood trauma or a developmental challenge. There are effective steps that teachers and schools can take to address student behavior, but all too often, school districts suspend or expel young students from their classroom. When young children are removed from their classrooms and schools, they miss out on the very opportunities they most need - the chance to learn, practice, and develop the foundational skills required for success in school and life.

Concerns about the high numbers of suspensions and expulsions in the early grades recently led several Texas districts, including Houston, Dallas, El Paso, and Austin ISDs, to place significant restrictions on the practice. State legislators have filed similar statewide bills. Those proposals are an important step in the right direction. However, these efforts will be most effective if coupled with strategies that provide teachers and schools with effective interventions to address challenging behaviors in students.

BACKGROUND

Schools in Texas remove students in pre-k and in the early grades at alarming rates.

- 107,745 kids from kindergarten through 2nd grade were suspended in the 2013-2014 school year.
- 4,691 pre-kindergarten students were suspended in the 2015-2016 school year.

Texans Care for Children is a statewide, non-profit, non-partisan, multi-issue children's policy organization. We drive policy change to improve the lives of Texas children today for a stronger Texas tomorrow. We envision a Texas in which all children grow up to be healthy, safe, successful, and on a path to fulfill their promise.

Virtually all classroom removals in the early grades occur for optional reasons.

- In three percent of suspensions from pre-k through second grade in Texas, the punishment is mandated by state law. Those cases include bringing a gun or drugs to school or other serious offenses.
- The other 97 percent are discretionary cases in which school administrators choose to suspend the student.

In some cases, schools resort to removals for challenging – but age-appropriate – behavior.

Testing boundaries and learning to manage emotions are age-appropriate behaviors for younger students. A child may still be in the process of developing skills such as self-control and taking turns. Children this age also commonly act out if they are not engaged in the classroom activities. This could occur when class sizes are too big, activities are too challenging (or too easy), or the teacher has not yet mastered effective classroom management skills for this young student population.

In other cases, schools remove students for challenging behavior that may stem from childhood trauma or stress or from developmental concerns.

- Exposure to traumatic experiences or prolonged chronic stress – such as child abuse or hunger – during the childhood years can disrupt normal development of the brain, affecting the way a child learns, reacts, and behaves. In 2016, more than 14,000 children between the ages of four and eight years old were in DFPS custody following findings of abuse and neglect. Nearly half (46 percent) of children in Texas are reported to have one or more potentially traumatic experiences during childhood, as a victim or a witness, that are associated with poor health or social outcomes.
- One out of seven children ages 2 to 8 are estimated to have a mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder, which can affect their judgment and behavior.

In cases of either age-appropriate behavior or more challenging behavior, implicit bias can subconsciously influence how a teacher or administrator responds. Research shows that even the best-intentioned among us develop subconscious biases that affect our judgment and decisions. In the classrooms, subconscious racial or gender biases can have an effect on what expectations teachers have of students, how they perceive students' behaviors, and how often and severely they react to those behaviors. Recent research by the Yale Child Guidance Center found that both Black and White early educators were more likely to identify boys, particularly boys who are Black, as having poor behavior, even in controlled studies in which the young Black and White children were actors and behaving appropriately.

Three groups of Texas students are disproportionately suspended and expelled in the early grades: Black students, male students, and students receiving special education services.

- In the 2013-2014 school year, Black students made up about 13 percent of the elementary school population in Texas, but they accounted for 42 percent of all pre-k through 5th grade out-of-school suspensions.
- In the 2013-2014 school year, boys made up about 51 percent of the elementary school population in Texas, but they accounted for 84 percent of all pre-k through 5th grade out-of-school suspensions.
- In Texas, students in special education were given out-of-school suspension at almost double the rate of the general population of students.

Suspensions and expulsions are linked to negative outcomes for students. Students who are suspended and expelled are more likely to:

- Have a lower academic performance
- Drop out of school
- Not graduate on time
- Disengage from school
- Receive future disciplinary action
- Become involved with the justice system

RECOMMENDATIONS

Whether school personnel are challenged by age-appropriate behavior or more difficult behavior, they need tools and strategies to keep students in the classroom and on a path to success.

School districts – with support and direction from the Legislature and TEA – should:

Provide training and technical assistance to early grade teachers and administrators, including:

- Practices such as Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and Restorative Discipline
- Support provided by behavior specialists and/or teacher trainers and mentors
- Evidence-based interventions that address implicit bias
- Opportunities for local child care providers to participate in training sessions

Establish an early detection and behavior intervention plan to:

- Implement positive school-wide behavior supports
- Provide access to on- and off-campus services for students and families to address social, emotional, and developmental concerns that interfere with learning and behavior
- Identify at-risk students; develop individualized behavior plans; document interventions used with students; collect and analyze outcome data for students receiving interventions; and increase supports if needed

In addition to supporting these efforts, state policymakers should also:

- Strengthen the state’s pre-k and child care policies, including establishing a limit on pre-k class sizes, so that more children can get the individual attention and instruction they need.
- Strengthen the state’s Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) program to ensure all children under age three with disabilities and developmental delays receive the therapies and supports they need to fulfill their potential.
- Ensure children who are eligible for special education services have access to the services, supports, and protections they are entitled to receive.
- Develop a plan to identify and align existing resources at the state, district, and campus levels that can be used to help schools implement strategies shown to address student needs, reduce challenging behavior, and keep students in the classroom learning.