

RESEARCH BRIEF

Preventing Preschool Expulsion by Supporting SEL and Reducing Teacher Stress

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Purpose

Expulsion rates are higher in preschool than in K-12, yet research does not address the impact that early expulsion may have on students and teachers. Studies of older children suggest that expulsion from preschool may result in long-term issues, such as a disconnected educational path and future contact with the criminal justice system. In deciding to request that a child be expelled, teachers may face a variety of challenges including a lack of support from administration, a lack of resources to address challenging behaviors, and inconsistent communication between schools and families. Issues that contribute to the use of expulsion may be particularly common in non-public, community-based preschool programs.

One promising intervention to reduce the rate of preschool expulsion is access to supports such as mental health consultants, however, such professionals are not consistently available to all preschool teachers and children, especially in for-profit programs.

This study sought to understand how support for children's social-emotional learning (SEL), like curricula, resources, training, and mentoring, may additionally prevent expulsion. In addition, we examine how these supports interact with teachers' stress, a known predictor of expulsion requests.

Method

126 teachers from across Chicago completed an online survey that asked questions on demographics, available supports (e.g., Mental health consultants, professional development), and how many children that were expelled within the past year. A subgroup (27 teachers) were chosen to complete a follow-up phone interview about 1) their access to and use of SEL supports 2) experiences of stress and 3) experience with challenging behavior in the classroom.

Key Points

- Preschool expulsion happens at rates higher than in K-12 schools.
- Teachers who request expulsions and those who do not don't in age, experience, or education level.
- But they do differ in how stressed they are in the classroom.
- Teachers need supports for children's SEL, but just having access to supports won't reduce teachers' stress or rate of expulsions.
- Instead, when teachers frequently used SEL supports that reduced their stress, they were less likely to expel
- Programs should consider teachers' stress and how classroom supports can benefit teachers too.

Findings

Teachers who requested an expulsion and those who did not were no different with regards to their age, years of experience or education level. Instead, factors such as their reported stress were more predictive of their request for at least one expulsion in the past year. Furthermore, although teachers who had access to a greater number of SEL supports were no less likely to request expulsions, those teachers who used available support regularly were less likely to make such requests. Additionally, teachers' use of SEL supports which reduced their experience of classroom stress was significantly related to requesting fewer expulsions. These results were also echoed in the interviews where teachers explained when and how supports such as classroom materials, social workers, and supportive administrators helped them manage their classroom and their own emotions.



Take Away

Classroom level interventions may not only decrease the likelihood of a teacher requesting expulsion, but they may also provide teachers with the necessary tools to manage classrooms effectively. By providing resources to teachers and promoting the use of supports, we have the ability to decrease both teacher stress and child expulsion. In order to curtail preschool expulsion, we must simultaneously establish systems to support both teachers' and students' social-emotional well-being.

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Zinsser, K., Zulauf, C. †, Silver, H.C. † & Nair Das, V† (Zinsser, K., Zulauf, C. †, Silver, H.C. † & Nair Das, V† (under review). Understanding preschool expulsion through the lens of teacher stress and supports of child SEL. Invited paper at Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology.