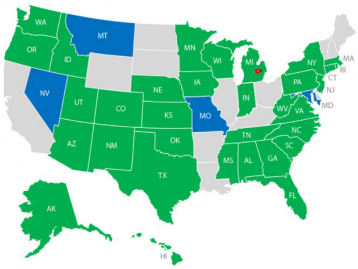
ALLIANCE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF INFANT MENTAL HEALTH

ADDRESSING SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SETTINGS:

An Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health-Informed Approach

Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health



MassAIMH
MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION FOR INFANT MENTAL HEALTH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

There is a strong body of research that demonstrates the lifelong, devastating effects of early childhood education (ECE) suspension and expulsion on infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, as well as its inequitable impact on Black, Indigenous, and other people/children of color (BIPOC). Throughout the past five years, many advocates have shared research, highlighted best practices, and issued policy statements and recommendations in efforts to guide ECE leaders and policymakers in stopping this epidemic of ECE suspensions and expulsions. We encourage policymakers to review these resources in depth (**www.allianceaimh.org/preschool-expulsion**[1]). Further, we feel it is imperative to point out this universal conclusion: An ECE workforce trained in infant and early childhood mental health is essential to ending ECE suspensions and expulsions. Systems are advised to bring their state's association for infant mental health (AIMH) and representatives from the ECE workforce to the table to ensure infant and early childhood mental health-informed strategies and solutions.

CALL TO ACTION FOR POLICYMAKERS

The Alliance and its member AIMHs, in partnership with members of the IECMH-informed workforce, urge policymakers to create systems and policies that:

- **Support** early childhood education providers and early childhood educators in attending to the early relational health needs of all infants, toddlers, young children, and their families
- **Prevent** early childhood education suspension, expulsion, and exclusionary practices AND replace suspension, expulsion, and exclusionary practices with support and professional development strategies
- **Ensure** early childhood educators have access to funded IECMH-informed training, technical assistance, consultation, and reflective practice supports
- **Address** the developmental needs of all infants/young children, including those with disabilities and those who are Black, Indigenous, or infants/young children of color, ensuring that equity is infused into all systems supporting infants, toddlers, young children, and their families

OVERVIEW: Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) is defined[2] as the "foundation of all future development…the developing capacity from birth to age 5 years old to experience, regulate, and express emotions; to form close relationships; and to explore the environment and learn— all in the context of family, community, and culture[2]." Ultimately, infants and young children develop strong mental and relational health when parents and other caregivers, including early childhood educators, are responsive, protective, and stable.
This allows them to become confident, resilient, better able to manage their emotions, and have the capacity to connect with their caregivers in healthy ways. This IECMH approach supports early relational health, including the use of disciplinary techniques that promote a teaching environment rather than a punitive stance that may be an antecedent to suspension and expulsion.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: Impact on Families and ECE Workforce

Although the COVID pandemic continues, parents are returning to work outside the home, and more children are returning to early childhood education settings after a period that has been anything but normal for most families. Many children and their caregivers have experienced, and continue to experience, trauma related to COVID. We know that this trauma has disproportionately impacted BIPOC families, children, and early childhood educators, many of whom also disproportionately face challenges related to poverty and systemic racism. Early childhood educators may also have experienced trauma within their own lives, which can impact how they interact with and respond to children in their care.

Given this reality, it is more important than ever to ensure that early childhood educators are well equipped with training and professional development opportunities. Doing so will help them understand and address the trauma experienced by our youngest children and provide nurturing, responsive, and developmentally appropriate social-emotional supports that build strong brains and interpersonal skills like empathy. It is also essential that early childhood educators are provided with reflective practice support so that they can, in turn, best support the children in their care.

With this frame in mind, the Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health (Alliance) and its member Associations for Infant Mental Health (AIMHs) step forward to lend a hand to policymakers seeking to address suspensions and expulsions within ECE settings. The Alliance, AIMHs, and their network of IECMH experts are uniquely situated to guide policymakers through this challenging time.

ADDRESSING ECE SUSPENSIONS AND EXPULSIONS: The Role of IECMH-Informed Training and Support for Early Childhood Educators

In addition to the familial unit, early childhood educators are the earliest relationship builders with infants and young children. Supporting and equipping these professionals to apply IECMH principles involves changing the systems which support and oversee ECE providers and professionals. It is not the responsibility of the early childhood educator alone to make this shift in the caregiving environment. A well-prepared ECE system offers regular professional development that is strengths-based, attachment-focused and offers behavior management techniques that nurture children.

Exclusionary discipline influences a child's academic and social trajectory, impacting their capacity for healthy social development. It is imperative that the impact of ECE suspensions and expulsions is understood from the larger developmental perspective. From a community and cultural context, there is a connection between ECE suspensions and expulsions and multi-system involvement of youth, such as child welfare, special education, and juvenile justice. In addition to suffering academically, there is a positive relationship between ECE exclusionary discipline and later criminal justice involvement of youth and young adults. Other documented outcomes include increased rates of school grade repetition, school drop-outs, and poverty. Viewed from a community and national perspective, the negative outcomes for children place a significant (and preventable) cost and social burden on whole communities and our nation.

Additionally, the COVID pandemic has highlighted that early childhood educators are essential workers. There is an expectation that an IECMH workforce will provide nurturing, safe, and brave spaces for infants and young children in their care. The ECE workforce needs policymakers to create that same space for them-- a learning environment that is strengths-based and a continuing education process that promotes their professional identity commensurate with the responsibilities assigned to them by our culture and society. With strong support and respectful engagement, early childhood educators and the ECE system can take on the challenge of preventing and mitigating the impact of ECE suspensions and expulsions.

WHO IS AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR?

- PRESCHOOL TEACHERS
- CHILD CARE PROVIDERS AT CENTERS
- HOME-BASED CHILD CARE PROVIDERS
- EARLY HEAD START & HEAD START TEACHERS
- OTHER PROFESSIONALS PROVIDING CARE TO YOUNG CHILDREN

WHO IS THE IECMH WORKFORCE?

- BEHAVIORAL AND COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDERS
- EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS
- EARLY INTERVENTIONISTS
- HOME VISITORS
- HIGHER EDUCATION FACULTY & RESEARCHERS
- HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS (PCPS, PEDIATRICIANS, OB/GYNS, NURSES, ETC.)
- IECMH CONSULTANTS
- CHILD WELFARE WORKERS (CPS, FOSTER CARE, ETC.)
- PROGRAM AND POLICY LEADERS
- ANYONE WORKING WITH OR ON BEHALF OF INFANTS, YOUNG CHILDREN, AND FAMILIES

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS:
Building the IECMH Workforce in ECE

Recognizing the gravity of the issue and the long-term negative outcomes on children, families, and communities, policymakers in a number of states have proposed or enacted legislation or regulations to address ECE suspensions and expulsions. The Education Commission of the States provided a policy analysis[3] of restorative practices and legislative action related to exclusionary discipline. States have taken a varied approach in targeting this social issue. However, there are some common elements of successful strategies that should be considered as policymakers tackle this issue. These elements include adequate funding that reaches infants and young children and the ECE workforce at several touchpoints, reasonable timelines for implementation of programs at the local level, maintaining fidelity to specifically chosen models across the child-serving system, and providing support and training to the early childhood education workforce. While a variety of policy solutions are likely needed to eliminate ECE suspensions and expulsions (e.g., legislation preventing ECE suspensions and expulsions, increased compensation for ECE providers, etc.), we believe that a critical and necessary component to any such effort will come from the advancement of policies that promote an IECMH-trained and supported ECE workforce.

POLICYMAKERS CAN ENSURE THAT EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS HAVE THE TOOLS AND SUPPORT SYSTEM TO ADDRESS THIS CHALLENGE BY:

- Assuring that ECE licensing/quality standards include training that addresses:
  - Infant and early childhood mental health competencies
  - Implicit bias (ECE suspension and expulsion is often tied to a child's behavior that is misunderstood or that leaves the teacher/caregiver feeling powerless or incompetent. Such behavior can lead to teacher/caregiver responses that have a disproportionate impact on Black boys and children of color)
  - Attachment, trauma, grief, & loss in infants and young children
  - Assessing and supporting social & emotional development
  - Assessing and supporting language development
- Funding for and access to IECMH credentialing
- Funding for and access to IECMH professional development opportunities, training, and technical assistance
- Funding for and access to infant and early childhood mental health consultation[4], a service that provides reflective and educational support to early childhood educators and systems
- Funding for and access to reflective supervision/consultation (RSC)[5] so educators, administrators, and leaders in ECE can better understand and respond to the way trauma interferes with development
- Ensuring that early childhood educators receive a living wage
- Funding for, access to, and compensation that reflects a specialization in IECMH, e.g., a credential like the Endorsement for Culturally Sensitive, Relationship-Focused Practice Promoting Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health[6]

ACTION STEPS:
IECMH-Informed Supports and Training for the ECE Workforce

1. **Connect with the Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health and its affiliate state associations for infant mental health (AIMHs)**[7]. These organizations can serve as a gateway and central hub for IECMH expertise, training, resources, Endorsement, and other infant and early childhood mental health experts and practitioners across respective states and communities.

2. **Contract with and/or appropriate funding to state AIMHs to provide training and reflective supervision/consultation to state/local ECE leaders.** Many state AIMHs offer training and reflective supervision/consultation for a variety of different sectors, including ECE administrators, early childhood educators, policymakers, and others in leadership positions. Sustainable, systemic change to address ECE suspension and expulsion will require those in ECE leadership positions to take an IECMH-informed approach to ECE administration, policy, and higher education curriculum.

3. **Provide funding and other grant opportunities to state and local childcare resource and referral centers and/or individual ECE providers to access IECMH training, reflective supervision, Endorsement/credentialing, and IECMH consultation.** Early childhood educators and other direct child-serving ECE providers are at the front lines of responding to challenging behavior and differing developmental needs in the classroom. Ensuring that these providers are equipped to address these challenges through a culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and infant mental health-informed lens will have an immediate and lasting impact on reducing ECE suspension and expulsion, particularly for children of color.

4. **Explore opportunities to incentivize Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Endorsement for ECE providers**. Endorsement in infant mental health and/or early childhood mental health signifies that providers have extensive training in IECMH competencies and are better prepared to respond to challenges in the ECE classroom with an IECMH-informed approach. However, accessing the Endorsement process can be time-consuming and requires some financial investment. Since Endorsement is currently not required by law for ECE professionals in any state, there is often a question of whether the Endorsement is "worth it." We strongly believe that it is, and data supports that those who are endorsed feel better prepared to implement culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and IECMH-informed approaches in their work with children and families. Incentives such as increased pay, promotion and leadership/management opportunities, or state and community recognition may encourage more ECE professionals to seek endorsement and, in doing so, to seek opportunities to build their IECMH training, education, and experience.

5. **Require higher education curriculum and continuing education in ECE fields to include IECMH competencies.** Perhaps surprisingly, some ECE undergraduate and graduate programs include little to no IECMH-focused curriculum. Although curricula have improved in recent years as higher education leaders and policymakers have increasingly recognized the importance of social-emotional health in early childhood development, there is still a long way to go. Embedding IECMH principles and practices in early childhood teacher curriculum and ongoing professional development will ensure that those entering the workforce will already have at least a baseline understanding and tools to meet the social-emotional needs of all children in their care.

These recommendations are not exhaustive but are meant to serve as a starting point for state and local policymakers exploring options for eliminating ECE suspension and expulsion. We recognize that some states are further along in this journey and applaud those that have made supporting an IECMH-informed workforce a key part of their plan.

There is critically important work to do to end ECE suspensions and expulsions. The Alliance, its member AIMHs, and our network of IECMH professionals are available to support policymakers as thought partners in this work.

Together we can do these hard things.

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LINKS & RESOURCES:

[1] www.allianceaimh.org/preschool-expulsion
[2] Retrieved from ZERO TO THREE: https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2674-how-to-talk-about-infant-and-early-childhood-mental-health
[3] https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Status-of-School-Discipline-in-State-Policy.pdf
[4] https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5884ec2a03596e667b2ec631/t/5f7b4e8b9ff4ab2ece0b5329/1601916556058/Endorsement+is+Good+for+Babies_FINAL_20200929.pdf
[5] https://www.allianceaimh.org/
[6] https://www.allianceaimh.org/members-of-the-alliance

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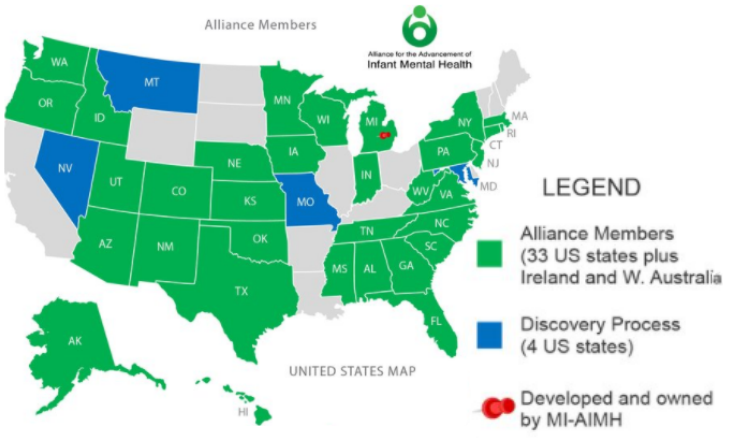
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