



Date: April 6, 2022  
To: Members of the House Committee on Education  
From: Beth Truzansky, Deputy Director, Building Bright Futures  
Re: Exclusionary Discipline in Early Childhood Settings

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**Executive Summary**

- Preventing exclusionary discipline is an urgent priority for children under the age of nine and the early childhood educators supporting their early education and social emotional development.
- Equity of access to high quality and inclusive early childhood environments is important, as is outlined in Act 35 and S. 283, however early childhood stakeholders have raised several concerns about implementation of the law and have additional needs to best serve young children.
- Stakeholders have identified three primary concerns related to the use of exclusionary discipline in early childhood settings (1) Urgent, preventative support needed for children and early childhood educators, and (2) Lack of clear communication about current guidance, and (3) Opportunities for stronger alignment with early childhood best practices and consultation with early childhood stakeholders.
- Existing recommendations: Repeated recommendations from Vermont’s Early Childhood State Advisory Council, alongside the Early Childhood Mental Health Task Force, and most recently, the Task Force on Equitable and Inclusive School Environments, have called for significant investment in prevention strategies that support the social-emotional well-being of young children in early childhood settings and help early childhood educators prevent the use of exclusionary discipline practices.
- Building Bright Futures’ current work in this area: BBF is currently finalizing a data brief focused on exclusionary discipline for children under the age of nine expected to be released on April 14. This brief will shed further light on the current use of exclusionary discipline, identify limitations and challenges, and outline considerations for early childhood policy.
- BBF is the entity positioned to convene early childhood stakeholders to discuss critical challenges, support identification of strategies and best practices, and to make recommendations that will improve outcomes for children and families, efficiency, effectiveness, and integration within Vermont’s Early Childhood System.

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**BUILDING BRIGHT FUTURES’ ROLE IN VERMONT’S EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM**

BBF is Vermont’s early childhood public-private partnership charged under Title 33, Chapter 46 and the federal Head Start Act to serve as Vermont’s Early Childhood State Advisory Council, the mechanism used to advise the Governor and legislature on the status of children in the prenatal period through age eight and their families. State statute charges BBF with maintaining and monitoring the vision and strategic plan for Vermont’s Early Childhood System. BBF’s mission is to improve the well-being of children and families in Vermont by using evidence to inform policy and bringing voices together across sectors and within regions to discuss critical challenges and problem-solve.

The Building Bright Futures State Advisory Council (SAC) does not directly support or oppose any specific proposal or bill. Instead, our role is to convene and elevate the voices of families and early childhood stakeholders; monitor the system by identifying and provide high-quality up-to-date data to inform policy and decision-making; and to advise the Governor and Legislature by making recommendations that move the early childhood system toward the 4 goals identified in Vermont’s Early Childhood Action Plan (VECAP).



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## OVERVIEW OF EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE CHALLENGES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS & STAKEHOLDER CONCERNS

Concerns about exclusionary discipline have been magnified as Vermont has seen an increase in mental, emotional, behavioral health, and developmental conditions over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the passage of Act 35, and continuous monitoring by the Agency of Education's (AOE) including the Universal Prekindergarten Education Accountability and Continuous Improvement System (UPK ACIS).

While a Task Force was established by Act 35 to examine equitable and inclusive school environments, its focus was on the full preK through grade 12 system. Resulting recommendations dedicated specifically to the early childhood period were limited<sup>i</sup>.

**Stakeholders have identified three primary concerns related to the use of exclusionary discipline in early childhood settings (1) Urgent, preventative support needed for children and early childhood educators, and (2) Lack of clear communication about current guidance, and (3) Opportunities for stronger alignment with early childhood best practices and consultation with early childhood stakeholders.**

Additionally, early childhood stakeholders have raised concerns related to documentation, consequences for the use of exclusionary discipline, implementation barriers, and a lack of available quantitative data on the current status of exclusionary practices in early childhood settings. Early childhood educators should be consulted to determine any necessary changes or support associated with these additional challenges.

Urgent preventative support is needed for children and early childhood educators: Supporting a child's social-emotional development and preventative strategies are seen by early childhood professionals as foundational and urgent components of addressing challenging classroom behaviors that may result in exclusionary discipline. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this need to crisis levels. Further enumerated below, recommendations from the State Advisory Council (SAC), the Early Childhood Mental Health Task Force, and most recently, the Task Force on Equitable and Inclusive School Environments, have called for investment and statewide implementation of a number of proven strategies to prevent the use of exclusionary discipline practices in early childhood settings. While discussed for years, these supports and strategic investments are now seen as urgent and critical needs to the field in order to support (and retain) early educators and to address the continuation of the mental health crisis facing young children and families.

Lack of clear communication: **There is an immediate need for clear definitions, consistent guidance, and clarity on the best practices, supports, and resources from the Agency of Education.** Given the increase in disruptive challenging behaviors, temporary additional supports, variances, or guidance should be included with a time limit that could be extended if necessary

Consulting stakeholders and alignment with early childhood best practices: **Early childhood educators should be engaged and consulted to ensure that this guidance is consistent with best practices for what constitutes a high quality early childhood education environment.** Given the unique and varying developmental needs of young children, policymakers and partners writing and implementing guidelines related to exclusionary practices must take into account feedback from the early childhood field, including national best practices, and early childhood educators.



In addition to the three concerns outlined above, early childhood stakeholders also elevated a number of other concerns which are outlined in a data brief related to exclusionary discipline expected to be released on April 14.

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### **BBF's ROLE IN DATA AND CONVENING STAKEHOLDERS ON ISSUES OF EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE**

BBF is the entity positioned to convene early childhood stakeholders to discuss critical challenges, support identification of strategies and best practices, and to make recommendations that will improve outcomes for children and families, efficiency, effectiveness, and integration within Vermont's Early Childhood System. With respect to exclusionary discipline, BBF is already working toward these goals.

Early Childhood Data Brief: As previously mentioned, BBF is currently finalizing a data brief focused on exclusionary discipline for children under the age of nine expected to be released on April 14. This brief will shed further light on the current use of exclusionary discipline, identify limitations and challenges, and outline considerations for early childhood policy. This brief has been informed by data from the Agency of Education, stakeholders from across the BBF Network, and national best practices.

Early Learning and Development Committee: Suspension and expulsion has been elevated as an urgent priority across a range of BBF Network meetings, primarily within the Early Learning and Development Committee (ELD). ELD is devoted to strengthening the integration, accessibility and quality of early childhood services. The committee's work spans from quality and capacity of services from prenatal through age 8 with a focus on alignment and best practices for children and families from child care through early elementary education. The committee is composed of public and private partners including early care and learning program directors, school administrators, philanthropy partners, advocacy and state agency partners representing the different levels of policy and systems integration. Recent discussions have centered on suspension and expulsion and how to urgently support the needs of children under the age of five and early childhood educators.

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### **EXISTING RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO PREVENTING THE USE OF EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS**

Since 2018, there have been repeated recommendations to meet the needs of children and early childhood educators and prevent suspension and expulsion to support the social emotional development of children. Recommendations from Vermont's Early Childhood State Advisory Council,<sup>ii,iii</sup> alongside the Early Childhood Mental Health Task Force<sup>iv</sup>, and most recently, the Task Force on Equitable and Inclusive School Environments,<sup>v</sup> have called for significant investment in prevention and supportive approaches including:

- Early Multi-Tiered System of Supports (EMTSS) and practice-based coaching
- Special Accommodations Grants (SAG)
- Early Childhood and Family Mental Health (ECFMH) consultation
- Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework
- Universal developmental and social determinants of health screenings

While limited investments in each of these areas has led to progress, further financial and personnel resources are required, along with leadership to champion these preventative interventions to fully realize their benefits and implement or deliver services to fidelity.



We will be sharing the forthcoming data brief with your committee after it has been finalized. We welcome any questions you have on the testimony above or the brief once it is received.

Thank you for continuing to keep children and families at the center of our decision-making.

Sincerely,

**Beth Truzansky**

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<sup>i</sup> Task Force on Equitable and Inclusive School Environments. Final Report of the Task Force on Equitable and Inclusive School Environments. Retrieved from

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2022/WorkGroups/Senate%20Education/Legislative%20Report/Final%20Report%20of%20the%20Task%20Force%20on%20Equitable%20and%20Inclusive%20School%20Environments/W~Amy%20Wheeler->

[Sutton~Final%20Report%20of%20the%20Task%20Force%20on%20Equitable%20and%20Inclusive%20School%20Environments~3-30-2022.pdf](https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2022/WorkGroups/Senate%20Education/Legislative%20Report/Final%20Report%20of%20the%20Task%20Force%20on%20Equitable%20and%20Inclusive%20School%20Environments~3-30-2022.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Building Bright Futures (2021). *2020 Recommendations of the Building Bright Futures State Advisory Council*.

Retrieved from <https://vermontkidsdata.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2020-SAC-Recommendations.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Building Bright Futures (2022). *2021-2022 Policy Recommendations of the Vermont Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network*. Retrieved from <https://vermontkidsdata.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/2021-Policy-Recommendations.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Building Bright Futures (2020). *Early Childhood and Family Mental Health: 2020 Task Force Report*. Retrieved from [https://47717snyayj49hh0r38uhcqo-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ECFMH-Task-Force-Report-2020\\_Final-Reduced-Size.pdf](https://47717snyayj49hh0r38uhcqo-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ECFMH-Task-Force-Report-2020_Final-Reduced-Size.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> Task Force p. 27