Delivering on the Promise

of Effective Early Childhood Education

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The National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) launched the **"Delivering on the Promise of Effective Early Childhood Education for Black Children: Eliminating Exclusionary Discipline and Concentrating on Inclusion"** national campaign in 2017. This initiative is designed to dismantle the foundation of America's preschool to prison pipeline: the rising rates of suspensions and expulsions in early childhood education (ECE). Through this initiative, NBCDI is supporting advocates and policymakers nationally who are seeking to ensure equal access to education for all young children by eliminating suspensions and expulsions in early childhood education and implementing positive discipline practices.

More than 250 preschoolers are suspended or expelled daily.[i] Data indicates that as many as 8,710, 3- and 4-year-old children may be expelled from or pushed out of public preschool or prekindergarten classrooms (administered in public schools) annually—a rate nearly three times that of students in kindergarten through 12th grade.[ii] In child care centers, expulsion rates are 13 times what they are in kindergarten through 12th grade.[iii] Exclusionary discipline has no place in learning environments; all children deserve to experience inclusive and affirming, high-quality education.

Disproportionate suspensions and expulsions for Black children in early childhood education underscore widespread injustice and racial inequality in our early childhood education system. Data from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights demonstrates that Black children are being systematically denied access to early education at the most critical period in their development. Key points from the Civil Rights Data Collection include several on preschool suspension:

- Black children represent 19 percent of preschool enrollment, but 47 percent of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions. In comparison, white children represent 41 percent of preschool enrollment, but 28 percent of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions.

- Black boys represent 19 percent of male preschool enrollment, but 45 percent of male preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions.

- Black girls represent 20 percent of female preschool enrollment, but 54 percent of female preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions.[iv]

Today's education system is not delivering on the promise of high-quality early childhood education. Children pushed out of education spaces are not experiencing the positive outcomes of high-quality education. The result of which is lasting negative impacts on their academic engagement and success in life. State-by-state analysis performed by Attendance Works demonstrates that students who miss more school than their peers consistently score lower on standardized tests, a result that holds true at every age, in every demographic group, and in every state and city tested.[v] Research also shows suspensions and expulsions for young children leads to children experiencing: less engagement and connection with peers and teachers; more disciplinary action later in their academic career; higher rates of drop out or fail out in high school; and higher rates of incarceration later in life.[vi]

Based on a 2016 research study brief entitled, "Do Early Educators' Implicit Biases Regarding Sex and Race Relate to Behavior Expectations and Recommendations of Preschool Expulsions and Suspensions?", the Yale Child Study Center shared findings that implicit bias plays a significant role in school discipline and the disproportionate exclusionary practices for Black students specifically. "The tendency to base classroom observation on the gender and race of the child may explain…why those children are more frequently identified as misbehaving and, hence, why there is a racial disparity in discipline," notes Dr. Walter S. Gilliam, director of The Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy and associate professor of child psychiatry and psychology at the Yale Child Study Center.[vii]

The kind of bias Gilliam's study illustrates can be seen across school systems at various education levels—the one constant is Black children receive harsher punishments than White children for similar behavior or significantly lesser offenses. **Punishing children by excluding them from learning deprives them of high-quality educational environments and policymakers and advocates seeking to address the disparities in academic outcomes for Black children must address disproportionate discipline.**

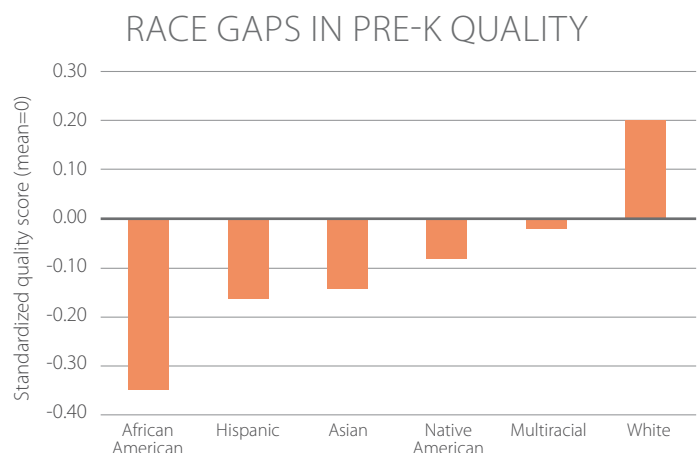# DELIVERING ON THE PROMISE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FRAMEWORK

NBCDI's Delivering on the Promise Framework: addressing the suspension and expulsion crisis requires reforms in early childhood education systems designed to improve the overall quality of education and advance racial equity. To deliver on the positive outcomes that are possible through high-quality early childhood education, early childhood education systems must eliminate exclusionary discipline, address racial bias and provide inclusive, affirming early learning environments. This issue will not be solved with a quick fix designed to place tighter controls on child behavior or solely placing the onus on educators to change their classroom practices without supports, coaching and professional development. To bring about real change, policymakers and advocates must move away from viewing this issue as a problem with child behavior, individual educators, or programs. Exclusionary practices are symptoms of broader systemic inequality in early childhood education. Young Black children do not have equal access to well-funded early childhood education programs with educators that are equipped to provide positive, developmentally-appropriate guidance and inclusive learning environments for all children.

Because addressing this issue will require systems-level changes, NBCDI developed solutions generated in partnership with a broad group of experts from the field, including advocates, practitioners, administrators, elected officials and parents/caregivers with expertise in various aspects of early childhood education. Eliminating suspensions and expulsions across all early learning settings, including public preschools, charter schools, Head Start, private programs and licensed home-based programs with mixed funding stream will require a comprehensive approach involving early education administrators, center directors, educators, health and mental consultants, professional development providers and coaches, community stakeholders and parents and caregivers supporting systems-level reforms with enhanced supports for programs and educators.

RECOMMENDATIONS described in detail throughout this paper include:

1. Ensure all children have access to the following Core Elements of Affirming, Inclusive Early Learning Settings.

Studies indicate that Black children are less likely to be enrolled in high-quality, culturally-affirming early learning environments.[viii] As policymakers and early childhood education administrators are striving to change systems to respond to the needs of all children, this paper provides a clear vision for everyday experiences that are denied to Black children.

RACE GAPS IN PRE-K QUALITY

Source: Analysis of data from the National Center for Early Development and Learning. BROOKINGS

TABLE 1.

Family-School Partnership	Parents/caregivers and educators work collaboratively to ensure children are fully engaged in the learning environment. Educators value the role of parents/caregivers as the primary teachers for children.
Culturally-Responsive Practice	Children receive positive, affirming messages about their race and identity that are woven into the curriculum and pedagogy.
High-Expectations of Children	Educators have high-expectations of the learning capacity of all children and communicate high-expectations through their engagement with children (children experience the opposite of implicit bias).
Social-Emotional Learning	Children learn how to engage with their teachers and peers, manage their emotions and respond to guidance from educators who understand.
Developmentally-Appropriate Pedagogy with Positive Guidance	Children engage in and know the rules and routines for typical classroom activities and receive proactive reminders. Educators proactively engage children in positive engagement designed to model and teach appropriate behavior.
Trauma-Informed Care and Services	Children who have experienced trauma receive services and interventions to help them process and heal their trauma.

The tendency to base classroom observation on the gender and race of the child may explain...why those children are more frequently identified as misbehaving and, hence, why there is a racial disparity in discipline.

WALTER S. GILLIAM

2. Implement systems-level reforms to support the Core Elements of Affirming, Inclusive Early Learning Settings.

Every element of our early childhood education systems—from funding levels to professional development programs—should be designed to ensure that all children experience affirming, inclusive early learning settings. This paper provides recommendations for systems-level reforms with a racial equity framework. All agencies and entities that engage with young children and families (health, education, family supports) must recognize their role in supporting inclusive and affirming learning environments and advancing racial equity. NBCDI recommends policymakers and advocates focus on the following core system changes:

- **Licensing Standards:** Child care licensing standards set the minimum acceptable health, safety and program standards for the legal operation of child care programs. To make progress on the issue of suspensions and expulsions, minimum standards should be designed to support positive interactions between educators and children and between parents and children. Licensing standards should be used to keep group sizes small and educator to child ratio at a level that will allow educators to provide attention and positive guidance to all the children.

- **Professional Development and Training Standards:** Research compiled in the last twenty years underscores two essential findings: 1) high-quality early childhood education programs are essential for positive child outcomes, and 2) education and training for practitioners are key to providing high-quality early childhood education.[ix] Black children must have access to early childhood educators and leaders who are prepared to effectively engage culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children and their families in learning environments that are free of racial bias.

- **Quality Assurance Systems and Ongoing Continuous Improvement:** Many states have taken a systemic approach to measuring and improving quality by creating **Quality Rating and Improvement Systems** (**QRIS**) and sharing rating publicly with parents.

QRIS could be used to advance racial equity and address disparities in discipline by incorporating quality indicators that are most critical for children of color. These indicators include: Family-School Partnership; Culturally-Responsive Practice; Social-Emotional Learning; Developmentally-Appropriate Pedagogy with Positive Guidance; Trauma-informed Care and Service; and Discipline Policies and Data. QRIS should also be used to incentivize the **Core Elements of Affirming, Inclusive Early Learning Settings** (identified above in Table 1) designed to eliminate reliance on suspensions and expulsions and ensure all children learn in positive, culturally-responsive early childhood education programs.
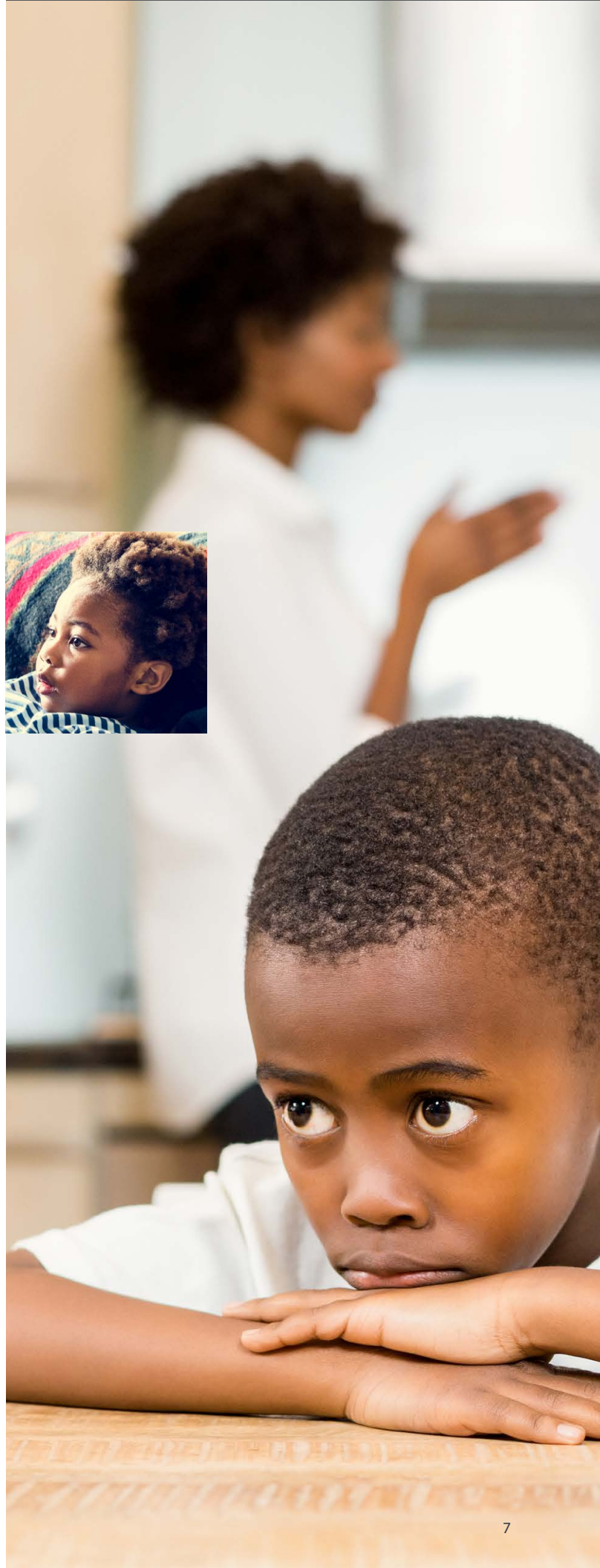
- **Wraparound Supports and Mental Health Services:** By suspending or expelling Black children at high rates, early childhood education systems are choosing to push them out instead of educating them and providing critical, holistic supports. Through wraparound supports, mental health services and trauma-informed care, early childhood education programs can advance equity by ensuring that each child and family has access to services designed to meet their unique needs. When implemented effectively, wraparound supports create pathways to success for every child. Comprehensive systemic changes to combat the suspension and expulsion crisis must address

  disparities in access to wraparound supports and mental health services for Black children and families. Research has shown that **Black children and adults are less likely to receive high-quality mental health services.**[x]

- **Data Development and Monitoring:** As policymakers and early childhood education administrators implement legislative or regulatory changes to reduce or eliminate suspensions and expulsions or address disparities in discipline, data on the frequency and type of disciplinary actions must be used to measure the effectiveness of these policy changes. Through data collection, advocates have learned that preschool suspension and expulsion occur at alarming rates, are associated with negative developmental and educational outcomes and have disproportionately affected Black boys and girls, contributing to racial disparities in access to educational opportunities. Comprehensive data collection and analysis at the state and local level is critical to continuing to raise awareness, drive progress on suspensions and expulsions in early childhood settings and track progress on reducing incidences.

CREATING AFFIRMING, INCLUSIVE EARLY LEARNING SETTINGS

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For decades, high-quality early childhood education has been cast as a way to bridge developmental opportunity gaps for U.S. children across disparate social and economic levels.[xi] Yet, the developmental benefits for Black children in these programs have been modest, often disappointing,[xii] and riddled with issues of implicit bias and differential treatment. Work from various scholars and, more recently, Gilliam and colleagues (2016), suggests that the implicit bias of teachers may be the underlying cause for the "pushout" of Black children, especially boys, from early childhood education settings; where Black children are viewed as older and more culpable.[xiii]

Psychological research consistently documents that implicit racial biases have negative consequences, with Black children being viewed as more culpable,[xiv] more aggressive[xv] and subject to harsher school discipline.[xvi] Because "implicit biases are automatic and unconscious stereotypes that drive people to behave and make decisions in certain ways,"[xvii] there is a need for specific tools and support to capture and document the interactions Black children have with early childhood educators. These observations need to be subsequently linked to policies and practices that can reduce the biases and differential exclusionary practices experienced by Black children.

Characteristics of Inclusive and Affirming Learning Environments for Black Children

The interactions children engage in with educators and other adults (and peers) are important in supporting children's social and emotional development.[xviii] Research from work conducted with Black children and youth suggests that certain learning environments may be particularly beneficial and relevant to their development and behavior, including:

1. **Collaborative relationships with families:**[xix] Numerous studies have shown a strong link between engaged families, child behavior and outcomes.[xx] In addition to being engaged in their children's learning and development, Black parents engage in cultural socialization practices that "teach children about their racial or ethnic heritage and history; promote cultural customs and traditions; and promote children's cultural, racial and ethnic pride, either deliberately

or implicitly."[xxi] When early childhood educators and parents are able to work in concert to create alignment between the home and school environments, children feel connected to the adults and the environment, reducing negative emotions and behaviors.

2. **Connections to their home language, traditions and lived experiences:**[xxii] Studies find that Black children's language and learning is primarily through their interactions with their "extended family and community, including peers, siblings and other related adults." This indicates that the mechanism to engage children and support their behavior and development must incorporate their experiences and culture, including their extended community and ways of interaction.

3. **Fun and engaging learning content that incorporates children's racial and ethnic heritage within caring, family- and community-type environments:**[xxiii] Interactive, fun and community- and family-type classrooms have been identified as uniquely beneficial for Black children because they connect the classroom culture to children's daily lives. [xxiv] Black children need the classroom environment to be active, lively and connected to their current lives, especially through the mechanism of oral storytelling. [xxv] However, Black children are less likely to experience congruity between the school and home/community environments, meaning characteristics such as valuing and incorporating rituals and traditions; use of similar mannerisms, interactions, or communication styles; and display of respect toward adults and elders is absent at school.[xxvi]

4. **Interactions that build on their positive racial and self-identity:**[xxvii] Work by scholars shows an affirmative link between positive racial identity and achievement. Messages regarding self-worth and positive self-identity, combined with messages about racial inequalities were associated with positive academic outcomes[xxviii] and behavioral markers, such as curiosity and persistence. [xxix] Positive racial and ethnic attitudes, including racial-ethnic pride and perception of racial barriers, have been associated with Black children's positive outcomes.[xxx]

5. **Warm demanders with high expectations:**[xxxi] Educators who engage in firm and supportive interactions with children, also called "warm demanders," have been noted as being instrumental for Black children's development. Educators who have high expectations for children's behavior and academic performance, and are direct and clear about these expectations, exemplify this component. Studies have shown that teachers may provide higher quality instruction and positive interactions to children from whom they expect more, and in contrast, provide lower quality instructions and less positive interaction to those from whom they expect less.[xxxii] Children then internalize these cues and expectations and engage (or disengage) based on them.

6. **Fair, non-judgmental disciplinary practices free of racial bias and microaggressions:**[xxxiii] Evidence is mounting about the negative impact of suspensions and expulsions on achievement, especially as it relates to the discipline gap.[xxxiv] However, classrooms are plagued by microaggressions.[xxxv] Microaggressions are brief, yet routine, verbal, behavioral, or environmental racial slights. Such microaggressions can be intentional, but they are most often unintentional and the result of people's implicit biases, such as assumptions of Black children's lack of intelligence or giftedness, non-academic orientation and aggressive behaviors.

These characteristics are critical to early childhood development. However, studies indicate that Black children are less likely to be in high-quality, culturally-affirming early learning environments (see Figure 1 below). Based on data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort: 25% of African American children were in centers rated as high-quality compared to 36% of White children. These numbers are more alarming for home-based programs: 0% of African American children were in high-quality early child education, compared to 15% of White children.[xxxvi]

FIGURE 1.

Percentage distribution of quality rating of child care arrangements of children at about 4 years of age, by type of arrangement and race/ethnicity: 2005-06

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort 9-month-Kindergarten Restricted-Use Data File and Electronic Codebook. Table 57. (December 2010)

Implementing Inclusive and Affirming Learning Environments for Black Children

Based on the six areas (outlined above) found to support Black children's early development and learning, we have developed a set of recommended strategies and tactics for adoption in early childhood education programs.

First, early childhood education systems must ensure that early childhood educators and leaders are provided with culturally-responsive training in order to effectively teach culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children. Several things must happen in order to do so, including:[xxxvii]

- **Developing a culturally diverse knowledge base:** this requires that educators be socially conscious; understand the cultural characteristics and contributions of ethnic groups, including their values, traditions, communication and learning styles; look at their own attitudes and practices towards diverse groups; have affirming views of students from CALD backgrounds and see their capacity to learn; and know how to incorporate diverse sets of learning strategies, connecting instruction to children's backgrounds.

- **Designing culturally relevant curricula:** this requires that educators identify the strengths and weaknesses of curricula for diverse learners, address stereotypes about particular groups and reinforce positive messages about diverse children.

- **Demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community:** this requires that educators and children be co-creators of the learning environment; learning is integrated and holistic, providing an opportunity for children to learn through different cognitive, physical and emotional strategies; and both children and teachers feel respected, connected and experience an inclusive learning environment.

- **Building effective cross-cultural communications:** this requires educators to decipher how children communicate and interact to better meet their individual needs, as well as understand how learners construct knowledge so they can be supported to do so effectively.

- **Delivering culturally-responsive instruction:** this requires educators to match instructional techniques and modalities to children's learning styles; develop an array of instructional approaches to meet CALD children's learning styles; and use children's cultural background and experiences to connect learning
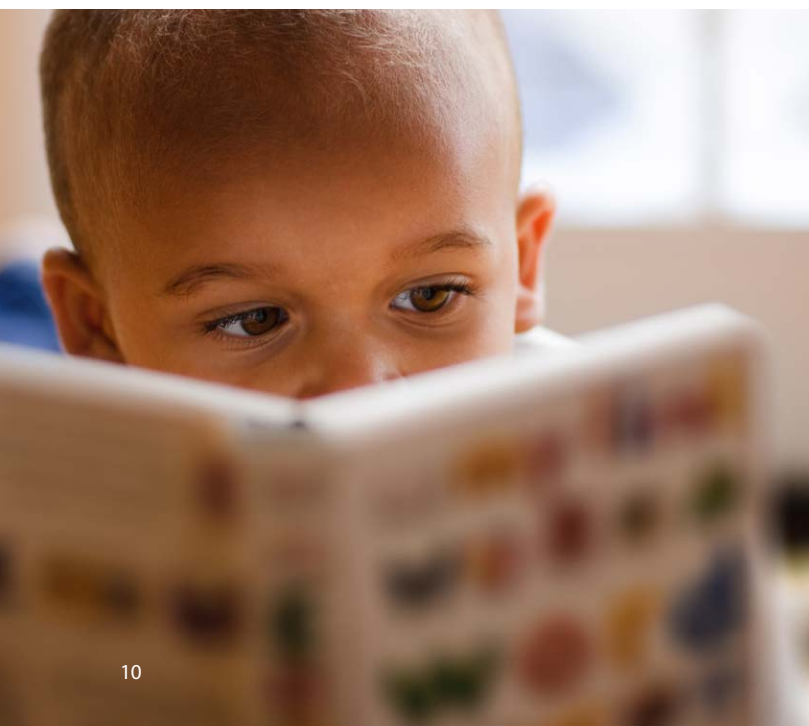
objectives, building on what they already know while stretching them to the next level.

- **Engaging in self-reflection about attitudes and biases:** this requires educators to engage in self-inquiry regarding their biases, perceptions about and responses to particular groups; how those perceptions and attitudes may have been formed; as well as how to value the assets CALD children bring to learning rather than viewing them with a deficit mindset.

How To Move Towards Culturally-Responsive Practices

1. Engage in an anti-bias training or racial equity workshop, which allows one to understand biases and how they may be reflected in interactions with children and their families, as well as colleagues and community members.

2. Commit to racial equity and addressing implicit bias in regular practice by conducting a cultural-responsive practices assessment in combination with a continuous quality improvement plan to improve practices and address biases.

3. Conduct a well-check visit with each child's family, the goal being to view the child's experiences through a family lens (such as what children see at home or the rituals they experience during meals). This is also an opportunity to determine if there are changes or anticipated changes in the child's routine. This allows teachers to view children's behavior differently, recognizing, for example, that a child painting on his shirt is exploring an activity engaged in with his family at home. The teacher is then able to engage the student in a conversation about what he was trying to do and connect behaviors to other learning activities, rather than respond to what is perceived to be disobedient behavior.

4. Engage and communicate with parents to identify and affirm the child's strengths, while also teaching them the skills and behaviors required to engage in learning. This includes educators' valuing the wealth of knowledge that families have regardless of their economic and racial background. For example, educators can ask parents if there are ways they want to contribute to classroom learning, such as being classroom helpers or readers.

5. Examine all aspects of the early learning experience, from greetings, meal time, the language of instruction, curriculum, assessments and more, to determine if the strengths of all children are captured. For example, do the assessments only examine children's receptive language skills, and not their expressive or interpersonal skills.

6. Use data to determine whether subgroups of children are not being effectively supported, especially Black children and other historically marginalized children.

Second, early childhood educators and professionals need access to developmentally-appropriate practices that support positive behavior. One such approach is positive discipline practices. With a concentrated focus on positive discipline practices, most programs educating young children use reactive approaches, such as more monitoring and surveillance for problem behaviors, sanctions for those behaviors, increased consistency in staff reactions to displays of antisocial behavior and accelerated consequences to prevent future problem behaviors.[xxxviii] While these practices make educators feel secure and in control, they do not foster a positive learning environment where children receive positive guidance and educators work to establish meaningful engagement with children. This has led to a focus on school- or program-wide positive discipline to create a sustainable and effective behavioral modification approach. School-wide or program-wide positive behavioral supports (PBS) are described "as the broad range of systemic and individualized strategies for achieving important social and learning outcomes while preventing problem behavior." [xxxix]

Effective use of school-wide PBS ensures that other alternatives to discipline are used while keeping in mind the importance of early childhood education programs as environments of learning, allowing for less reliance on punitive consequences. It provides strategies for schools and educators to consider alternative discipline approaches that don't exclude children from learning, especially those with the greatest need for a high-quality early learning environment. Educators and school leaders must seek ways to mitigate exclusionary discipline practices, including eliminating practices that create inequitable learning environments (e.g., neglecting to incorporate children's culture into instruction) and exclusionary discipline practices that prevent children from receiving full instruction.

1. Program-wide discipline systems that clearly outline strategies that support learning and encourage expected behaviors, including defined teacher expectations and procedures for record keeping and decision-making.

2. Clearly defined classroom behavior systems across the program, with each educator directly setting expectations and routines for typical classroom activities (e.g., how to ask for assistance) and monitoring; each teacher should have positive interactions with children, providing pre-corrections as a reminder.

3. Individual child support systems are in place to provide more specialized, comprehensive and customized support for children who don't respond to whole-program/school approaches. These systems are generally team-based and individualized.

Third, Black children have been found to disproportionately experience trauma, emphasizing the need for trauma-informed care. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study,[xl] initiated at Kaiser Permanente in California from 1995 to 1997, examined the relationship between childhood maltreatment, family stress and outcomes in adulthood. They found that more than 50% of adults reported at least one, and 25% reported two or more childhood exposures. They also noted that a greater number of exposures increased the likelihood of significant health risk behaviors include; obesity, diabetes, depression, suicide attempts, STDs, heart disease, cancer, stroke, poor health status, and disease later in life.

Knowledge about the detrimental impact of ACEs has resulted in more emphasis on providing trauma-informed care. "Trauma-informed care has many facets. It refers to recognition of the pervasiveness of trauma and a commitment to identify and address it early, whenever possible. Trauma-informed care also involves seeking to understand the connection between presenting symptoms and behaviors and the individual's past trauma history."[xli] **Trauma-informed care involves the provision of services and interventions to help the individual process and heal their trauma.**

This type of care is not highly specialized and can be provided in multiple settings by trained, committed professionals who understand the principles of a trauma-informed care system, including:

- trauma and how it may impact children's identity, how they will view the world and coping mechanisms;
- the child and their contexts, including their family and community contexts, and supporting the child to be active in their healing process;
- services that are strengths-based and promote children's self-control and coping skills; and
- the service relationship, which is based on relationships and trust that is earned over time.
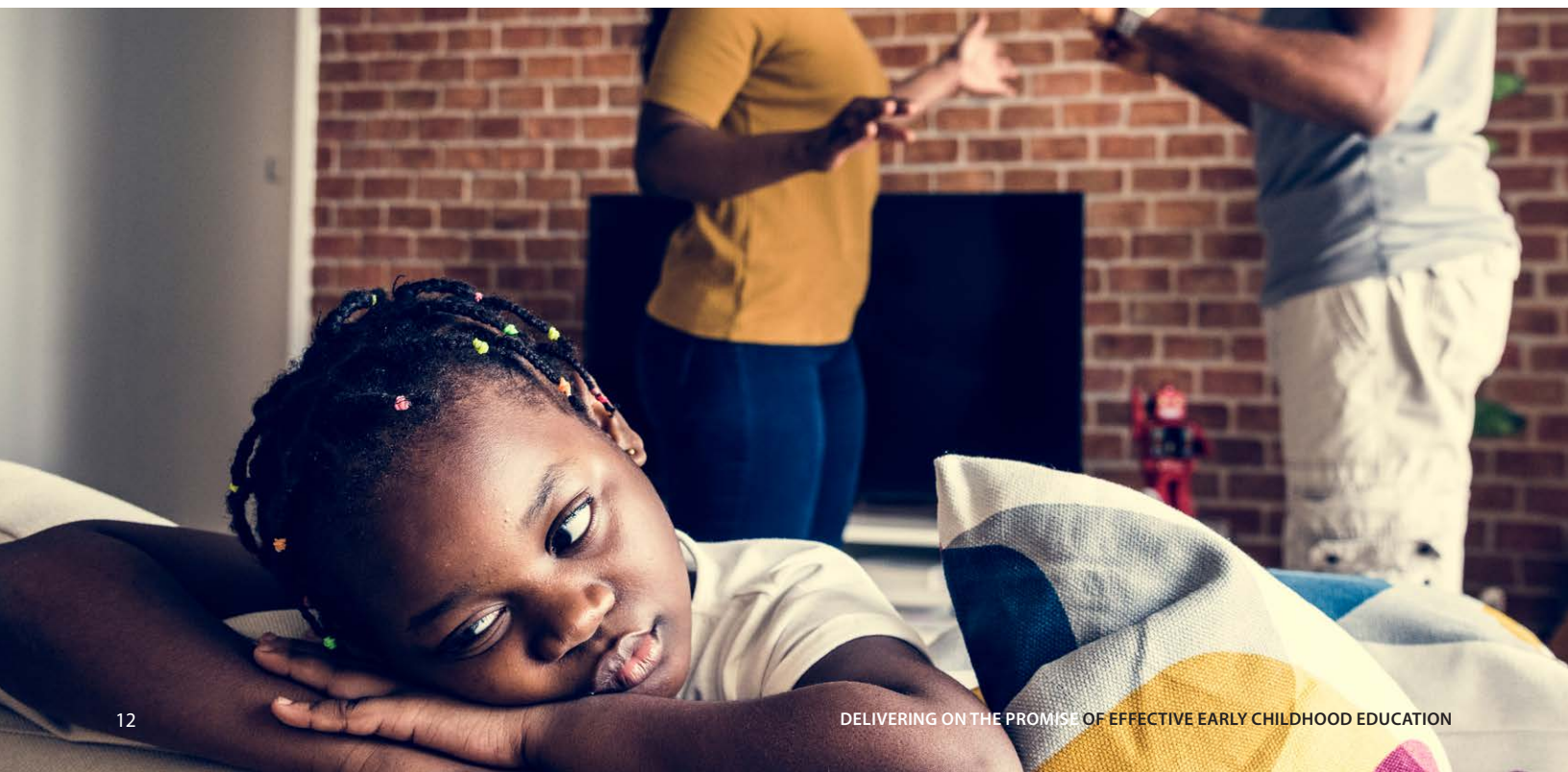
Treatment for children experiencing trauma needs to be developmentally appropriate. These specialized techniques include play therapy, art, storytelling and role-playing.[xlii] Play therapy is viewed as a developmentally-appropriate service to support children's healthy behavior, especially for children dealing with trauma. Many children are exposed to traumatic experiences, including abuse, family and media violence, loss of a parent, or parents dealing with substance abuse, mental or other health challenges. Media violence is the act or threat of injuring or killing another witnessed by children through television, radio, movies, music, video games, and other forms of media. However, young children are not able to understand their complex emotions or how to adequately express them. Thus, play therapy is "viewed as the vehicle for communication between the child and the therapist on the assumption that children will use play materials to directly or symbolically act out feelings, thoughts and experiences that they are not able to meaningfully express through words" (Bratton, Ray, Rhine, & Jones, 2005, p. 376). Various types of toys are used as tools to help children communicate their feelings. As play is the natural way that children learn about the world, it helps them to cope, problem-solve, change their behavior and learn how to relate to others. Numerous studies have found a large positive effect for children dealing with a host of emotional and behavioral challenges, including life stressors such as divorce, death, relocation, hospitalization, chronic illness, physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence and natural disasters.[xliii]

Other evidence-based approaches have also been developed to provide treatment for children experiencing trauma-related symptoms. They include Parent-Child Psychotherapy for young children exposed to violence, Trauma Focused-Cognitive Behavior Therapy (TF-CBT) for childhood traumatic grief and the Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS). Other treatments can be found at the website of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network at www.NCTSNet.org.

This section provided strategies for individual early childhood education programs to implement in creating inclusive and affirming learning environments for all children. The next section of the paper focuses on the systems-level changes required to support schools and early childhood education programs in changing their practices. Multiple systems impact children's development and well-being. Thus, systems of care—education, health, mental health, and family supports—must be called upon to ensure that Black children are afforded equitable learning opportunities and are not experiencing systematic exclusion from learning due to disproportional suspension and expulsion.

Trauma-Informed Care Strategies for Educators

(Adapted from the NCTSN Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit)

a. develop a crisis plan with resources;

b. maximize the child's sense of safety;

c. assist children in reducing overwhelming emotion;

d. help children make new meaning of their trauma history and current experiences;

e. address the impact of trauma and subsequent changes in the child's behavior, development and relationships;

f. coordinate services with other agencies;

g. utilize a comprehensive assessment of the child's trauma experiences and their impact on the child's development and behavior to guide services;

h. support and promote positive and stable relationships in the life of the child;

i. provide support and guidance to the child's family and caregivers; and

j. manage professional and personal stress.

DELIVERING ON THE PROMISE
THROUGH SYSTEMS-LEVEL REFORM

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The previous section—*Creating Affirming, Inclusive Early Learning Settings*—provided a description of the evidence-based practices required to create positive learning environments that meet the needs of Black children. In these early learning settings, educators have the supports they need to educate and nurture young children from diverse backgrounds without relying on harsh discipline practices. Table 2.1 below provides a brief summary of the core recommendations.

All children deserve to learn in the environment described above. Every element of our early childhood education systems, from funding levels to professional development programs should be designed to ensure that all children have these experiences. The fact that Black children are most likely to be punished with suspensions and expulsions shows that they are least likely to be learning in inclusive environments with positive guidance. Studies show that, when compared to White and Latino children, Black children are least likely to be enrolled in high-quality, early childhood education programs.[xliv] Addressing the suspension and expulsion crisis will require systems-level reforms designed to improve the overall quality of early childhood education and address disparities for Black children. **This issue will not be solved with a quick fix designed to place tighter controls on child behavior or solely placing the onus on educators to change their classroom practices without supports, coaching and professional development.**

While many states, cities and school districts have taken action to address this issue, these actions often ban suspensions and expulsions without providing adequate supports—in most cases no supports—for early childhood education programs to implement changes. Policy changes or legislation designed to ban suspensions and expulsions without taking steps to provide the supports needed to create affirming and inclusive early learning settings (described in Table 2.1 above) will fall short. In addition, these policy changes are typically only geared toward pre-kindergarten programs and do not reach children across various early learning settings:

- Pre-kindergarten programs in charter schools;
- Federally-funded programs like Head Start;
- Private programs funded solely through parent pay; or
- Programs with mixed funding streams, including those that serve children whose families participated in child care assistance programs.

While the rules are changing in some programs, the overall early childhood education system remains the same. Changing the rules only addresses the symptoms—alarming rates of suspensions and expulsions—without focusing on the underlying systemic issues—inequality, inconsistent standards and lack of supports for families and educators.

DELIVERING ON THE PROMISE OF EFFECTIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Table 2.1: Core Elements of Affirming, Inclusive Early Learning Settings.

Family-School Partnership	Parents/caregivers and educators work collaboratively to ensure children are fully engaged in the learning environment. Educators value the role of parents/caregivers as the primary teachers for children.
Culturally-Responsive Practice	Children receive positive, affirming messages about their race and identity that are woven into the curriculum and pedagogy.
High-Expectations of Children	Educators have high-expectations of the learning capacity of all children and communicate high-expectations in their engagement with children.
Social-Emotional Learning	Children learn how to engage with their teachers and peers, manage their emotions and respond to guidance from educators who understand.
Developmentally-Appropriate Pedagogy with Positive Guidance	Children understand the rules and routines for typical classroom activities and receive proactive, affirming reminders. Educators proactively initiate positive engagement with children designed to model and teach appropriate social interaction.
Trauma-Informed Care and Services	Children who have experienced trauma receive services and interventions to help them process and heal their trauma.

Driving Systemic Change in Early Childhood Education

There are five essential systemic changes that will lay the foundation to make the **Core Elements of Affirming, Inclusive Early Learning Settings** (described above in Table 2.1) a reality for children across various early childhood education settings. The recommendations below are complicated by the reality of a fractured delivery system in early childhood education. Many programs are supported through multiple local, state and federal programs and funding sources with widely varying policies, standards and reporting requirements. Despite major barriers, large systemic reforms in early childhood education will be well worth the investment in children's education in the most critical years of learning.

NBCDI has identified the following systemic changes that can be the drivers of the behaviors, relationships and actions that can prevent or remediate suspensions and expulsions:

- **Licensing Standards:** Child care licensing standards vary widely by state and are not typically designed to guarantee high-quality education for children. Child care licensing standards set the minimum acceptable health, safety and program standards for the legal operation of child care programs. Therefore, licensing regulations will impact the early childhood education experiences of almost every young child in our early childhood education systems. To make progress on the issue of suspensions and expulsions, minimum standards should be designed to support positive

interactions between educators and children and between parents and children. Licensing standards should be used to keep group sizes and educator to child ratio at a level that will allow educators to engage with and provide positive guidance to all the children. The structural elements of programs that are regulated by licensing standards should be evidence-based and informed by early childhood educators.

- **Professional Development and Training Standards:** To address the disparities in the treatment and punishment of Black children, early childhood educators and leaders must have professional development coaching and training that addresses racial bias and equips them to effectively engage culturally and linguistically diverse children and their families. With so much variation in early childhood education systems, the education and preparation of educators vary widely across states and cities and within programs. Education and training vary so broadly that early childhood systems cannot consistently deliver high-quality early childhood education to all children, especially children of color.
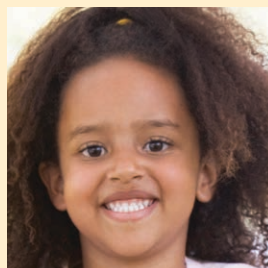
Research (published by the National Academy of Medicine[xlv]) shows that the suspensions and expulsions crisis is not due to "children behaving badly" but, rather, a complex set of program level, local, state and federal policies that create systems of inequality that show up in underprepared staff and scattered social service systems. This study shows that these inequities in our education system result in children living in poverty and children of color being more likely to have educators that are not prepared to meet their needs. Furthermore, educators themselves desire more support and training in this area. The U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services have each cited studies that identify coping with challenging

behaviors as the most pressing training need for early childhood educators.

To deliver on the promise of early childhood education, educators must receive professional development and coaching that prepares them to address their own biases and implement positive, culturally-responsive discipline practices. The research from the Yale Child Study Center demonstrated that implicit bias plays a significant role in school discipline and the disproportionate exclusionary practices for Black children specifically.

To address disparities in discipline and ultimately academic outcomes, the early childhood education field must address inequities in access to high-quality early childhood education programs that have well-qualified staff prepared to combat racial bias and engage diverse children and families. Overall, working with young children is a profession that requires knowledge of child growth and development, as well as the skills to communicate effectively with children and families from diverse backgrounds. Research compiled in the last twenty years underscores two essential findings, that: 1) high-quality early childhood education programs are essential for positive child outcomes, and 2) education

and training for practitioners are key in providing high-quality early childhood education.

- **Quality Assurance Systems and Ongoing Continuous Improvement:** Early childhood education is primarily market-based, with parents and caregivers acting as the consumers who choose child care based on affordability, preferences, and knowledge of their child's needs. In early childhood education, quality assurance and improvement systems support parents and caregivers in making informed choices about quality care by arming parents and caregivers with knowledge that helps them compare the level of quality across programs. Many quality assurance and improvement systems

also provide financial-incentive programs to improve or maintain quality.

Many states have taken a systemic approach to measuring and improving quality by creating **Quality Rating and Improvement Systems** (**QRIS**) and sharing ratings publicly with parents and caregivers. In 42 states, these systems give incentives for early childhood education programs to provide high-quality early childhood education. These systems should also be used to incentivize the **Core Elements of Affirming, Inclusive Early Learning Settings** identified above to mitigate or eliminate reliance on suspensions and expulsions. QRIS commonly measures teacher/caregiver professional development, quality of child and family engagement and the social-emotional development of children.[xlvi] QRIS systems are not consistently assessing quality indicators that are most critical for children of color. Of the 44 states with QRIS, 20 have no quality indicators related to culturally-responsive practices and none assess the availability of data on discipline practices.[xlvii] For the most part, QRIS systems are not currently designed to ensure that families of color can identify programs that will respond to needs of their children or to encourage programs to be responsive to the needs of families of color. QRIS could be used to advance racial equity and address disparities in discipline.

- **Wraparound Supports and Mental Health Services:** Children communicate their needs through their behavior and, for some children, educators will need additional supports to meet their needs. By suspending or expelling those children from early childhood education programs, educators are pushing them out instead of providing critical support. Through wraparound supports and early intervention programs, early childhood education systems can advance equity by ensuring that each child and family has access to services designed to meet their unique needs. When implemented effectively, wraparound supports create pathways to success for every child. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs identifies the core needs of all people to reach their optimal level of learning and growth and provides an excellent demonstration of the importance of wraparound supports.

Many early childhood education programs are considered high-quality when they meet the top-level needs for children—self-actualization and
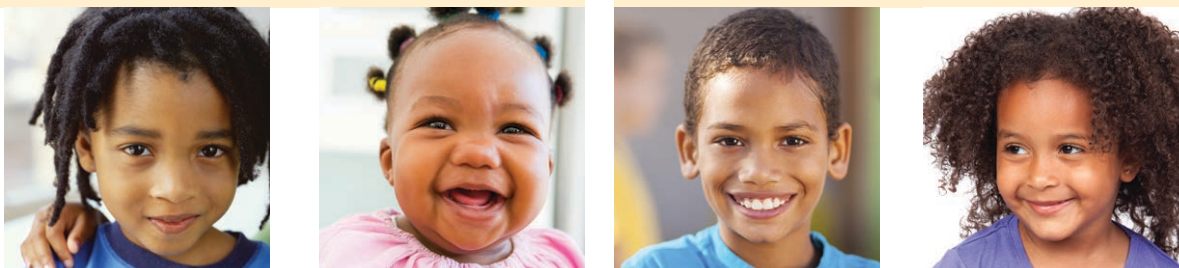
MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Self-Actualization: Child develops abilities and problem-solving skills.

Self Esteem Needs: Child is affirmed and given the opportunity to achieve.

Love & Belonging Needs: Child has trusting relationships with adults and peers.

Safety Needs: Child is physically safe and feels safe.

Physiological Needs: Child has proper nutrition, sleep, exercise, and healthcare.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION

SELF ESTEEM NEEDS

LOVE & BELONGING NEEDS

SAFETY NEEDS

PHYSIOLOGICAL NEEDS
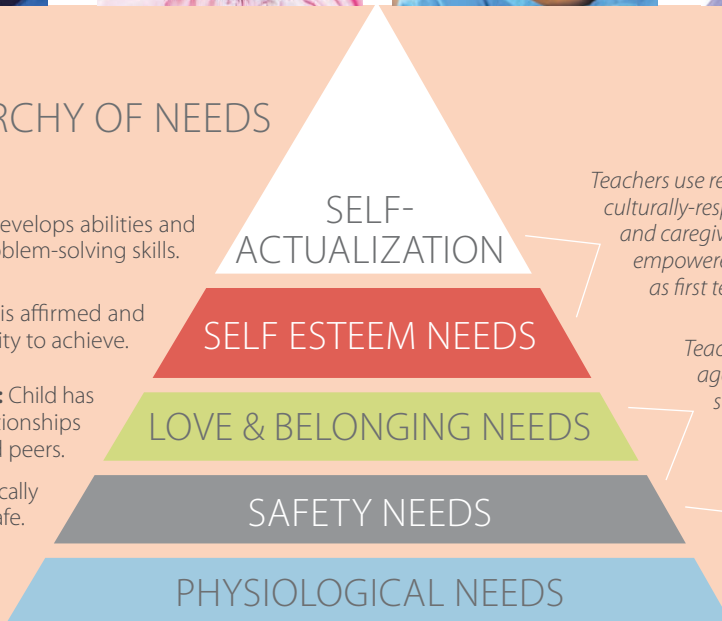
Teachers use research-based, culturally-responsive curriculum and caregivers are educated and empowered in their roles as first teachers.

Teachers and caregivers understand age-appropriate practices and support social-emotional development.

Families have stability through access to health care, education, job-training, and social services.

self-esteem. When educators are providing culturally-responsive pedagogy and engaging well with parents and caregivers, outcomes for children are better, but many children need more to be successful. Meeting children's educational needs means that children *and* families have access to proper nutrition, health care, housing and other social services. Early childhood education systems must ensure that individual programs and providers are well-aware of the holistic resources that are available and of how to connect families with wraparound supports.

In addition to meeting children's basic needs, systems of care must also be responsive to their social, emotional and developmental needs. **When children are struggling with severe behavioral issues, our education systems should ensure they have proper trauma-informed, mental-health services.** Expelling or suspending children may delay or prevent them from gaining access to mental health services or trauma-informed care. Research has shown that **Black children and adults are less likely to have their needs met in areas of mental health.** As documented in "Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General"[xlviii] and its supplement, "Mental Health, Culture, Race and Ethnicity"[xlix] people of color have less access to mental health services than do white people, are less likely to receive needed care and are more likely to receive poor quality care when treated. Mental health systems provide people of color with the best available treatments for depression and anxiety at lower rates than white people.[l,li] Comprehensive systemic changes to combat the suspension and expulsion crisis must address disparities in access to wraparound supports and mental health services.

- **Data Development and Monitoring:** As policymakers and early childhood education administrators implement legislative and/or regulatory changes to reduce or eliminate suspensions and expulsions or address disparities in discipline, data on the frequency and type disciplinary actions must be used to measure the effectiveness of these policy changes. Through data collection, advocates have learned that preschool suspension and expulsion occur at alarming rates, are associated with negative developmental and

"I feel the most significant impact—that is indeed transformative—is that children who require early intervention and treatment for mental and behavioral issues receive specialized services to help them not only have successful beginnings, but also implement coping and management skills to succeed as they continue to develop and shape the communities in which they live."

— Excerpt from the blog authored by **Cindra Taylor**, former President of Black Child Development Institute-Atlanta, published on NBCDI website in May 2016

DELIVERING ON THE PROMISE OF EFFECTIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

educational outcomes and disproportionately affect Black boys and girls, contributing to racial disparities in access to educational opportunities.

At the national level, the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) provided critical data that demonstrated, for example, that Black boys represent 19 percent of male preschool enrollment, but 45 percent of male preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions. While these data sources track suspensions and expulsions, they are limited to preschool programs operated by public schools, which are only a subset of state-funded preschool and early childhood settings where suspensions and expulsions occur. Furthermore, the most recent report for the 2015-2016 school year did not include data on preschool suspension and expulsion rates. Comprehensive data collection and analysis at the state and local levels is critical to continuing to raise awareness, drive change and monitor progress on suspensions and expulsions in early childhood settings.

DEDICATED CENTER DIRECTOR DELIVERS FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN…

"As an early childhood administrator, my teachers and I became frustrated as we found ourselves resorting to suspension and, in some cases, expulsions because we simply did not know other effective discipline strategies to address behaviors that disrupt learning and affect other children. Recognizing the negative impacts of exclusionary discipline, I began to look for alternative methods to address the issue. I implemented a mental health program, which we called CAMP (Childhood Acute Mental Health Practices). We used the acronym to avoid the stigma of "mental health" problems.

*In this program, children receive **comprehensive services that are confidential and culturally responsive**, including screenings, assessments and treatments, such as play therapy. Additionally, our families are empowered through family counseling and crisis intervention services while teachers receive training on developmentally-appropriate practices and mental health identification. **Providing professional development for educators helped us identify when we need to improve classroom management and when children and families truly need additional services.** We established collaborative partnerships with mental health providers for these services. We also work directly with feeder elementary schools for continuity of services through third grade and, this year, we will expand the program to include home visitation."*

— Excerpt from the blog authored by
Cindra Taylor, former President of Black Child
Development Institute-Atlanta,
published on NBCDI website in May 2016

SECTION **3**

"DELIVERING ON THE PROMISE"
RECOMMENDATIONS

NBCDI
National Black Child
Development Institute

I n this section, NBCDI provides policy recommendations designed to make our early childhood education system more equitable and protect Black children from the overuse of harsh discipline. We recognize that advocates are working to partner with policymakers and early childhood education administrators and have also identified best practices for launching and engaging in advocacy campaign designed to drive systems-level reform to end suspensions and expulsions in early childhood education.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Early Childhood Education Administrators

Licensing Standards and Regulations

NBCDI recommends that policymakers and early childhood education administrators working to address disparities in discipline include an examination of licensing requirements. Licensing requirements must be designed to ensure that early childhood education programs are operating with programmatic structures that support positive engagement between educators and children.

New licensing requirements should be informed by educators, researchers and parents and set state-wide standards for educator to child ratios, group size, family engagement, minimum requirements for professional development and standard practices related to discipline and data tracking disciplinary action. Policymakers should partner with educators, parents and caregivers to develop statewide guidance on discipline practices for young children across all early childhood education settings. This process should be led by a taskforce of diverse parents/caregivers and educators requiring representation from Black families.

Professional Development, Training and Coaching

NBCDI recommends policymakers require coordination between education and workforce

development systems to implement minimum professional development standards in all licensed early childhood education systems with training also offered to programs or settings that are not required to be licensed. All early childhood educators should receive annual training and as-requested coaching on positive guidance, racial bias and developmentally-appropriate practices for educators. The training schedule and content should be informed and continuously improved based on engagement with early childhood educators.

Wraparound Supports and Mental Health Services

NBCDI recommends that states move away from allowing early childhood education programs to rely on suspensions and expulsions and require programs to support families with referrals to wraparound supports if they are considering exclusionary practices. States must support programs by creating referral systems for support services. Multiple states have hotlines for early childhood educators to call when they or a family that they serve need support. Thus, states should examine the quality and availability of mental services in Black communities to ensure equitable access.

States should ensure that all early education programs have access to Early Childhood Mental Health

Consultation (ECMHC). Mental health consultants work with educators, young children and their families to support social-emotional and behavioral health and development. Through Mental Health Consultation, educators have the opportunity to learn strategies to improve their practices, foster positive behavior and identify when children and families truly need mental health interventions. Through ECMHC, educators and families gain a better understanding of the powerful influence of their relationships and interactions on young children's development.

Data Development and Monitoring

NBCDI recommends states collect state-wide data on exclusionary discipline practices and professional development for early childhood educators. Data is most prevalent from preschool programs in public schools. States should create systems to track data across all early childhood education settings: pre-kindergarten programs in public schools or charter schools; federally-funded programs like Head Start; private programs funded solely through parent pay; or programs with mixed funding streams and those that serve children who families participate in child care assistance programs. All licensed child care providers should be required to provide data and data should be requested on a voluntary basis from license-exempt settings. Data should be disaggregated by race and gender to allow states to assess the level of inequality and proactively address disparities. Finally, policymakers should develop a stakeholder committee comprised of parents/caregivers, educators, advocates and researchers reviewing data annually and recommending systems-level strategies for continuous improvement.

Quality Assurance Systems and Ongoing Continuous Improvement

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) should be redesigned and examined to include measures of quality that are critical to the success of diverse children. QRIS should consistently include the following measures with indicators that are culturally-relevant.

- **Family-School Partnership**
  - What activities in the program create alignment between the home and school environments?
  - How frequently do parents and caregivers engage with educators and participate in program activities? How are parents and caregivers made aware of these opportunities?

- **Culturally-Responsive Practice**
  - How do programs incorporate the experiences and cultures of diverse children into their curriculum and activities?
  - How often do educators receive professional development or coaching on engaging children from diverse backgrounds? Do educators have dedicated time to engage in reflective practice related to culturally-responsive practices?

- **Social-Emotional Learning**
  - How often do educators receive professional development or coaching on social-emotional development for young children? Do educators have dedicated time to engage in reflective practice related to supporting children's social-development?

- **Developmentally-Appropriate Pedagogy with Positive Guidance**
  - Does the program have a framework for implementing positive behavioral supports? (Example Framework: The Pyramid Model focuses on providing a tiered approach of social emotional support for young children and infants, from universal and preventive supports to individualized intervention supports.)
  - How is the positive behavioral framework incorporated into school structure, policies, classroom routines, staff professional development opportunities and administrative leadership?

- **Trauma-Informed Care and Service**
  - How often do educators receive professional development or coaching on the principles of trauma-informed care?
  - How are the principles of trauma-informed care incorporated in classroom practice?
  - Does the center have procedures for connecting parents and caregivers with services and supports?

- **Discipline Policies and Data**
  - Does the program use exclusionary discipline practice (early dismissal, suspension, or expulsion)?
  - Does the program have written discipline policies that are transparent to parents and caregivers?
  - Does the program make data on their discipline practices disaggregated by race and gender available for parents and caregivers?

Recommendations for Advocates

Advocacy is critically important to delivering on the promise of high-quality early childhood education. Advocates are concerned individuals and organizations dedicated to educating, informing and holding policymakers accountable to being responsive to needs of communities, families and children. Parents, caregivers and educators have the expertise, lived experiences and crucial perspectives on how to improve programs and policies for children and families. For advocates seeking to support access to high-quality early childhood education and address disparities for children of color, NBCDI provides the following recommendation:

- **Promote the value of early childhood education and demand adequate funding for early childhood education systems.** The systems-level reforms identified above will require significant investments in early childhood education systems. For example, updating licensing standards to reduce group sizes and child to adult ratios will require programs to hire more early childhood educators. Professional development or wraparound supports are cost drivers that are worth the investment to deliver high-quality early childhood education that has positive lasting impacts on children and families. The return on investment from early childhood education has been well-documented for decades. **Advocates must take a strengths-based approach—unapologetically acknowledging the cost of systemic reforms—that will ensure equal access to education for Black children and close the opportunity gap.** Legislation or rule changes designed to end suspensions and expulsions must be complimented with funding to support

implementation. With an estimated 70% of families already paying over 20% of their incomes for child care, the cost of fixing the early childhood education system should not be passed to parents and caregivers.

- **Raise awareness about expulsions, suspensions and other exclusionary discipline practices in early childhood education, disparities in discipline by race and gender and the negative outcomes for children associated with expulsion and suspension in the early years.** Community voices and community organizing are vital to ending suspensions and expulsions and delivering on the promise of early childhood education for Black children. Advocates must ensure that more people are aware of this issue. Much like electoral politics, advocacy campaigns need to garner widespread support from diverse stakeholders. Advocates should target core stakeholders like parents, caregivers, educators, community leaders, activists, clergy, child advocacy organizations, *and* focus on innovative partners like judges, pediatricians, business leaders and civic organizations. Unlike electoral politics, the road to a "win" in eliminating exclusionary discipline practice in early childhood education will require a long game plan, especially for advocates deeply committed to the systemic reform identified above. Small wins are paramount to creating the large-scale reforms required to ensure young Black children are not penalized with harsh discipline practices.

- **Work in coalitions with other advocates to ensure you are presenting a united front with a strong voice in support of children.** Elected officials have tough choices

on their legislative agendas and budget priorities. Joining with other groups communicates the critical importance of this issue to policymakers. The structure of a coalition can support the long-term nature of campaigns to address exclusionary discipline practices.

- **Highlight progress in your city and state and across the country.** Advocating from a strengths-based perspective requires celebrating the wins along the way. If your state has already banned suspension and expulsion in public pre-kindergarten programs or added professional development on culturally-responsive practice as required training, highlight the importance of these wins while challenging policymakers and administrators to do more.

  - Advocates should build on the momentum of wins to engage directly with early childhood education administrators to implement the systemic reforms that do not require legislative action. Legislative action can be essential but is not the only avenue for change.

  - Publicizing progress through traditional and social media is also a great way to recruit more supporters, people want to join a winning campaign. Through social media, advocates can quickly disseminate the most current news regarding progress in their local communities, issue calls to action, announce community events and expand their base of support. This form of advocacy is most useful in recruiting young leaders to advance campaigns, as well as in making direct appeals to elected officials and other power brokers.

- **Demand data *and* engage in independent data collection.** Advocate for publicly-available data on suspensions and expulsions across early childhood settings and programs. If your city or state has not put data systems in place, implement independent data collection through focus groups and surveys. Advocates should engage with parents, caregivers, educators and instructional coaches to learn about the lived experiences of families and educators and identify solutions and strategies designed to respond to local needs and environments.

The ultimate goal of many advocates and advocacy organizations in early childhood education is supporting the success of our children by ensuring they have access to high-quality early childhood education. However, enrollment in these programs is not enough when Black children are disproportionately "locked out" by a system that suspends and expels them and other children of color at alarming rates. NBCDI is committed to policy and systems changes that will end suspensions and expulsions in early childhood education.

A guiding principle of our approach is to ensure that policies and programs are informed by the children and families that they are designed to benefit. The next step in the "Delivering on the Promise" campaign is actively engaging the voices of Black families and educators from across the country. In 2019, NBCDI will release the second "Delivering on the Promise" publication, which will include findings from focus groups with Black parents, caregivers and educators and lessons learned from our "Delivering on the Promise" Community of Practice. Ultimately, changes to early childhood education systems must be carefully designed with families of color in mind to ensure we are addressing racial equity and not perpetuating the opportunity gap.

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Acknowledgements

About NBCDI

For 48 years, the National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) has been committed to our mission to improve and advance the quality of life for Black children and families through education and advocacy. With our National Affiliate Network, we develop and deliver strengths-based, culturally relevant, evidence-based, and trauma informed curricula and programs that focus on health and wellness, family engagement and literacy. We support increased access to effective education by providing professional development scholarships for early childhood educators. NBCDI, the National Affiliate Network, and our members advocate and inform education policies at the federal, state and local levels to ensure standards, regulations and resource allocations support equitable systems for Black children and families.