

# Supporting All Young Learners to Thrive: Dismantling the Preschool to Prison Pipeline

## Executive Summary

Exclusionary discipline in early childhood education (ECE), including suspension, expulsion, and informal removals (soft suspensions), disrupts learning during children's most critical years and disproportionately impacts Black children, Hispanic boys, and children with disabilities. Pennsylvania lacks a statewide system to track these practices, masking their true extent and limiting reform.

Led by Children First, in collaboration with Trying Together, PennAEYC, and PHMC, this project collected data from child care and pre-k provider and family surveys, focus groups, and classroom observations. The findings highlight both system strengths and persistent barriers that undermine inclusion.

## Key Findings

- + **Providers:** 75% are aware of state resources but staffing shortages, uneven training, and fragmented supports limit consistent use.
- + **Families:** Over half experienced suspension or expulsion requests, often without clear plans, referrals, or transition support.
- + **Focus Groups:** Providers cited the absence of centralized supports; families emphasized inequitable decision-making and limited culturally responsive communication.
- + **Classrooms:** Training modestly improved inclusive practices, but gains were inconsistent and undermined by teacher turnover and weak follow-up coaching.

## Decision Tree Tools

To illustrate these realities and chart solutions, the project developed decision trees showing:

- + Current family and provider experiences.
- + Improved outcomes with consistent supports.
- + An ideal future if resources and policies align.

These tools, included in the appendix and online, serve as guides for families, providers, and policymakers to navigate the current system and envision reform.

## Implications for Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania can draw on effective state models to build a comprehensive framework for discipline reform:

- + IECMHC networks (Connecticut, Colorado)
- + Consultation before exclusion (Illinois)
- + Integration into QRIS/quality standards (Michigan)
- + Restorative, family-inclusive approaches (California, Oregon)



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## Path Forward

Pennsylvania can lead the nation by moving away from exclusionary practices toward systemic, equity-driven reform. Strengthening data systems, workforce supports, and family partnerships will create inclusive early learning environments where every child can learn, grow, and thrive.

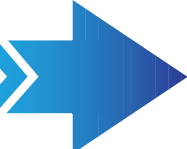
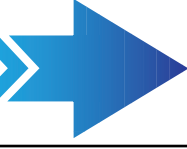
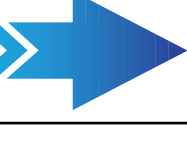
## Short-Term Policy

| Priority Area                                                          | Key Actions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                       |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Reduce and Address Exclusionary Discipline in ECE                      | Require programs to document all exclusionary discipline decisions with re-entry plans and family-inclusive planning. Collect and track statewide data on suspension and expulsion across Child Care Works, Head Start, and Pre-K Counts, with accountability mechanisms such as Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) reporting, Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC) support, and program-level audits.                                                                                |    |
| Expand Access and Funding for Family Support Services                  | Fund Rapid Response initiatives to ensure timely support for families and programs. Develop and expand a Family Navigator model (not currently state-funded) to guide families through child care subsidies, Early Intervention (EI), and community resources, paired with awareness strategies such as family-facing webinars, text campaigns, and partnerships with pediatricians and faith-based groups.                                                                                                |    |
| Provide Add-On Payments for Programs Serving Children with IEPs/IFSPs* | Establish additional payments to offset costs of serving children with disabilities.<br><br>*Individual Education Plan (IEP) / Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |  |
| Expand Infant–Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC)      | Use federal Child Care and Development Block Grants (CCDBG) quality funds and state dollars to expand regional IECMHC capacity and increase provider awareness. Require consultation prior to exclusion.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |  |
| Incentivize Professional Development for Educators                     | Provide incentives for professional development in trauma-informed care, family engagement, EI navigation, and communication, using core content from the <i>Supporting All Young Learners to Thrive</i> training. Link training to Keystone STARS credentials and offer tiered options—online, hybrid, and on-site—paired with job-embedded coaching. ELRC Quality Coaches can support high-turnover programs through on-site coaching, staff mentoring, and integration of training into daily practice. |  |
| Develop Parent Resource Guides on Rights and Supports                  | Develop standardized, multilingual family documents that combine “know your rights” guidance with proactive resource information to ensure families are informed before conflicts arise.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |  |
| Strengthen Parent Intake Processes                                     | Require programs to hold intake meetings with families to review policies, discipline procedures, and a Family Rights and Resources guide. Modeled after the Head Start intake process.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |  |
| Streamline Early Intervention Referrals                                | Reinforce existing Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) benchmarks (timely evaluations, IFSP-to-IEP transitions) by strengthening compliance monitoring already in place. Expand bilingual staff and translated materials to meet language access obligations.                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |  |

## Policy Roadmap for Reducing Exclusionary Discipline in Pennsylvania

These findings highlight the need for immediate and long-term reforms. The following roadmap outlines short-term actions to meet urgent needs and long-term strategies to build sustainable change.

### Recommendations (1–3 Years)

|                                                                                   | Why This Matters                                                                                                                                                            | Impact for Pennsylvania                                                                              |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    | Early suspensions/expulsions harm development and disproportionately affect Black boys and children with disabilities. Inclusive alternatives reduce reliance on exclusion. | Creates accountability, ensures exclusion is rare, transparent, and paired with support.             |
|    | Family instability is a major driver of exclusion. Strengthening supports reduces stress, improves attendance, and stabilizes child participation.                          | Families gain faster access to critical supports, reducing disruptions in children's learning.       |
|   | Programs often exclude children with higher needs because of resource constraints.                                                                                          | Promotes inclusion, reduces exclusions, and ensures equitable access for children with disabilities. |
|  | IECMHC is proven to reduce expulsions, lower teacher stress, and strengthen child–teacher relationships.                                                                    | Ensure every program can access rapid-response consultation before exclusion decisions.              |
|  | One-off training does not change practice. Incentivized, sustained PD improves capacity for inclusive care.                                                                 | Builds a skilled, equity-driven workforce prepared to prevent exclusion.                             |
|  | Families often face exclusion without knowing their rights or appeal options.                                                                                               | Empowers parents to advocate for their children and demand fair treatment.                           |
|  | Clear expectations build trust and prevent misunderstandings that lead to exclusion.                                                                                        | Stronger partnerships between families and providers; greater transparency.                          |
|  | Long delays (6–12 months) in EI access fuel exclusion. Early supports are critical for success.                                                                             | Children receive services faster, reducing risk of exclusion and developmental harm.                 |

## Long-Term Policy

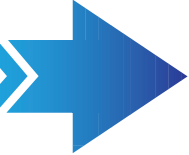
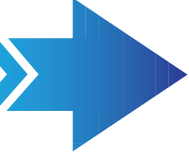
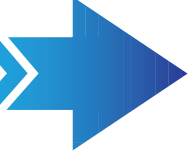
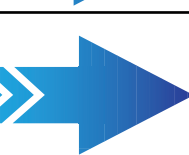
| Priority Area                                                    | Key Actions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                       |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Compensation, Recruitment, and Retention (System-Wide Challenge) | Establish competitive compensation and pay parity across ECE and K–12 settings; offer retention bonuses, benefits, and targeted recruitment supports; expand career pathways with reflective supervision and wellness supports; and increase EI provider reimbursement rates to stabilize the workforce.                                                                                                                                                  |    |
| Mandate Data Tracking of Suspension and Expulsion                | Require standardized data reporting across all child care and preschool settings, including informal removals, with data disaggregated by race, disability, age, and program type. Pair this mandate with dedicated funding to ensure feasibility. Data should be used not only to track disparities after they occur but also to inform targeted responses—such as training, technical assistance, or resource allocation—when concerning trends emerge. |    |
| Mandate Training on Core Competencies                            | Require all ECE educators to complete training in trauma-informed practice, family engagement, EI navigation, and effective family communication. Core training content should be standardized across the state, informed by data from ICP and aligned with evidence-based resources such as those developed by National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI).                                                                                    |    |
| Standardize Higher Education Preservice Requirements             | Align ECE degree and certification programs statewide to include core competencies. ( <b>Note:</b> This is a long-term pipeline goal, aligned with certification changes already underway in Pennsylvania.)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |   |
| Create a Centralized Entity for Coordinated Services             | Develop a “one-stop hub” to connect EI, IECMHC, behavioral health, and community supports with shared data systems.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |  |
| Strengthen Accountability and Continuous Improvement             | Use removal and inclusion data to drive improvement plans, not punishment. Fund research partnerships to test restorative practices, peer advocacy, and integrated consultation.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |  |

### Alignment

Together, these short- and long-term actions form a comprehensive roadmap for reducing exclusionary discipline across Pennsylvania’s early childhood system.

By aligning policy, practice, and resources, the state can move toward an equitable future where all young children have the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive.

# Recommendations (3–5 Years)

|                                                                                   | Why This Matters                                                                                                                              | Impact for Pennsylvania                                                                                                |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    | Workforce instability drives exclusion when programs lack staff or cannot retain qualified educators. Low pay is a leading cause of turnover. | Stabilized workforce, stronger capacity for inclusion, and equitable access to qualified educators across the state.   |
|    | Without consistent statewide data, exclusion remains invisible. A proactive system allows early identification and correction of inequities.  | Build a comprehensive monitoring system that drives equity and accountability.                                         |
|    | Embedding competencies ensures consistency across the workforce.                                                                              | Creates a highly skilled, equity-centered workforce.                                                                   |
|  | Current preservice training is inconsistent, leaving new educators underprepared.                                                             | Strengthens the educator pipeline, improves instructional quality, and elevates the profession.                        |
|  | Families now face fragmented, inequitable referral pathways.                                                                                  | Reduces delays and improves outcomes with a seamless family navigation system.                                         |
|  | Current compliance systems focus on penalties rather than solutions. Continuous improvement builds a learning system.                         | Shifts Pennsylvania toward a supportive accountability culture that reduces inequities and scales effective practices. |

## Recommendations

Pennsylvania should pursue a coordinated, equity-driven strategy that:

- + Expands family supports (Rapid Response, Navigator programs).
- + Strengthens inclusion incentives and scales IECMHC.
- + Builds workforce capacity through sustained, incentivized training.
- + Provides multilingual “Know Your Rights” resources and intake requirements.
- + Mandates statewide data tracking, disaggregated by race, disability, age, and program type.
- + Stabilizes the workforce through fair pay, retention supports, and coaching.
- + Coordinates services across early intervention, mental health, and community systems.

## Discussions & Implications

While the policy roadmap provides clear strategies for action, it is equally important to understand the systemic barriers that make exclusionary discipline so persistent. Findings highlight how inequities in data, access, workforce stability, and referral systems contribute to the overuse of exclusionary practices. These challenges reinforce the urgent need for a statewide approach to reduce and address exclusionary discipline in ECE—allowing only narrowly defined safety exceptions—paired with inclusive supports and due-process protections. The following discussion explores these challenges and their implications for children, families, providers, and policymakers.

### *System Challenges*

1. **Lack of Statewide Exclusion Data:** Pennsylvania currently lacks a mandatory, statewide system to track exclusionary discipline across all ECE settings. While public schools collect some data, child care centers, family child care homes, and private preschool programs are not held to the same reporting requirements. Informal removals—such as early pickups, shortened schedules, or discouragement from re-enrollment—are rarely documented. Without standardized data, policymakers cannot monitor equity, identify trends, or hold programs accountable, leaving the true scale of exclusion largely invisible.
2. **Access Bottlenecks to Supports:** Providers consistently reported long delays in accessing Infant–Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC), Early Intervention (EI), and behavioral health services. From their perspective, wait times often stretched for months, leaving programs with few immediate options and contributing to exclusionary decisions. It remains unclear, however, whether these delays reflect true service waitlists or the reality that referral and intake processes are not designed as rapid-response systems. These challenges were described as most acute in under-resourced communities and for multilingual families, where pathways were slower and harder to navigate.
3. **Workforce Fragility:** The ECE workforce remains fragile, marked by low wages, limited benefits, staff shortages, and high turnover. Educators often receive only minimal professional development each year, insufficient for sustained change in practice. High turnover further erodes continuity, meaning investments in training are often lost when staff leave. This instability undermines program capacity to deliver consistent, high-quality, inclusive care.
4. **Complex and Inequitable Referral Systems:** Families described referral systems for EI and behavioral health as confusing, fragmented, and inequitable. Navigating these systems requires persistence and resources that many families—especially hourly workers, single-parent households, or families managing multiple stressors—struggle to provide. Multilingual and non-English-speaking families face additional barriers when interpretation services and culturally competent supports were limited. These inequities compound disparities and contribute to uneven access to needed supports.

5. **Bias and Policy Inconsistency:** Disproportionality in exclusionary discipline reflects both implicit bias and inconsistent program policies. Families of Black and Hispanic boys reported higher rates of behavioral contacts and program discouragement, even when behaviors were no different from peers. Providers acknowledged the need for anti-bias and culturally responsive training, yet without clear statewide policy requirements, programs apply inconsistent standards. Some invest in inclusion, while others resort more quickly to exclusion—creating inequitable experiences for children depending on where they are enrolled.
6. **Documentation Gaps and Lack of Due Process:** Many exclusions occur without written documentation. Families are left with no clear pathway to appeal or advocate for their child, while policymakers lack actionable data to guide reforms or allocate resources effectively. Families described this as the “invisible visible” problem: exclusions were highly disruptive in daily life yet invisible in official records. Unless documentation requirements and due-process protections are strengthened, exclusionary practices will continue unchecked, eroding accountability and equity.

## Implications for Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania has an opportunity to build on the lessons emerging from other states by developing a comprehensive, statewide framework for discipline reform in early childhood programs. Key strategies include:

- + Establishing a statewide IECMHC network modeled after Connecticut’s Early Childhood Consultation Partnership (ECCP) and Colorado’s consultation systems, ensuring consultation is accessible across all program types.
- + Embedding consultation requirements prior to exclusion, following Illinois’ Early Childhood Expulsion Prevention Act, which mandates documented supports and referrals before any child is asked to leave.
- + Aligning professional development and coaching with Keystone STARS and preservice pathways, as Michigan has done by integrating consultation and coaching into Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) quality standards.
- + Exploring restorative and family-inclusive approaches that reflect Pennsylvania’s diverse communities, drawing on models from California and Oregon that emphasize relationship repair and shared decision-making with families.

By drawing on these proven strategies, Pennsylvania can ensure that discipline reform is not only policy-driven but also practically supported, equitable, and sustainable.

## Conclusion

Reducing and addressing exclusionary discipline in ECE requires more than incremental change; it requires a decisive shift in policy and practice. Pennsylvania must adopt a comprehensive strategy to reduce and address suspensions and expulsions in early childhood education programs—permitting only narrowly defined safety exceptions—while simultaneously investing in workforce stability, family supports, and proven strategies like Infant–Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation. By committing to this framework, Pennsylvania can transform exclusionary discipline from a hidden barrier into an opportunity for equity, inclusion, and lasting educational success.

To succeed, Pennsylvania must:

- + **Center equity** by disaggregating exclusion data, co-designing solutions with families and providers, and addressing practices that disproportionately harm Black children, Hispanic boys, and children with disabilities.
- + **Stabilize the workforce** through fair pay, benefits, retention supports, and job-embedded coaching to ensure that inclusive practices are sustainable.
- + **Ensure documentation and due process** by ensuring families consistently receive written notices, transition (re-entry) plans for children returning to child care programs, and transparency around decision-making.
- + **Invest in proven strategies** such as Infant–Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC), sustained coaching, and family partnership models that are already demonstrating success.
- + **Measure progress consistently** by tracking reductions in exclusions, improvements in practice, and increases in family stability and satisfaction.

Policy change is only the first step. Without intentional follow-through, workforce supports, and continuous monitoring, reforms risk being symbolic rather than transformational. But with commitment to equity, transparency, and investment in strategies that work, Pennsylvania can move beyond compliance to create an early learning system where every child has the opportunity to thrive.

**Read the full text of the report at:** [www.childrenfirstpa.org/dismantlingthepipeline](http://www.childrenfirstpa.org/dismantlingthepipeline)

*Now is the time to act decisively—transforming exclusionary discipline from a hidden barrier into a catalyst for equity, inclusion, and lasting educational success.*