



Background and Context for Foundations for Success Taskforce: Reducing Exclusionary Discipline for Early Learners through Policy Change

A Call to Action:

- In 2024, the Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children (JCLCC) reviewed data from the South Carolina Department of Education showing a marked increase in the number of public preschool students suspended between 2021 and 2024 (*an increase of 747 students*) and an overall increase from 2017 to 2024 (*an increase of 398 students*).^{1,2}
- Special education students in South Carolina are suspended at a rate nearly twice the national average.³
- There are reports of schools in South Carolina suspending students “off-the-book,” leaving those students ineligible for protections and resources provided to disabled students after 10 total days out of the classroom.^{4,5}
- Suspensions and expulsions are associated with lower rates of on-time graduations, poor educational outcomes, increased absenteeism, heightened risk of absorption into the school-to-prison pipeline, and adverse developmental, mental, and physical health outcomes.^{6,7,8,9,10,11,12}
- Exclusionary discipline like suspensions and expulsions, creates strain across the education system, often leading to burnout among educators and support staff.^{13,14}
- Education instability compounds stressors and financial burden for South Carolina families when a child is removed from the classroom environment and they are left without a critical and often primary source of childcare.^{15,16,17}

Overview

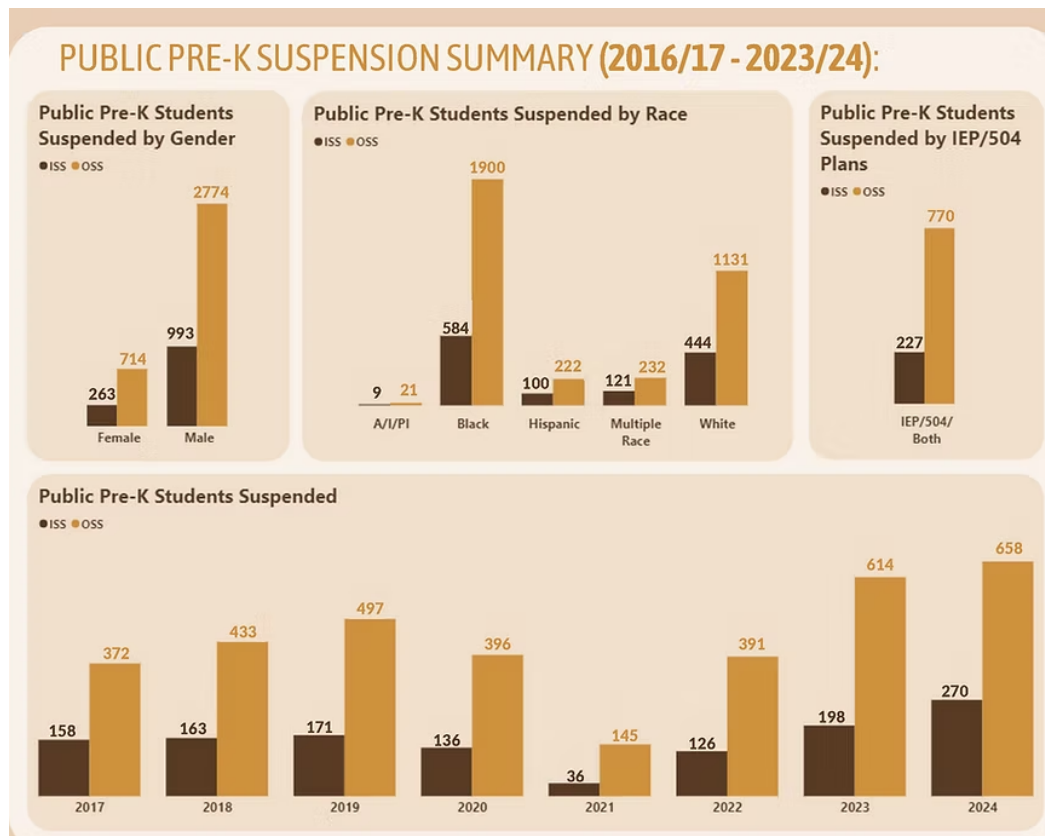
Underscoring the importance of this emerging public health concern, the American Academy of Pediatrics updated its policy statement for the first time since 2013 in 2024 emphasizing that “suspending or expelling a student is one of the most severe punishments a school can impose on a student – and it can have lifelong, devastating consequences.”¹⁸

Reported in 2024, “South Carolina leads the nation in the number of preschool children, ages 2½ to 5 years old, who are suspended from school one or more



times.”¹⁹ This extends to children with disabilities, who are more likely than their peers to be suspended or expelled.²⁰ A recent article in the Post and Courier noted that, “no state removes students with disabilities from school for 10 days or fewer at a higher rate than South Carolina [at 15%].”²¹ This rate for the 2022-2023 school year was “nearly twice the national average.”²² Experts noted that those numbers are likely “a substantial undercount due to widespread ‘off the book’ suspensions in South Carolina.”²³ According to legal proceedings, sometimes suspensions are not reported “to avoid the legal protections that kick in for students with disabilities once they’ve been kept out of the classroom for more than 10 cumulative days.”²⁴

In 2024, the Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children (JLCC) reviewed data from the South Carolina Department of Education showing a marked increase in public preschool students (ages 3-5) suspended between 2021 and 2024 (an increase of 747 students) and an overall increase from 2017 to 2024 (an increase of 398 students).^{25,26}



It is well documented that these practices are associated with various adverse developmental, educational, and health outcomes across the lifespan.²⁷ Removal from the classroom puts early learners at an increased risk of social isolation and



severely hinders social-emotional development.²⁸ According to the Georgia Family Connection Partnership, “children who experience early expulsion and suspension are 10 times more likely to experience negative educational and social outcomes like dropping out, academic failure, grade retention, and negative school attitudes.”²⁹

The US Department of Health and Human Services and the US Department of Education released a policy statement in July 2020 noting:

The beginning years of any child’s life are critical for building the early foundation of learning, health and wellness needed for success in school and later in life. . . A child’s early years set the trajectory for the relationships and successes they will experience for the rest of their lives, making it crucial that children’s earliest experiences truly foster – and never harm – their development. As such, expulsion and suspension practices in early childhood settings, two stressful and negative experiences young children and their families may encounter in early childhood programs, should be prevented, severely limited, and eventually eliminated.³⁰

Nationally, exclusionary discipline rates are higher among children who experience heightened economic disadvantage and exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).³¹ It has also been reported that punishing individual children for behavioral disruption in school puts them at an increased risk for juvenile justice involvement creating what is known as the “school to prison pipeline.”^{32,33} The long-term impact of these practices have been demonstrated to disproportionately impact Black male students and students of low socioeconomic status.^{34,35} It is critical that protective factors be identified and implemented to not only mitigate these disparities but ensure every early learner in South Carolina is positioned to succeed.

The effects of early age suspensions and expulsions are not limited to the children impacted. These practices come with economic consequences for the state as well as for individual families.³⁶ Exclusionary discipline not only takes a child out of a classroom but often takes a parent out of work, compounding emotional and financial stressors leaving South Carolina families without crucial support systems and hindering their ability to engage in the workforce.

Legislative Support for Change in South Carolina

During the 2023-2024 Session of the South Carolina General Assembly, S.B. 1108 was introduced and included several provisions formalizing definitions of terms related to suspensions and expulsions of preschool students; early childhood



workforce pathways through education and training opportunities for school administrators, teachers, and staff; strategies to maintain enrollment; and recommendations for data reporting and accountability.³⁷ This legislation was reintroduced during the 2025-2026 session as H.B. 4068.³⁸

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