



From Suspension to Support in the Early Grades: The School-Based Diversion Initiative Elementary Model



Connecticut has been at the forefront of the national movement to reduce suspensions and expulsions of young children in recent years. School suspensions and expulsions can be harmful for children, particularly in the earliest grades. When a young child's challenging behavior is met with exclusionary discipline rather than behavioral health support they are at greater risk for negative outcomes in the areas of social-emotional development, behavior, health, and education.

In 2015, Connecticut was the first state to pass legislation (PA 15-96) to ban suspension or expulsion of children in preschool through 2nd grade, except in cases where the child's conduct is "of violent or sexual nature" that endangers the child or others. The legislation was passed in response to a Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) report showing a disturbing 10.6% rise in suspensions of children under age seven from the 2012-2013 to 2013-2014 school year.

Despite this legislative ban, many schools continue to suspend young children, particularly young

boys of color. [CSDE data](#) from the 2015-16 school year indicates 1,674 children were suspended in preschool through Grade 2. Seventy-two percent of these children were Black or Hispanic (1,198) and 58.5% were Black or Hispanic boys (979). The majority of the reported incidents were for disrespect, disruption and insubordination.

Research demonstrates that many school behavioral problems occur among youth with trauma histories and diagnosable behavioral health conditions. To fully achieve the requirements of PA 15-96, schools need a comprehensive trauma-informed approach that effectively addresses challenging behaviors and meets students' underlying needs, without resorting to suspensions and expulsions. That approach should include training for school personnel, implementation of alternative in-school disciplinary practices, family engagement, screening for health and mental health concerns, and strengthening connections to community-based services and supports including trauma-informed mental health interventions.

The School-Based Diversion Initiative is Being Adapted to Address Suspensions and Expulsions in Elementary Schools

CHDI is working with its State partners (CSDE, the Judicial Branch's Court Support Services Division, the Department of Children and Families, and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services) to adapt Connecticut's [School-Based Diversion Initiative](#) (SBDI) model to reduce suspensions among children in elementary schools. SBDI was initially developed in 2009 as a comprehensive approach for reducing arrests, expulsions, and out-of-school suspensions and has been implemented in 37 schools across 13 districts. SBDI has successfully reduced school referrals to the juvenile courts by using a behavioral health response that addresses root causes of behavior. This approach has helped reduce juvenile court referrals by 45% among participating schools in the first year of implementation and increased referrals to the State's Mobile Crisis Intervention Services by 94%.

Given this success, SBDI-Elementary (SBDI-E) is being adapted from the original SBDI model, which was developed to target middle and high schools, to now address suspensions in elementary schools. The core model components for SBDI-E are described below.

Core Model Elements and Activities of SBDI-Elementary
<p>Professional Development and Evidence-Based Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train school staff in understanding early child development, recognizing child trauma, and incorporating social emotional learning and cultural competency. • Promote crisis de-escalation and effective classroom behavior management strategies among teachers and other school staff utilizing evidence based practices such as RULER, and providing other effective tools and resources. • Train schools to implement restorative practices as an alternative disciplinary approach that includes community-building circles, restorative conferencing and mediation.
<p>Discipline Policy Consultation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revise student code of conduct and other policies to specifically prohibit suspensions and expulsions among preschool to 2nd grade youth, in accordance with PA 15-96. • Implement a graduated response model of discipline that emphasizes early intervention, implementation of restorative practices, and includes behavior management strategies developed by the Early Childhood Consultation Partnership®.
<p>Community Coalition Building</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate with Mobile Crisis Intervention Services and School-Based Health Centers to provide on-site screening and clinical support for students with mental and behavioral health needs. • Establish partnerships with Youth Service Bureaus and other youth-serving organizations to access positive child development activities and divert from suspensions and expulsions. • Promote family engagement and peer support for parents of children with mental health and special education needs. • Work with Local Interagency Service Teams (LIST) and Racial and Ethnic Disparities (RED) Committees to build community partnerships and address disparities in school discipline practices as important precursors to juvenile justice system involvement. • Develop a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with local law enforcement to engage and support proactive and positive interactions with children.

SBDI-Elementary Can Help Reduce Suspensions of Young Children in Connecticut

Connecticut has shown great leadership in diverting school-based arrests, particularly for middle and high school aged students, using SBDI and many other successful reform efforts. When it comes to younger children, the State's ban on suspensions and expulsions of children under age seven is also a significant step forward; however, there is not currently a model that can help support elementary schools in addressing this issue. A replicable model that incorporates school policy changes, family-school-community partnerships, and implementation of evidence-based alternatives to suspension would help ensure that schools can successfully manage behavior issues that may otherwise result in suspensions and expulsions. CHDI will continue to explore partnerships with state and philanthropic sources to pilot test the SBDI-Elementary model in schools with high rates of out-of-school suspensions.

*For more information, contact Tianna Hill [thill@uchc.edu, (860) 679-6293], Yecenia Casiano [casiano@uchc.edu, (860) 679-2336], or Jeana Bracey [bracey@uchc.edu or (860) 679-1524]. Learn more about SBDI at www.chdi.org/sbdi, www.ctsbdi.org, or by downloading *The SBDI Toolkit: A Community Resource for Reducing School-Based Arrests*.*