Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

Building Better Behavioral Supports in Early Childhood Education

Health Equity

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As an early childhood psychologist, I know the importance of high-quality early childhood education. I also know the severe detriment faced by our children when they don't receive high-quality early childhood education.

Currently in the United States, more than 5,000 preschool students are expelled each year. That's a rate more than three times higher than their K-12 peers. Additionally, nearly 7,500 preschool students were suspended at least once in the 2011-2012 academic year. Racial disparities exist in rates of expulsions and suspensions, with African American students making up 18% of preschool enrollment, and 42% of preschool suspensions. In Philadelphia, a 2004 survey conducted by Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) showed 48% of early childhood programs reported having suspended or expelled at least one child over the course of a year due primarily to behavioral concerns, such as poor emotional regulation and aggression.

Research has found that the likelihood of expulsion decreases significantly with access to classroom-based behavioral consultation. Childcare teachers, however, often do not have the resources necessary to support children with challenging behaviors.

The Consequences of Expulsion and Suspension

Early childhood education sets the foundation for a child's future success. High-quality preschool programs improve elementary school readiness and provide important cognitive, academic, social and emotional skills that are necessary for success in elementary school and beyond. Pre-kindergarten programs have been shown to have substantial benefits in reducing crime, raising earnings and promoting education.

Social-Emotional Competence

Young children's ability to manage their emotions and behaviors is an important prerequisite for school readiness and academic success. In fact, children's emotional, social and behavioral skills are often as important for school success, if not more so, than their cognitive and academic skills because social interactions, attention and self-control affect readiness for learning. Social and emotional competence is a critical component to positive child outcomes and therefore, it is imperative that early childhood educators be equipped with the knowledge and support to foster social and emotional development in all children.

A Philadelphia Experiment to Build Better Behavioral Supports

My current project focuses on the high incidence of behavior challenges and the impact of poor social-emotional skills on school readiness. In my role at PolicyLab and with colleagues from the early childhood department at Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC), we are developing a system of services that would enable childcare centers in Philadelphia to be fully inclusive. This pilot research project has three main goals:

1. To determine the incidence of children with behavioral challenges in childcare centers in Philadelphia in order to inform provider agencies in the city.
2. To develop a scalable and sustainable strategy model that integrates social-emotional and behavioral supports with early childhood education in select high-quality childcare settings.
3. To create a business model that leverages childcare and mental health funding streams to increase the school readiness for children in all categories of behavioral need.

This model program will take place in a fully inclusive high-quality childcare facility that serves children with typical behavioral needs, children with emerging behavioral disorders and children with significant behavioral disorders. The integrated model will maximize the effectiveness of previously siloed educational and mental health interventions by designing opportunities for early childhood education, Early Intervention and early childhood mental health professionals to work together with parents to identify children with behavioral disorders, support social and emotional maturation and reduce behavioral challenges.

The project will provide education and coaching for parents at the childcare center on ways to build social-emotional skills at home. Much learning will take place from their child's participation in the classroom so equipping families with the same key information regarding social-emotional skills and support is crucial.

Clinton Global Initiative America: Commitment to Action

This month, I will be attending the 2016 Clinton Global Initiative (CGI) America meeting, in which I will be expanding upon this planning project for my Commitment to Action. My commitment is to use lessons learned from our pilot center to scale up the model to four additional childcare centers over the next three years. This commitment to action, which will build a network of trainers and expertise in the region, includes an evaluation component to assess effectiveness and identify key elements that support success. The evaluation will inform next steps for the city of Philadelphia as it pursues universal pre-kindergarten.

The CGI meeting will be an opportunity to network with stakeholders from across America who share my priorities for high quality inclusive early childhood education for all.

About Clinton Global Initiative America : Clinton Global Initiative (CGI) America brings together leaders from the business, philanthropic, nonprofit, and government sectors to develop solutions that encourage economic growth, support long-term competitiveness, and increase social mobility in the United States. CGI America's annual convening is designed to be a working meeting that promotes collaboration. Each CGI America participant makes a Commitment to Action: a new, specific, and measurable plan that supports increased economic growth and opportunity. To date, CGI America participants have made more than 500 commitments, which have improved the lives of nearly 2.4 million people.