

# Reducing Exclusionary Discipline in Early Care and Education Programs: An Examination of the Arkansas Model

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## STUDY PURPOSE

Expulsion and suspension (or exclusionary discipline) in early care and education (ECE) are now widely recognized as harmful to children, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups including children of color and children with disabilities. Numerous states have developed expulsion and suspension prevention policies through legislation or administrative rules, and a small number of states have policies that provide resources to support teachers in addressing challenging behavior by fostering children’s social and emotional development.<sup>1</sup> Yet there is limited research on the implementation of state policies designed to reduce exclusionary discipline and on ECE providers’ use of program supports that could help reduce these practices.<sup>2</sup>

In this report, we investigate Arkansas ECE program leaders’ and teachers’ understanding of the state’s expulsion prevention policy, their use of suspension and expulsion, and their participation in professional development (PD) and other supports to meet the needs of children with challenging behavior. Additionally, we explore how teachers’ attributions of the reasons for challenging behavior predict their use of the available PD and supports. We offer recommendations at the end of this report.

## Key Findings

- Publicly funded programs in Arkansas engaged in exclusionary discipline at lower rates than non-publicly funded programs, despite reporting a higher percentage of children with challenging behavior.
- Many Arkansas early care and education (ECE) program leaders were aware of the state’s expulsion prevention policy, but fewer demonstrated a strong understanding of the requirements.
- More than three quarters of Arkansas ECE teachers reported receiving some form of professional development or training on topics such as encouraging positive teacher–child interactions, promoting children’s positive behavior, and helping children develop skills like managing their emotions.
- The use of exclusionary discipline practices was related to teachers’ views of families as a reason for children’s challenging behavior.

## STUDY METHODS

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This study was part of a U.S. Administration for Children and Families Child Care Policy Research Partnership grant focused on reducing exclusionary discipline in Arkansas ECE programs. In partnership with the Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS)/Arkansas Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education (DCCECE),<sup>a</sup> SRI International and the National Center for Children in Poverty at Bank Street Graduate School of Education conducted the study. The study team emailed surveys to a representative sample of 400 licensed center- and home-based Arkansas ECE programs in spring 2022. For center-based programs, the team invited program directors to complete a survey and provide contact information for the lead teachers at their programs. If a program director provided contact information, the team invited all lead teachers at the center to complete a survey. Family child care home (FCCH) providers completed one survey on behalf of their programs.

The study team received survey responses from 178 center-based Arkansas ECE program directors, 225 center-based lead teachers, and 58 FCCH providers in spring 2022. The response rates were 59% for center-based directors, 52% for center-based teachers, and 58% for FCCH providers.



Surveys included questions about awareness and understanding of Arkansas' expulsion prevention policy, participation in PD and other supports, children's challenging behavior, attributions of children's challenging behavior, and responses to challenging behavior (including using exclusionary discipline and seeking support from Arkansas' BehaviorHelp expulsion prevention support system).

For program leaders, analyses included responses from center-based directors and FCCH providers. For teachers, analyses included responses from center-based lead teachers, directors who also serve as teachers, and FCCH providers.

The study team used descriptive statistics and chi-square analyses to compare awareness and knowledge of the Arkansas expulsion prevention policy, use of exclusionary discipline, and uptake of supports between publicly and non-publicly funded programs. For teachers who reported using exclusionary discipline, the team conducted logistic regression analyses to predict the likelihood of engaging in the policy-compliant action of seeking support from BehaviorHelp. Predictor variables included whether teachers worked in a publicly funded program, program leaders' knowledge of the policy, and teachers' attribution scores for family-related and teacher-related reasons for children's challenging behavior. Analyses controlled for teacher education and years of experience.

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<sup>a</sup> In 2023, DCCECE became the Office of Early Childhood within the Arkansas Department of Education.

## ARKANSAS' APPROACH TO PREVENT EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE

The Arkansas DHS/DCCECE has adopted a multipronged approach to increase the capacity of ECE teachers to promote young children's development and reduce exclusionary discipline related to children's challenging behavior in ECE programs. The Arkansas approach combines:

- a policy that seeks to limit expulsion by requiring programs to ask for support from the state's BehaviorHelp expulsion prevention support system when a child is at risk for removal due to challenging behavior; and
- the quick provision of tailored assistance, which may include infant early childhood mental health (IECMH) consultation, technical assistance, and PD for providers when a child is at risk for expulsion.

### Arkansas Expulsion Prevention Policy

According to a memo to ECE providers about the policy, "DCCECE does not allow for the suspension or expulsion of a child receiving [Child Care and Development Fund] CCDF funding without prior authorization from the DCCECE Director or Director's Representative. However, DCCECE can facilitate a transition on a case-by-case basis as needed. Failure to follow the new procedure may result in termination of your agency CCDF Participant Agreement."<sup>3</sup>

### BehaviorHelp

As an alternative to expulsion, DCCECE instructs programs to submit a referral to BehaviorHelp, a centralized resource staffed by specialists who can determine the type of assistance a program needs. The BehaviorHelp support system allows DHS/DCCECE to assign a master's degree-level IECMH consultant or technical assistance specialist to the program who can support teachers in using effective practices to address children's challenging behavior and promote their social and emotional development. Although the policy specifies that

programs must contact DHS/DCCECE before expulsion, the state encourages programs to submit a referral to BehaviorHelp before a response to challenging behavior reaches the point of expulsion. Programs also use BehaviorHelp support in response to other forms of exclusionary discipline such as part- or full-day suspension.

### Professional Development and Other Supports

DHS/DCCECE also provides a range of PD and other supports focused on teaching practices and positive behavior that are available to all ECE providers in the state, and typically offered at no cost. These include opportunities such as group training and coaching to help programs use practices from research-informed models like Conscious Discipline and the Pyramid Model.<sup>4</sup>





## POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AMONG PUBLICLY AND NON-PUBLICLY FUNDED ECE PROGRAMS IN ARKANSAS

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Although the DHS/DCCECE guidance regarding suspension and expulsion is communicated to all programs and the state PD supports are available to both publicly and non-publicly funded programs, only publicly funded programs are explicitly required to comply with the policy. Therefore, the study team focused on comparing publicly funded programs with non-publicly funded programs. Head Start programs have their own requirements limiting expulsion and so are grouped with the publicly funded programs though they are not under the state policy.

A program was classified as being *publicly funded* if it is an Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) state-funded preschool program, a Head Start program, a school district-funded program, or a privately owned center-based program or FCCH provider that serves children who receive CCDF

subsidies. Most program leaders (72%) and teachers (77%) in the study sample worked in publicly funded programs.

To examine the implementation of Arkansas' unique combination of policy and program supports among publicly and non-publicly funded programs, the study team addressed the following research questions:

1. Are educators aware of the policy and do they understand the policy?
2. What types of exclusionary practices are occurring in Arkansas ECE settings, and who is engaging in these practices?
3. Are educators participating in PD and other supports that could reduce the use of suspension and expulsion?
4. What do we know about the teachers who seek assistance from BehaviorHelp?

## FINDINGS

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### Policy awareness does not equate to policy understanding

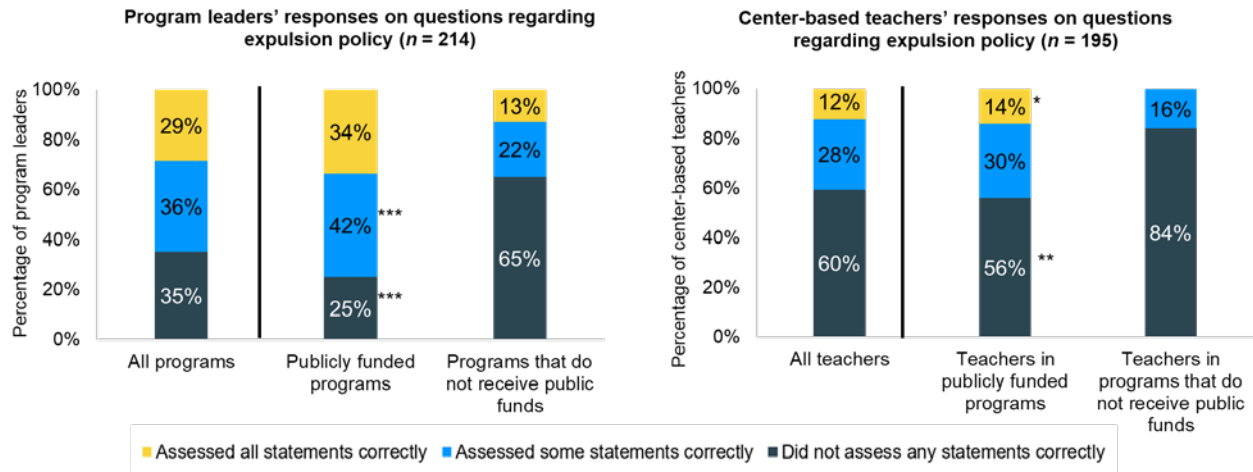
The majority (63%) of ECE program leaders and more than two fifths (42%) of center-based teachers reported learning about the Arkansas expulsion prevention policy. However, far fewer demonstrated a full understanding of the policy. The survey asked program leaders and teachers how they would respond if a colleague at another ECE program in Arkansas sought their guidance on what to do if a child may need to be removed permanently from a program because of challenging behavior. Survey respondents assessed the accuracy of four statements about Arkansas' policy, two of which were correct and two incorrect. Less than a third (29%) of program leaders and less than a fifth (12%) of

center-based teachers correctly assessed all statements (Exhibit 1).

Program leaders and teachers differed in how they learned about the policy. Program leaders most commonly reported learning about the policy from the voucher or grant participant agreement (55%), online or in-person training on the expulsion policy (53%), or licensing agency (46%). In contrast, most center-based teachers reported learning about the policy from their program directors (40%).

These findings suggest that state agency leaders may want to invest in ongoing efforts to educate program leaders and teachers about exclusionary discipline policies and include assessments of their understanding (e.g., brief

## Exhibit 1: Less than a third of programs leaders and less than a fifth of center-based lead teachers demonstrate understanding of the policy



Note. Contrasts are between teachers in publicly funded and non-publicly funded programs using chi-square tests.  
 \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

knowledge-check questions at the end of an online training). The findings indicate that relying primarily on program directors to educate their teachers about the policy is likely insufficient for ensuring all staff understand the policy. Thus, targeting teachers directly when disseminating information about the policy is necessary. Teachers who understand the policy and supports may be more likely to request the supports they need to address challenging behavior in productive ways.

### Publicly funded programs were more knowledgeable than non-publicly funded programs about the policy

As expected, leaders and teachers at ECE programs that received public funds and were therefore subject to the Arkansas policy demonstrated greater awareness and understanding of the policy, compared with leaders and teachers at non-publicly funded programs.

A higher percentage of program leaders from publicly funded programs, compared with leaders of non-publicly funded programs, reported being aware of the policy (72% vs. 33%). However, there were no significant

differences between center-based teachers' awareness of the policy across publicly and non-publicly funded programs (41% vs. 30%). Program leaders and center-based teachers from publicly funded programs were more knowledgeable of the policy than their counterparts from non-publicly funded programs, as indicated by their ability to assess the accuracy of all policy statements (34% vs. 13% for program leaders, 14% vs. 0% for center-based teachers).

### Exclusionary discipline is less common among teachers in publicly funded programs

Teachers reported on whether they engaged in a variety of exclusionary practices during the 2021–22 school year. These practices included expulsion (asking a child to permanently leave a program) and different forms of suspension (asking parents to pick up their child early one or more days, asking the child to attend a shortened day, or asking parents to keep their child home one full day or more) because of challenging behavior.

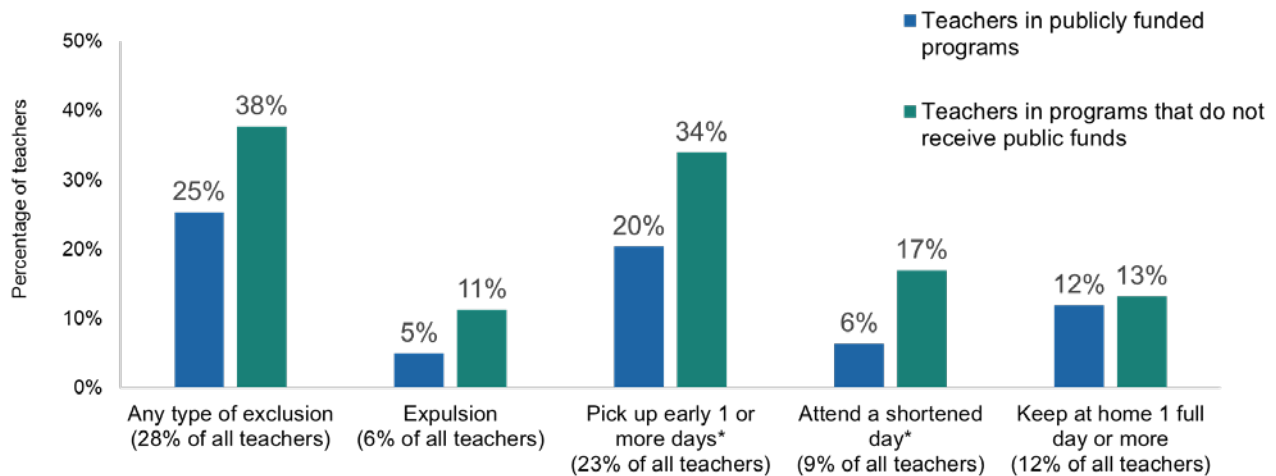
Most teachers (89%) reported serving children with challenging behavior. More than a quarter

(28%) of teachers reported engaging in some form of exclusionary discipline, and less than a tenth (6%) reported engaging in expulsion during the school year. A significantly higher percentage of teachers from non-publicly funded programs reported asking parents to pick up their child early and asking parents to have their child attend a shortened day, compared with teachers from publicly funded programs (Exhibit 2). A higher percentage of teachers in non-publicly funded as compared with publicly funded programs also reported engaging in expulsion (11% vs. 5%), but this difference was not statistically significant.

Notably, teachers in publicly funded programs reported using exclusionary discipline at lower rates despite being statistically more likely than teachers in non-publicly funded programs to

report serving children with challenging behavior, such as children whose behavior they perceived as threatening to their own or other children’s safety and well-being, including hurting themselves or others or destroying property, which is often cited as a reason for expulsion.<sup>5</sup> About a fifth (21%) of teachers in publicly funded programs, compared with a small fraction (4%) of teachers in non-publicly funded programs, reported behavior that threatens a child’s or other children’s safety as “very common.” Being the recipient of public funds may contribute to a sense of accountability to the DHS/DCCECE policy that programs must abide by to maintain their funding. This finding suggests that the Arkansas expulsion prevention policy may influence the behavior of educators in publicly funded programs.

**Exhibit 2: Exclusionary discipline is substantially less common among teachers in programs that receive public funds (n = 254)**



Note. Results includes center directors who are also lead teachers. Contrasts are between teachers in publicly funded and non-publicly funded programs using chi-square tests.  
 \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## The majority of teachers reported receiving professional development or other supports that could reduce the use of suspension and expulsion

Teachers reported whether they received any of the following types of PD or other supports related to encouraging positive teacher–child relationships and fostering children’s positive behavior between summer 2021 and spring 2022:

- coaching, technical assistance, and/or consultation not linked to training, such as assistance from BehaviorHelp;
- single-session training *without* coaching, such as online training on topics like tantrums or expulsion prevention; and
- multiple session training *with* coaching, such as on Conscious Discipline or Powerful Interactions.

Teachers who reported receiving coaching also provided the number of coaching sessions that included conversations about practices that may benefit children in their programs. More than three quarters (76%) of the teacher respondents reported receiving some form of PD or training on topics such as encouraging positive teacher–child interactions, promoting children’s positive behavior, and helping children develop skills like managing their emotions. There were no statistically significant differences in participation in PD among teachers in publicly funded and non-publicly funded programs.

Among teachers who reported receiving coaching, nearly three quarters (74%) reported receiving a low dosage of coaching (10 sessions or fewer). There were no statistically significant differences in the receipt of a low or high dosage of coaching among teachers in publicly funded and non-publicly funded programs. However, a higher percentage of teachers from non-publicly funded programs reported not having enough time to participate in PD outside of work hours, compared with teachers from publicly funded programs (44% vs. 29%).

## Just under a third of center-based directors and about a quarter of teachers requested assistance from Arkansas’ BehaviorHelp support system

Publicly funded ECE programs are required to request support from BehaviorHelp before engaging in suspension or expulsion. The majority of program directors (82%) reported they were involved in addressing difficulties with managing children’s challenging behavior. When these directors were asked about specific steps they had taken to address children’s challenging behaviors, just under a third (31%) of them indicated they requested assistance from BehaviorHelp in 2021–22. There were no statistically significant differences in the use of BehaviorHelp by directors in publicly and non-publicly funded programs. Among teachers who reported engaging in exclusionary discipline, about a quarter (24%) reported requesting BehaviorHelp support. There were no statistically significant differences in BehaviorHelp usage by teachers in publicly and non-publicly funded programs.

## The more strongly teachers attributed children’s challenging behavior to family circumstances, the less likely they were to request support from BehaviorHelp

The study team also examined teachers’ views about the reasons for children’s challenging behavior in their classrooms or home-based programs. On the survey, teachers rated how much they agreed that specific factors (related to a child’s family or to the teacher/classroom) contributed to children’s challenging behavior.

In general, teachers across both publicly and non-publicly funded programs more strongly attributed children’s challenging behavior to family-related factors rather than teacher or classroom factors. Many teachers indicated that parents’ lack of knowledge about effective

parenting (75%), families' financial or parent mental health concerns (58%), and children's experiences of trauma (53%) contributed to challenging behavior. Teachers also attributed children's challenging behavior to teacher-related factors such as stress interfering with positive teacher-child interactions (51%), a lack of knowledge about practices that promote children's positive behavior (37%), a lack of positive relationships with children (36%), and a perception that classroom routines and teaching practices are stressful for children (27%). These results tend to align with the literature on self-serving attributional bias, in which people are more likely to attribute success or positive events to internal factors while attributing failure or negative events to factors external to themselves.<sup>6</sup>

The more strongly a teacher attributed a child's challenging behavior to family-related factors, the lower the likelihood that the teacher reported requesting assistance from BehaviorHelp. It may be that teachers view children's challenging behavior attributed to family-related factors as unlikely to change because a child always returns to that home environment for a significant part of the day. Alternatively, the attribution of challenging behaviors to family-related factors may indicate an unhealthy relationship with families, and teachers may avoid seeking BehaviorHelp support because they perceive it will involve collaboration with a child's family.

## CONCLUSION

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ECE providers in publicly funded programs who are subject to the Arkansas expulsion prevention policy demonstrated greater awareness and understanding of the policy and reported engaging in some types of exclusionary discipline less frequently than ECE providers in non-publicly funded programs. However, about a third of program leaders and less than a fifth of center-based teachers in publicly funded programs accurately understood the policy. Over three quarters of all ECE providers engaged in PD and other supports that might reduce the use of suspension and expulsion, yet most teachers reported low dosages of coaching and less than a quarter of teachers who engaged in exclusionary discipline requested assistance from the state's BehaviorHelp expulsion prevention support system. The more strongly a teacher attributed children's challenging behaviors to family-related factors such as lack of knowledge about effective parenting, the lower the likelihood the teacher would request assistance from BehaviorHelp.

Publicly funded programs in Arkansas engaged in exclusionary discipline at lower rates than non-publicly funded programs, despite reporting a higher percentage of children with challenging behavior. This finding may be encouraging to state agency leaders seeking to lower rates of exclusionary discipline. For states involved in implementing ECE expulsion prevention policies, the study findings also demonstrate the need to (a) ensure full awareness and understanding of an expulsion prevention policy; (b) deliver sufficiently intensive PD supports, such as through a series of coaching sessions; and (c) help teachers understand the potential value of PD and IECMH consultation supports even when they attribute the reasons for children's challenging behavior to family-related factors.



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