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ISSUE BRIEF: EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

PREFACE

This Issue Brief is the first part of a 3-part examination of the critical issues, directions, and alternatives for Early Care and Education.

The Hamilton Fish Institute on School and Community Violence (HFI) provides information, research, and support to make schools safer for high achievement. In alignment with this mission and based upon the research and practice of countless organizations and individuals, HFI has concluded that early childhood – birth to age eight – is a critical stage for imparting to children the appropriate proactive and responsive behaviors that are most supportive of healthy development and success in life and in school.

At the risk of omitting organizations and foundations that are contributing in substantial ways to improve the delivery of early care and education services, in addition to the schools, local governments, families, friends, and neighborhood, HFI would like to thank the following organizations for their diligence in work and dedication to our youngest children:

American School Counselor Association
Chicago Longitudinal Study [Chicago Child-Parent Center Program]
Child Care and Early Education Research Connections
Commission on the Whole Child, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
Early Head Start
Early Childhood Research Collaborative
Education Commission of the States
Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics
High/Scope Perry Preschool Program
National Association for the Education of Young Children
National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Center for Early Development & Learning
National Child Care Information Center
National Early Childhood Transition Training Center
National Institute for Early Education Research
National Technical Assistance Center for Children’s Mental Health
Pre-K Now
Society for Research in Child Development

In parts 2 and 3 of this examination of the critical issues, directions, and alternatives for early care and education, we will draw on the lessons learned from the organizations listed above and others.

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ISSUE BRIEF: EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Our challenge is . . . to educate the children who come to the schoolhouse door. -H. G. Wells

Situation Analysis

Recent advances in scientific understanding of brain development have led to greater attention to the early-childhood years as a crucial learning period (National Association of Elementary School Principals 2005). National attention to early childhood development has led to the proliferation of thousands of early intervention programs, nursery schools, and preschools throughout the U.S. Early childhood education marks the young child's entrance into the K-12 educational setting. As the expectations for academic performance for children increase, the early developmental years take on profound significance.

Gilliam (2005) has conducted the first national study of 3,898 prekindergarten classrooms (81 percent response rate) that represent all of the nation's 52 state-funded prekindergarten systems currently in operation across the 40 states. The data were collected as part of the National Prekindergarten Study (NPS). Gilliam found that youngsters in pre-kindergarten programs are being expelled at triple the rate of their peers enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade. Specific results indicated the following:

- More than one in ten (10.4 percent) of prekindergarten teachers reported expelling at least one preschooler in the past 12 months, of which 19.9 percent were expelled more than once;
- Nationally, 6.67 preschoolers were expelled per 1,000 students enrolled (a rate that is 3.2 times the rate for K-12 students, based on comparisons with data from the Elementary and Secondary School Survey 2000 (National Center for Educational Statistics 2001);
- In Massachusetts, the preschool expulsion rate was 27.42 per 1000 enrollees, more than 34 times the state K-12 rate and more than 13 times the national K-12 rate (Gilliam and Shahrar 2006);
- Rates are highest for older preschoolers and African American children;
- Boys were 4 ½ times more likely to be expelled than were girls;
- Expulsion rates were lowest in classrooms in public schools and Head Start and highest in faith-affiliated centers and for-profit child care;
- The likelihood of expulsion decreases significantly with access to classroom-based mental health consultation.

In the study, Gilliam asserts, since it is the complete and permanent removal of a student from an entire educational system, expulsion is the most severe disciplinary response that any system can impose on a student.

Other current research points to several structural factors related to early childhood programs that warrant focused study since they may be associated with increases in school exclusions and alternative placements.

More Children are Participating in Early Intervention Programs. In child care settings – child care centers, regulated family child care homes, and informal settings¹ such as, for example, with relatives and in-home nannies – the number of children who are participating in early childhood programs before they enroll in kindergarten has risen sharply in the past few decades. Preschool enrollment of 3-5 year old

¹ Informal settings are also referred to as “family, friends, and neighbor care” (Child Care Resources n.d.; National League of Cities n.d., 6).

children rose by nearly 30 percent between 1970 and 1998, a larger enrollment increase than for any other age group (Kleiner, Porch, and Farris 2002; Gallop-Goodman 2000). Nearly 65 percent of children in this age group attend a program such as day care, nursery school, preschool, Head Start or Pre-Kindergarten program. About 51 percent of these children attend all day, compared with 38 percent in 1988. There are many reasons for these changes, including an increased number of working mothers, more single parent families, and desire on the part of parents to ensure that their children are ready for the new demands of kindergarten and elementary school. Furthermore, many lower income children are able to start their education early because of the federally administered Head Start program (Gallop-Goodman 2000).

Access to High Quality Services and Personnel. Access to high quality early education programs is elusive for the majority of families, and those with the economic means are more likely to access high quality programs (Hofferth, Henke, and West 1998; National Research Council 2001; Shonkoff and Phillips 2001). Program eligibility for more intensive services are restricted to children who are in the most serious need (Center for Evidence-Based Practice 2002; Infant Mental Health Forum 2000).

The quality of the environment in which children receive care is important for several reasons. Young children are extremely vulnerable to illness and injury and their health and safety must be protected. In addition, the early years of life are critical for children's development, specifically in the areas of intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, physical and cultural development. In fact, research on the brain shows that 80 percent of the brain develops by the age of three, and 90 percent by the age of five (National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies 2007,1).

There is ample research evidence that children learn and achieve more in preschool programs that employ 'developmentally appropriate practices' (DAP) than in traditional practices. However, such practices are not the norm in early childhood programs and teachers often struggle with its implementation (Dunn and Kontos 2006). Studies that have examined social and academic development of children in developmentally appropriate and developmentally inappropriate (DAP and DIP) settings have consistently found that children who participated in DAP programs demonstrated more appropriate skills in social settings and received better grades in some academic subjects (Huffman and Speer 2000; Marcon 1999). Schweinhart and Weikart (1997) reported from their longitudinal study that children from DAP programs had far fewer emotional difficulties later in life, were less likely to engage in antisocial activities as teenagers and young adults, and showed enhanced personal development (e.g., higher preference for challenge, greater autonomy, higher expectations of success, and less stress in academic situations). DAP programs have generally been shown to have positive effects on children's social and personal development – even for children who are considered at risk – and their effects can still be observed as they approach adulthood (Huffman and Speer 2000; Marcon 1999).

Staffing problems undermine the quality of early childhood programs, with staff turnover ranging from *25 to 50 percent annually* (Wishman, Kates, and Kaufmann 2001). States are finding that they cannot prepare or retain enough qualified individuals, and cannot provide adequate wages or career ladders for them. Half of state preschool education initiatives failed to meet the important benchmark of requiring a bachelor's degree or higher for all lead teachers (Barnett, Hustedt, Hawkinson, and Robin 2006). Furthermore, preschool teacher knowledge of behavioral interventions, child development and appropriate teaching strategies are lacking and they are not trained to understand mental health issues and how to deal with them in the classroom strategies (National Institute for Early Education Research 2004a). Mitchell-Copeland, Denham, and DeMulder (1997) explored the attachment relationship between 62 children and their preschool teachers to assess relations between the quality of attachment relationships and social competence. Results indicated that attachment security with the teacher is related to prosocial behavior and teacher-rated social competence in the preschool. Therefore, the competence of the teacher and stability of relationships between teachers affect children's behavior, whereas poorly trained teachers and high turnover can have a negative impact on children's school adjustment.

According to the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (2007, 20-21), the 50 states and the District of Columbia have not executed oversight, especially inspections, in robust ways²:

- Just six of the 52 operate at the NACCRRRA benchmark for manageable oversight.
- Just four conduct quarterly inspections.
- Only nine address all 10 health and safety benchmarks.
- Only two conduct full background checks.
- Only two require child care center directors to have a BA degree.
- Minimum staff qualifications and orientation training are low and, frequently, non-existent.
- A small minority require child development activities. A similar number require no child development activities.

Training, supervision, and appropriate wages and working conditions are a primary concern in early intervention and early childhood programs. Every state requires a bachelor's degree and teaching certificate for kindergarten teachers although similar standards are not in place for preschool educators. Early childhood educators and clinical staff often lack access to supervision and professional development. High caseloads for preschool educators are a concern and lower caseloads are correlated with higher quality services (Barnett et al. 2006; National Institute for Early Education Research 2004a).

Additional factors that can impact the preschool environment and the social and behavioral adjustment of children include the availability of recess space and time, availability of developmentally appropriate resources and materials, strategies for students with limited English proficiency, teacher-student ratio, health and nutrition of children, family engagement in the program, and pick-up and drop-off transportation issues at the beginning and end of days.

The Performance Culture and Readiness for Early Intervention. Many states are moving toward universal preschool and establishing preschool requirements and performance expectations (National Institute for Early Education Research 2004b). Young, three and four year-olds may not be ready to adjust to the demands of full-day preschool. Also, many children entering preschool have disabilities that are not yet identified. The percentage of children enrolled in preschool special education at age 4 is on average about half the percentage of children enrolled in special education at ages 6-17. Thus, at least half of the children eventually identified as needing special education are not identified for preschool special education services. Strong collaboration with preschool special education providers is important for the success of many children in early intervention programs. Disabilities that are not identified or addressed in preschool can lead to serious adjustment problems.

The No Child Left Behind standardized testing culture is also affecting a younger population. Four-year-olds are tested in literacy and math in Head Start programs, and kindergartners undergo tests to see who is 'gifted' (Strauss 2006; Solorzano in Strauss 2006). Researchers, however are asking whether standardized tests to assess children in Head Start or other preschool programs, including their social and emotional development, are developmentally appropriate. Little is known about the kind of test takers young children are and their ability to stay focused and comprehend assessment cues. There is a lack of sound research on the results of testing regimens, and assessment experts are concerned that we are experimenting with our very young children (Koretz 2002).

Defining Behavior that Qualifies for Exclusion. Some preschool directors say they have observed a sharp rise since the 1970's in the number of children with behavioral problems. In the past, in a school of 150 kids, you might have one or two children with behavior problems, but now it may be up to 10 percent

² The U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) was also included in the review. It was concluded that DoDEA conducts oversight at the highest standards.

of all of the children (Lavin and Glaser 2006). In the past, many of these children were not sent to school because parents sensed that they were not yet ready to adjust. Now there are more day care opportunities in communities, more families in which both parents are employed, and more single-parent homes. Children start school younger and stay longer hours.

About eight percent of preschoolers (ages 3-5) exhibit behavioral problems severe enough to warrant a psychiatric diagnosis, report Keenen and Wakschlag (2004). These authors are concerned about the appropriateness of applying diagnostic categories such as 'oppositional defiant' and 'conduct disorder' to preschoolers and whether such symptoms reflect typical behaviors for young children. The validity of these applications requires more investigation. Others have indicated that behavioral problems that emerge in preschool are associated with later behavioral problems and decreased educational achievement in kindergarten and later years (Keane and Calkins 2004). Early identification of difficulties and intervention in children's academic, personal and social needs is essential to removing barriers to learning (American School Counselor Association 2004). There may be instances, however, where behavior problems are so severe that they cannot be managed safely in a typical prekindergarten classroom or child care setting. For these cases, prekindergarten systems should explore the effectiveness of alternative settings where children's behavioral and academic needs can be addressed effectively (Gilliam and Shahar 2006).

While many states are developing policies and programs for kindergarten and elementary alternative education programs (Kochhar-Bryant and Stephenson 2007), no data are being collected on alternative education programs for preschoolers. While little is known about the number of children excluded from preschool or who are placed into alternative programs for disciplinary reasons or for more intense behavioral guidance, anecdotal information such as the following offers some insight:

Due to ever increasing numbers of referrals to our child & adolescent MH center of children under age 6, many of whom have been removed from pre-schools, we had to develop expertise and programs to deal with this. We started with The Incredible Years program for parents of identified preschoolers as well as for teachers, day care providers, and in-home providers. We then added a program in an inner-city special needs pre-school; this year we are providing this early intervention to two Head Start classrooms. We also reorganized our outpatient counseling program in such a way so as to have a special under-6 unit for working with families in the most flexible way we can. We will provide other consultation services to pre-schools interested in looking at their learning environments in order to assist in maintaining some of the more "challenging" young ones in the normalized setting. All of this activity is in an attempt to enhance school readiness in populations, which have extremely high risk factors for early school failure, drop-out, etc. (Kayne 2005).

Gilliam (2005) did not catalog the reasons for his finding of a rise in preschool expulsions, so it is unclear how serious or disruptive was the misbehavior of the expelled students. A greater understanding is needed about behaviors that are considered normative for preschoolers in order to distinguish between those that should be subject to discipline and those that require treatment or intervention. An exploration is needed of policies that preschool programs have instituted to help children with behavioral problems, including providing individual classroom aides and alternative programs that offer small group sizes with highly trained teachers.

Changes in Family Demographics. America's Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being (2006) reports several statistics about family demographics that impact children and their readiness for school. Living with two parents who are married to each other is associated with more favorable outcomes for children. The proportion of children under age 18 living with two married parents fell from 77 percent in 1980, to 67 percent in 2005. Among children under age 18 in 2005, 23 percent lived with only their mothers, five percent lived with only their fathers, and four percent lived with neither of their

parents. Births to unmarried women constituted 36 percent of all births in 2004, reaching a record high of nearly 1.5 million births. Over half of births to women in their early twenties and nearly 30 percent of births to women ages 25–29 were to unmarried women.

System Coordination and Support Services for Transition into and out of Early Intervention

Programs. Most states and districts engage in ‘child-find’ activities to identify young children at risk of developmental delay and three quarters of states (86 percent percent of districts) screen preschoolers for vision, hearing and other problems (Schiller et al. 2003). These findings indicate that states are giving priority attention to developing outreach, transition services, and service delivery structures to implement early implementation services (Fox, Dunlap and Cushing 2002). Early identification of disability and initiation of services depends upon strong collaboration and communication among families, health professionals, early childhood educators, specialists, and related services professionals. Research on risk factors inform us that learning and human development occur within larger systems – the child welfare system, social service system, mental health system, juvenile justice system, and the school system – coordinated around the child as the focus of service (Laszlo 1996). For example, Gilliam’s study (2005) found that when teachers reported having access to a mental health consultant who could provide classroom-based strategies dealing with challenging student behaviors, the likelihood of expulsion was lower (Brennan, Bradley, Allen, Perry, and Tsega 2005).

Research studies have concluded that, in general, early intervention service systems are fragmented and poorly coordinated resulting in both duplication of efforts and gaps in service delivery (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Families Statistics 2003; U.S. General Accountability Office 2000). Implementation challenges and gaps in services are prompting many state and local systems to assess their early intervention services.

Role of the Physician. The pediatrician is the person parents turn to most for guidance on their child’s development. Yet it has been reported that in 60 percent of all routine well-child visits, the physician ignored parental concerns or provided no developmental or behavioral information or guidance (Kaplan-Sanoff, Lerner and Bernard 2000). Similarly, pediatricians frequently spend less than two minutes on anticipatory guidance during a visit. Thus, pediatric clinicians are missing many opportunities to provide critical information about child development and to support families as they struggle with the demands of caring for young children (Kaplan-Sanoff, Lerner and Bernard 2000; Young, Davis, Schoen and Parker 1998).

Federal Legislation Promotes a Climate of Discipline. Changes in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA), Safe and Drug-Free Schools legislation, Gun Free Schools Act of 1994, and state laws on student discipline policies make alternative in-school and out-of-school settings more likely options for a growing number of children and youth who may be subject to disciplinary violations. IDEIA 2004 and NCLB allow greater discretion for local school personnel to remove students, including students with disabilities, who violate codes of conduct (Sec. 665, Interim Alternative Education Settings, Behavioral Supports, and Systemic School Interventions).

Title IV, 21st Century Schools, Part A Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities, is designed to support programs that prevent violence in and around schools. States are now required to implement uniform management information and reporting systems that includes information on truancy rates; frequency, seriousness and incidence of violence and drug-related offenses resulting in suspensions and expulsions in elementary schools and secondary schools; and incidence and prevalence of drug use and violence by students in schools and communities. Together, these laws increase school personnel’s emphasis on policies and practices oriented toward safety, security, management of student behavior and consequences for rule breaking. What is not well understood is the extent to which this climate of school security and violence prevention in K-12 is contributing to policy responses to children’s behavior in early childhood programs.

Changes in State Laws May Encourage Inappropriate School Policies. Many states view – and frame – the solution to the rising problem of student behavior, suspension and expulsion as a need for alternatives that exclude students from their base schools. The locus of the problem is in the student who is defined as being at risk, and the policy response is removal rather than assessment of the school environment to identify factors that lead to student violations of codes of conduct. For example, in Maryland the Code of Maryland Regulations Special requirements for Selected Elementary Schools that have suspension rates exceeding 18 percent of the school’s enrollment require such schools to implement positive behavioral intervention and support programs (COMAR, 703.07, 2004).

According to the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (2007, 17),

The quality of child care is a reflection of a state’s child care standards and oversight/monitoring of those standards. . . . Nearly 12 million children under age 5 spend time every week in a child care setting. The children of working mothers spend, on average, 36 hours a week in child care. Research shows that 90 percent of brain development occurs between birth and age 5, which has a lifelong impact making these years a critical period for child development. Last, but not least, the health and safety of children are at stake.

The proliferation of zero-tolerance policies for a widening range of student behaviors has led to a dramatic increase in the exclusion of children and youth from school and placement into alternative settings. The National Center for Education Statistics (Kleiner, Porch, and Farris 2002), studied a national sample of 1,534 public school districts, and a 2003 U.S. Government Accountability Office study identified 10,900 alternative schools and programs. These studies reported that alternative schools were offered at the secondary level (88-92 percent of districts); at the middle school level (46-46 percent); at elementary level (10-21 percent). Data for preschool children are not yet available.

A study of 39 U.S. states, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia revealed that since 2000, there has been a rise in the number of states that have (a) lowered the age at which students can be placed into alternative educational settings or (b) have created optional age-appropriate education programs for students in grades K-5 who require guidance, supervision and discipline in a structured learning environment and who need to be redirected toward appropriate classroom decorum and acceptable personal behavior (Kochhar-Bryant and Stephenson 2007). State laws and regulations related to discipline and alternative education were reviewed to explore the extent of redefinition of what constitutes ‘dangerous’ and ‘potentially dangerous’ behavior and expansion of the range of behaviors that are subject to citations, suspensions or recommendations for alternative education placements. What is striking is the trend toward expansion of behaviors that are defined, redefined or expanded, the types and locations of behaviors that ‘constitute a threat’ or that are subject to suspension, expulsion or placement into an alternative educational program (e.g., assault, abuse of others, bullying, harassing or intimidating personnel, profane or obscene language, threats of force, false threats, use of drugs or alcohol, carrying weapons or dangerous instruments, habitual disruption, accessing pornographic material at school, other behaviors that may endanger health or safety of others or aiding and abetting the behavior of others). Furthermore, the solution to the problem is also to lower the age for which students may be removed to alternative settings, including middle, elementary and kindergarten ages. These conditions faced by schools make it more likely that students will be placed into alternative programs and schools as a result.

Unlike K-12 education which is mandated by law and is a protected civil right, preschool is optional and schools are not required to retain disruptive children. They can be expelled more easily without legal challenges or requirements for alternative placements. While there is no systematic data available on the decision making processes employed by preschools for expulsion of children, there is anecdotal information. Consider one school’s three-strike policy:

The Three Strikes Policy is designed to protect a variety of harmful situations here at the

school/church. For times when we encounter extremely disruptive behavior which we consider to be: A danger to the child, a danger to another student or staff member, or intentional destructive behavior to the property at Emmanuel Church, the child and his family will undergo proceedings that begin the Three Strikes Policy. The 1st Strike results in a meeting with parents, the second recommends that the parent take action at home, and the third strike results in removal from the program without a refund for the month's tuition (Emmanuel Day School Behavior and Discipline Policy, 2007).

Summary

There is a growing concern among families and professionals about the exclusion of young children with behavioral difficulties from current systems of early care and education. Emerging estimates have indicated a rise in the number of preschoolers (ages 3-4 years old) who are expelled from preschools. Little is understood about the factors that are contributing to this trend or which children are most at risk for such disciplinary action. While there is ample evidence of persistent barriers to the delivery of quality early intervention and early childhood education that need to be addressed within the states, it is not clear how these barriers may impact preschool expulsion rates. Furthermore, little research is available to determine the number of states and local education districts that are establishing expulsion policies or alternative educational options for very young children. The purpose of this Issue Brief is to present evidence of preschool expulsion in the U.S., identify potential contributing factors, and present recommendations for further study of this important issue for our children, their future and the nation.

Preschool enrollment of 3-5 year old children has risen sharply in the past three decades, and many states are moving toward universal preschool and establishing preschool requirements and performance expectations. While day care opportunities have expanded and more families are participating, access to high quality early education programs is elusive for the majority of families who lack the economic means. Research has concluded that in general early intervention service systems remain fragmented, poorly coordinated, and inadequately staffed. In this context, preschool practitioners and researchers have observed a sharp rise since the 1970's in the number of preschool children with behavioral problems (current estimates are up to 10 percent of all of the children) and states are reporting a rise in preschool expulsions. Unlike K-12 education, which is mandated by law and is a protected civil right, preschool is optional and schools are not required to retain disruptive children. Further research is needed to explore a variety of factors that may contribute to increased expulsions, including the extent to which the current national climate of school security and violence prevention in K-12 is contributing to discipline policy responses in early childhood programs.

Recommendations

Work in progress and new initiatives implemented in the near future will encourage a revisiting of the recommendations below. Presently, the authors recommend:

- An investigation of preschool teacher competencies in behavioral intervention, as is an exploration of how behavioral interventions are implemented to prevent expulsion;
- An in-depth study of the relationship between program quality factors and child expulsion;
- A comprehensive study of factors that act as behavioral antecedents and may contribute to the expulsion of students;
- An examination is needed of the number of children excluded from preschool or who are placed into alternative programs for disciplinary reasons or more intense behavioral guidance;
- A synthesis of research to examine the impacts of single parenting on child readiness for preschool, parent's ability to intervene when behavioral problems arise, and their ability to advocate for and coordinate with preschool staff for support services when children are at-risk for expulsion or disciplinary action;
- A systematic investigation of factors that support or impede collaborative relationships between

- parents, teachers and service coordinators (Research and Training Center on Service Coordination n.d.);
- Studies on the care that pediatricians and family physicians provide to instruct new parents or provide resources and referrals when developmental delays are identified in the first year. Additionally, it is important to know whether preschool staff encourage parents to discuss concerns with their physicians when behavioral problems arise that may trigger an expulsion;
 - An investigation into the nature of state laws and guidelines regarding preschool expulsion, including their relationship to existing laws governing K-12 discipline, suspension and expulsion;

Ultimately, there is a need to link quality early care and education with success in life and in school. Aside from mostly positive indications of the impact of these programs on education and youth development and a few longitudinal studies – and notwithstanding the services that are already provided with quality – as the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (2007) says, “We can do better.”

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