



# Health policy fact sheet

## The connections between education and health Suspensions and expulsions among young children

The **third policy brief** in HPIO's four-part education and health series describes the importance of a child's early years for both health and future educational attainment. Adverse environments and experiences during these early years have a critical impact on development and can affect behavior in an educational setting. Certain school disciplinary practices, such as out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, can hinder academic success and reinforce behavioral problems instead of resolving them.

The most severe disciplinary sanctions a school can impose, suspensions and expulsions, involve the removal of a child from school, either for a limited period of time or permanently.<sup>1</sup> It is not uncommon for young children to be suspended or expelled. In the 2016-17 academic year, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) registered approximately 34,000 suspensions and expulsions among students in kindergarten through third grade, including 16,400 for disobedient or disruptive behavior.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers have found the rate of expulsions in U.S. state-funded pre-kindergarten (pre-K) systems to be more than

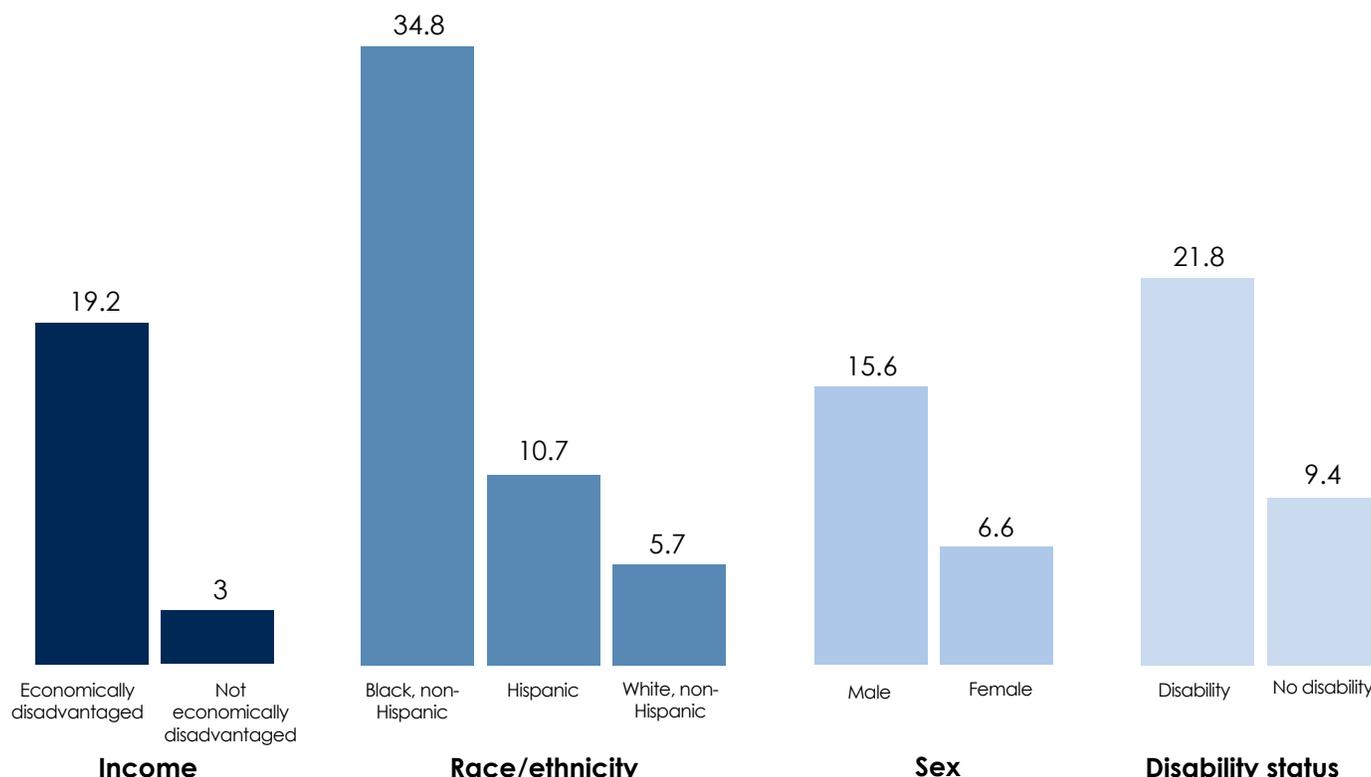
three times the national expulsion rate of K-12 students. The highest expulsion rates are in for-profit child care centers and faith-based settings. Rates in school-based and Head Start locations are lower.<sup>3</sup>

Rates of suspensions and expulsions are higher among black, male and economically-disadvantaged students – both in early childhood and K-12 education. For example, during the 2016-2017 school year, a black student in Ohio was 6.1 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than a white student, and an economically-disadvantaged student was 6.4 times more likely to be suspended than a more financially-stable student. Also, in the 2016-2017 year, students with a disability were more than twice as likely to be suspended than students without a disability<sup>4</sup> (see figure 1).

### Negative outcomes associated with suspensions and expulsions

Suspensions and expulsions can reinforce and perpetuate behavioral problems instead of resolving them. Many behavioral problems stem from developmental challenges

Figure 1. **Out-of-school suspensions per 100 Ohio students (2016-2017)**



**Note:** Rates are calculated by dividing the total number of out-of-school suspensions received by students of a certain category in all grade levels by the total number of enrolled students in that category. This number is then multiplied by 100. This can include multiple suspensions for a single student.  
**Source:** Ohio Department of Education interactive report card data (iLRC)

or exposure to trauma, such as oppositional defiance, hyperactive behavior and aggression. If these conditions are not addressed in early years, they may lead to behaviors in school and in later years that are resistant to treatment.<sup>5</sup> Children who are expelled from preschool are also often ill-prepared for kindergarten, starting their educational trajectories on a negative path very early on.<sup>6</sup>

Children who are suspended or expelled at a young age are also more likely to be suspended or expelled in later years.<sup>7</sup> Negative outcomes associated with suspension and expulsions include:

- Academic failure, grade retention and negative attitudes toward school
- Ten times greater likelihood of dropping out of high school
- Greater likelihood of justice system involvement and incarceration<sup>8</sup>

## What can be done?

Reducing or eliminating suspensions and expulsions is most likely to succeed through comprehensive, evidence-based approaches. Efforts to create a positive school climate, such as through schoolwide adoption of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (discussed in a [separate HPIO fact sheet](#)), social-emotional learning and trauma-informed education, can prevent behavioral problems and eliminate the need for suspensions and expulsions. Expanding availability of mental health services through community partnerships is another valuable approach.

## The Ohio Preschool Expulsion Prevention Partnership

Teachers with regular access to an early childhood mental health consultant or similar professional report significantly fewer preschool expulsions. The Ohio Preschool Expulsion Prevention Partnership, created by Nationwide Children's Hospital and the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, provides early childhood consultants at early learning sites. These consultants make recommendations for strategies, interventions and training and offer resources for students and families, including referrals to local mental health providers, if necessary.<sup>9</sup>

Ensuring that teachers are adequately trained, supported and prepared to manage student behavioral challenges is critical. Higher teacher stress levels are associated with higher expulsion rates.<sup>10</sup> The likelihood of expulsion has been found to significantly decrease when teachers have access to classroom-based behavioral consultation and support from mental health professionals<sup>11</sup> (see the Ohio Preschool Expulsion Prevention Partnership box). A focus on teacher health and wellness, lower student-teacher ratios and professional development aimed at promoting social-emotional and behavioral health of children and eliminating unconscious biases can also help decrease expulsion rates.<sup>12</sup>

## Senate Bill 246: The SAFE (Supporting Alternatives for Fair Education) Act

Increasingly, states and cities are enacting policies to limit the use of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, especially for young children. In December 2017, Ohio senators Peggy Lehner (R-Kettering) and Gayle Manning (R-North Ridgeville) introduced legislation to phase out out-of-school suspensions for Ohio students in pre-K through third grade for non-violent behavior, except in limited circumstances. Out-of-school suspensions would still be permitted for student actions posing a physical threat to teachers or other students, as required by federal law.

Several other provisions of the bill would require:

- Schools to report out-of-school suspension and expulsion data to ODE, based on the type of offense committed and broken out by race and disability status
- Boards of education to implement a system-wide PBIS framework and submit annual reports outlining progress
- Teacher preparation programs to include a semester-long course on positive classroom behavior management principles which covers PBIS and social-emotional development
- Schools to assist the disciplined student's parent or guardian with finding mental health services when a need is identified, whenever possible
- Schools to permit students to complete any classroom assignments missed during a suspension

## Notes

1. Gilliam, Walter S. *Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems*. New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development, 2005. See also *Policy statement of expulsion and suspension policies in early childhood settings*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/policy-statement-ee-expulsions-suspensions.pdf>
2. Data from the Ohio Department of Education interactive report card data. Accessed Jan. 2, 2018. <http://bireports.education.ohio.gov>
3. Gilliam, Walter S. *Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems*. New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development, 2005.
4. Data from the Ohio Department of Education interactive report card data. Accessed Jan. 2, 2018. <http://bireports.education.ohio.gov>

5. Ibid.
6. Campbell, Susan B., Daniel S. Shaw and Miles Gilliom. Early externalizing behavior problems; Toddlers and preschoolers at risk for later maladjustment. *Development and psychopathology*, 12, No. 3 (2000): 467-488.
7. Gilliam, Walter S. *Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems*. New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development, 2005.
8. *Policy statement of expulsion and suspension policies in early childhood settings*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/policy-statement-ee-expulsions-suspensions.pdf>
9. Dusenbury, Linda and Roger P. Weissberg. *Social Emotional Learning in Elementary School: Preparation for Success*. Issue brief. Pennsylvania State University and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2017.

10. *Policy statement of expulsion and suspension policies in early childhood settings*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/policy-statement-ee-expulsions-suspensions.pdf>
11. Dusenbury, Linda and Roger P. Weissberg. *Social Emotional Learning in Elementary School: Preparation for Success*. Issue brief. Pennsylvania State University and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2017.
12. Gilliam, Walter S. *Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems*. New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development, 2005.
13. Ohio Preschool Expulsion Prevention Partnership. *Nationwide Children's*. <http://mha.ohio.gov/Portals/0/assets/Prevention/EarlyChildhood/NACH-2730-Preschool-Expulsion%20fier.pdf>