



South Carolina Institute of Medicine & Public Health

Foundations for Success Taskforce

Key Informant Interviews - Preliminary Thematic Overview

Purpose: This document provides a high-level summary of themes emerging from key interviews conducted to inform *the Foundation for Success* Taskforce. Interviews were guided by questions related to definitions, drivers, impacts, barriers, and policy considerations related to the suspension and expulsion of early learners in South Carolina. Interviews are ongoing. This overview reflects early themes and is intended to support discussion at the upcoming Taskforce meeting.

Theme 1: Defining Behavior - Misalignment between Practice and Policy

Informants emphasized the importance of shared definitions of exclusionary discipline. Exclusionary discipline was described as **any removal of child from the point of instruction**, whether 3 minutes or 3 days. This includes:

- Formal suspension
- Expulsion or revocation
- Informal or “soft” removals
- Asking parents to pick up child early
- Telling families the program is “not a good fit”

With key drivers identified as:

- Behavioral benchmarks and expectations for classroom behavior being subjective rather than developmentally appropriate
- Underreporting being incentivized by a lack of clear, standardized reporting policies
- Mismatching expectations and reality of developmentally appropriate behavior

Cross-sector work has been done to align definitions with legislative language and state systems. However, informants noted that informal removals are not often tracked and there is limited structure around what constitutes a removal with one informant noting: *“That haziness with in-school suspension, what the effects are for a length of time as a variable there. You know, there’s an in-school suspension where you’re put in a different classroom, and you can’t come back to your classroom, the effect of that versus the effect of, you know, sitting out in the hallway, so you can, you know, maybe have a little cry, because you’re 3 years old, and you’ve got a lot of emotions, and you’re not sure what to do with them.”*

Several informants stated that numbers reflect **public schools only**, not private childcare settings. In private settings, there may be no requirement to report removals. Some informants believe that the true scope of exclusionary discipline may be larger than official data suggests. Children with disabilities were specifically identified as being more likely to be suspended.

Theme 2: System Strain

A strong and consistent theme was that exclusionary often occurs in a system under strain. Informants described:

- High turnover of early care providers, educators, support staff, and administrators
- Low pay and limited benefits
- Difficulty recruiting qualified educators
- Programs operating with very thin financial margins
- Pressure from families to address suspend and/or expel other students to address a behavior concern
- Fear of losing staff
- Providers and educators not feeling supported in their role by parents and administrators
- Protections for students being rolled back at the federal level
- Inconsistent understandings of definitions and policies lead to inconsistent reporting

One informant noted that decisions to use exclusionary discipline practices are often reactive, not malicious. Directors may feel forced to act when teachers threaten to leave, or families threaten to withdraw. Educators were described as overwhelmed and sometimes ill-equipped to feel confident and supported in their role with one informant emphasizing *“we’re quick to blame folks for systemic failures of the system.”* One informant underscored the importance of autonomy: *“We talk about in education all the time the importance of autonomy for the students, but also, when you’re talking about teachers, the importance of making sure that the teachers themselves feel like they have some autonomy, that their decisions are respected.”* Stress affects both parents and teachers and disproportionately impacts rural communities where access to childcare is limited. If a child loses one placement, there are likely no alternatives nearby.

Theme 3: Behavior as Communication

Informants emphasized that young children use behavior to communicate.

Behavior may signal:

- Speech or language delays
- Developmental differences
- Trauma exposure or foster care transitions
- Health concerns
- Stress related to family transitions
- Exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)
- Executive functioning challenges

Some questioned if children are being excluded from the classroom before underlying issues are identified. For example, behavior may reflect an untreated ear infection, a speech delay, a developmental delay, a recent placement change, or a foster care transition. Informants stressed the importance of understanding child development. Young children are still learning to regulate

emotions and use language and at this age, socialization serves as the primary curriculum and emotional regulation as a foundational skill. Misunderstanding what is developmentally appropriate can lead to exclusion. One informant emphasized that *“Kids are not inherently bad, nor do they inherently want to misbehave”* and another *“It’s really [about] helping parents, helping educators and childcare providers to take the emotion out of what’s happening with the child, to understand the science behind the expressed behavior.”*

A repeated message was that **supporting all adults in the lives of early learners leads to better outcomes for children**. Coaching, consultation, and evidence-based classroom practices were often described as essential. It was also emphasized that parents and guardians are often not fully aware of educational rights and protections and how to exercise them.

Theme 4: Gaps in Early Childhood Mental Health Infrastructure

Interviewees consistently highlighted limited access to professionals trained in infant and early childhood mental health. Concerns included:

- School-based mental health services focused mainly on adolescents
- Few providers trained specifically to treat and support children under five and their families
- Limited behavioral health and special education workforce capacity statewide
- Lack of clear standards in some systems for providers serving young children
- Gaps in transitional service continuum to support closed-loop referrals and care coordination across educational, clinical, and therapeutic settings
- Limited infrastructure to coordinate care across clinical, therapeutic, and educational services
- Disconnect between HIPAA and FERPA perpetuates siloed care delivery

Informants discussed the need for developmentally appropriate approaches and supportive services for both families and early care providers and educators with one informant noting *“a dysregulated adult can’t help regulate a dysregulated child, and when you don’t have the support services you need, you don’t have the knowledge about how to approach in a trauma-informed way.”* Supporting adults in classrooms and families was described as a different from traditional one-on-one therapy modeled used with older students. One informant expressed the importance of strengths-based approaches for children, specifically *“focusing on what makes them special and unique, and what their superpowers are with [redacted], and how their brain works differently, but that it doesn’t make them bad, because they’re told a lot that they’re bad.”*

Theme 5: Exclusion Has Long-Term and System Level Consequences

Informants framed exclusionary discipline as a public health issue with broad impacts. Impacts described as:

- Children in foster care often experience interrupted development due to the interactive effects of placement instability and exclusionary discipline
- Loss of stabilizing function of school creates a cumulative instability effect
- Loss of stability and sense of safety
- Increased family stress
- Economic hardship if parents miss work
- Risk of long-term educational disengagement

Informants also describe how placement changes can disrupt attachment, social development, and child's sense of belonging as well as academic performance. One informant described early childhood as *"the foundation for all other things."* Self-regulation and self-emotional skills developed in early childhood were described as essential for literacy, graduation, and workforce readiness. Some informants referenced the connection between early exclusion and long-term risks such as dropout and the "preschool-to-prison pipeline" with one informant emphasizing the importance of understanding *"The long-term effects of in-school discipline or out-of-school discipline on students, their perceptions of themselves, and how that affects them as adults, and increases the likelihood of incarceration and recidivism as an adult."* This suggests that efforts to reduce exclusionary discipline may strengthen not only outcomes for children, but also economic stability and well-being of the families impacted.

Theme 6: Promising Efforts Exist but Are Not Scaled

Interviewees identified several initiatives that show promise:

- Cross-sector definition alignment efforts
- Professional development modules for specialized instruction
- Coaching and consulting modules
- Pyramid PIECES Model (Prevention, promotion, intervention framework)
- Infant Mental Health Consultation
- Inclusion Collaboratives
- Maximizing Preschool Development Block Grant funding
- Early care providers and early education wellness initiatives
- Increasing access to supportive services that are accessible and culturally relevant
- Prioritizing strength-based approaches
- Closed loop communication across educational, clinical, therapeutic, and community-based settings
- Peer support models for parents, caregivers, and families
- Programming that promotes positive childhood experiences and family supports
- Trauma-responsive training for providers, educators, parents/guardians, and first responders
- Culturally responsive training for providers and educators

However, many described existing efforts as limited in scale. Programs often cannot meet demand due to funding or staffing constraints. Informants described several barriers to scaling these efforts:

- Low compensation and high turnover among early educators, limiting continuity and implementation capacity
- Lack of incentive structures to retain good providers and educators

Informants also noted that promising models are often voluntary or dependent on short-term grants, limiting sustainability and statewide reach.

Cross-Cutting Observations

Across interviews, several patterns emerged:

- Informants believe exclusionary discipline may be underreported
- Behavior is often immediate issue, but the system capacity shapes adult response
- Children with disabilities were identified as disproportionately impacted
- Prioritize families, individuals with lived experience, providers, educators, disability rights advocates, and community-based partners in strategy development
- Workforce instability and stress as main drivers
- Supporting adult competence and well-being is central in prevention
- Early childhood development is foundational to long term educational and health outcome

One informant summarized the urgency by stating “In early childhood, this isn't one more thing, this is the thing.” And another, “It's not going to be a one-size-fits-all, because everybody is different, and what works for one kid isn't going to work for another kid. That's sort of how it... how it works, right? That's special education.”