

Modernizing Discipline for Preschoolers Will Have Lifetime Benefits for Maryland Children

Position Statement Supporting Senate Bill 651

Given before the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

When children have access to a high-quality pre-kindergarten education, they begin elementary school more ready to learn, generating measurable benefits decades into the future. This is why ongoing efforts to expand access to pre-K in Maryland are so important. Few educational interventions have been shown to bring greater returns both to children and to the community. Yet currently, too many Maryland children are shut out of pre-K education due to ineffective disciplinary measures like suspension and expulsion. Eliminating these outdated measures will be good for Maryland children and strengthen our state's education system—which, in the long run, means strengthening our economy. For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports Senate Bill 651.

A substantial body of research has found that high-quality early childhood education can yield large benefits when children enter school, setting them up for greater success in school and, eventually, the workforce.ⁱ Studies have found that students entering kindergarten from a high-quality pre-K program score higher on reading and math tests than children who did not attend preschool. These gains in achievement are substantial in all income groups, and greatest among children who grow up in families struggling to make ends meet. The benefits of pre-K remain with children as they grow up, translating into better achievement in middle school, a greater chance of graduating high school, and higher earnings in adulthood. Because students who attend pre-K need fewer targeted educational services during school and go on to pay more in income taxes, investments in pre-K can generate significant cost savings for the state over time. To ensure that Maryland children and our economy see the greatest possible benefit from pre-K investments, it is important to make sure that this resource is available to as many children as possible.

The use of suspension and expulsion undermines the goal of offering high-quality pre-K to as many students as possible. Nationwide, students in pre-K programs are more than three times as likely to be expelled as K–12 students, with the pre-K expulsion rate exceeding the rate in elementary and secondary education in all but three states.ⁱⁱ Students in privately run programs face an especially high risk of expulsion. It is particularly concerning that nationwide statistics compiled by the federal government find black students in pre-K programs are more than twice as likely to be suspended as other students, and are at an especially high risk of being suspended more than once.ⁱⁱⁱ

Being suspended or expelled harms young children in a variety of ways. These disciplinary measures remove children from the enriching preschool environment, excluding them from the many benefits this environment has

been shown to bring. In addition, suspension and expulsion are emotionally harmful to young children who are not developmentally equipped to understand why they are being punished.^{iv} These psychological harms are likely to be most significant in children whose families struggle to afford the basics, as research shows that these children already face dangerous levels of stress.^v Just as the benefits of high-quality pre-K extend decades into the future, the harms of suspension and expulsion follow children through life as well. Students who are suspended or expelled once are more likely to face these punishments again in the future, more likely to be held back in school, less likely to graduate, and more likely to be incarcerated as adults.^{vi} Each one of these effects is likely to translate into worse job prospects and lower incomes.

In light of the numerous ways suspension and expulsion during prekindergarten make children worse off, we should act swiftly to end these ineffective practices. Fortunately, there are superior approaches that can help children rather than harm them. Senate Bill 651 calls for several such approaches, including positive behavioral interventions and referral to community-based services. Replacing punitive disciplinary practices with a supportive approach is likely to be beneficial. This is reflected in the much-lower prevalence of suspension and expulsion in pre-K programs where students have access to psychologists and social workers—when these professionals are present, programs have less need to resort to counterproductive practices.^{vii} The benefits of a supportive approach are likely to be greatest for students whose behavioral challenges are the result of an unrecognized disability.^{viii} Replacing counterproductive punitive practices with an approach to discipline focused on supporting children will enable pre-K programs to better fulfill their purpose of ensuring all students are prepared to succeed in school. Senate Bill 651 would do just that.

At a time when Maryland is rightly working to expand access to high-quality preschool, it makes little sense to simultaneously shut out many of the students who need these services most. Senate Bill 651 would end this ineffective approach and bring pre-K discipline into the 21st century.

For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully asks that the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee make a favorable report on Senate Bill 651.

ⁱ Chrisanne Gayl, “The Research on Pre-K,” *Center for Public Education*, 2008, <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Pre-kindergarten/Pre-Kindergarten>.

ⁱⁱ Walter Gilliam, “Prekindergarteners Left Behind: Expulsion Rates in State Prekindergarten Programs,” *Foundation for Child Development*, 2005, http://ziglercenter.yale.edu/publications/National%20Prek%20Study_expulsion%20brief_34775_284_5379.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Data Snapshot: Early Childhood Education,” *U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights*, 2014, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-early-learning-snapshot.pdf>.

^{iv} Denisha Jones and Diane Levin, “Here’s Why Preschool Suspensions Are Harmful,” *Education Week*, 2016, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/02/24/heres-why-preschool-suspensions-are-harmful.html>.

^v Gary Evans, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and Pamela Kato Klebanov, “Stressing Out the Poor: Chronic Physiological Stress and the Income-Achievement Gap,” *Pathways*, 2011, http://inequality.stanford.edu/media/pdf/pathways/winter_2011/PathwaysWinter11_Evans.pdf.

^{vi} “Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings,” *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*, 2016, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ece/expulsion_ps_numbered.pdf. While the majority of these findings are based on research involving K–12 students, the report notes that, because students who are suspended or expelled once are more likely to face these punishments again, pre-K suspension and expulsion likely produce these harms as well.

^{vii} Gilliam, 2005, 6.

^{viii} “Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension,” 3.