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Eliminating Exclusionary Practices in Early Childhood Education in Nevada

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Abstract

Problem. Many young children under 5 years old spend a significant part of their days in early childhood settings which provide them access to environments and activities that foster their learning. Unfortunately, in many of these early childhood settings, young children are expelled and suspended at a rate that is three times the rate of students in a K-12 setting leading to detrimental, long-term outcomes for young children, families, and the community. **Purpose.** This paper gives an overview of exclusionary practices in early childhood, discusses causes and consequences of these practices, and provides recommendations to eliminate exclusionary practices in Nevada. **Recommendations.** To reduce exclusionary practices, it is recommended to embed preventive practices into early childhood state requirements; develop data systems to better understand and track practices; deliver high quality professional development and technical assistance; use developmental screening and referrals for young children in need; and increasing family engagement.

Introduction

Young children in Nevada spend a significant portion of their time in early childhood programs prior to entering kindergarten. According to the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education (U.S. DHHS/DOE; 2015), early childhood programs “provide early care and education to children birth through age five...[including] private or publicly funded center or family-based child care, home visiting, Early Head Start, Head Start, private preschool, and public school and community-based pre-kindergarten programs, including those in charter schools” (p. 1). Unfortunately, the expulsion and suspension of young children, including infants and toddlers, from early childhood programs is common and leads to devastating, long-term consequences including lower academic outcomes, increased likelihood of repeated disciplinary actions in school and with law enforcement for students, and distrust in the educational system for students and families (U.S. DHHS/DOE, 2016). Early childhood programs suspend young children ages birth to five up to three times the rate of students in K-12 (Gilliam, 2005). In the US, 5,000 preschool children were suspended at least once and 2,500 children were suspended a second time

(U.S. Department of Education for Civil Rights [OCR], 2014).

In 2019, there were 181,207 children under the age of five in Nevada (Children’s Cabinet, 2018; Nevada Institute for Children’s Research and Policy, 2019). It is estimated that although almost 71,000 children (40%) were enrolled across a variety of early childhood programs, 134,000 children (74%) were in need of some kind of early childhood programming (see Table 1*; Child Care Aware of America, 2019; Children’s Cabinet, 2018). In these programs, children gain access to environments and activities that foster their learning in all areas of development including their cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and language development. In addition to benefits of early childhood programs for children, families are able to use programs to seek employment, continue their education, and gain respite from the heavy demands of caregiving (Zero to Three, n.d.). Overall, early childhood programs are essential for communities and states to function (Stevens, 2017). Without access to quality programs, children, families, and communities face potential outcomes that can be detrimental to the child and family structure. The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of exclusionary practices

*Refer to paper’s Appendix on page 66 for all tables and figures.

in early childhood, discuss potential causes of suspension and expulsion, share examples of efforts in other states to address this issue, and provide recommendations to eliminate exclusionary practices in Nevada. Although exclusionary practices occur in all early childhood settings, this paper focuses primarily on early childhood programs and professionals outside of school districts that are bound by more stringent federal, state, and local regulations.

What are Exclusionary Practices in Early Childhood?

There are two categories of exclusionary practices: suspension and expulsion. Suspension is defined as a “disciplinary action that is administered as a consequence of a student’s inappropriate behavior and requires that a student absent him/herself from the classroom or the school for a specified period of time” (Morrison & Skiba, 2001, p. 174). Expulsion is defined as “permanent dismissal of the child from the program in response to problem behavior” (National Center on Pyramid Model Innovations [NCPMI], 2018, p. 3). Expulsion is the most severe action that a school or childcare center can take in response to a student’s challenging behavior (NCPMI, 2018).

Exclusionary practices in early childhood may be explicit, such as asking a family to leave a program (i.e., expulsion) or requiring a child to stay home for a day (i.e., suspension). Often, however, ‘soft’ practices are used such as calling families to pick up a child with challenging behaviors so that families must find a different program to meet their needs (i.e., expulsion) or having a child sit in the hallway during group time (i.e., suspension; Garrity et al., 2017; Zeng et al., 2020). Table 2* describes definitions and examples of exclusionary practices. Figure 1* provides the numbers of expulsions and suspensions of young children per 1,000 children in the United States.

There are many factors that lead to expulsion and suspension of young children. Gilliam and Reyes (2018) state, “Preschool expulsion is not a child behavior; it is an adult decision” (p.106). In what follows, we overview two main factors, lack of training and implicit bias.

Lack of Training on Child Development and Social-Emotional Development. The first factor related to the expulsion and suspension of young

children engaging in age and developmentally-appropriate behaviors such as crying, biting or hitting, using fingers to eat, not sitting for long periods of time, sharing materials, and choosing not to engage in structured activities that professionals believe are inappropriate or challenging (Anderson, 2015). Developmental appropriateness considers valuing each child as they develop individually at their own pace across all domains of development and within the contexts of their family and community’s culture (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Furthermore, children may have unidentified developmental delays or disabilities that impact their behavior. However, professionals working in most early childhood settings including licensed childcare are often not required to have any initial or ongoing training on child development, sequences of learning, and developmentally appropriate practices (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2018). Only 20% of early childhood professionals reported receiving training on facilitating social-emotional development and early childhood professionals consistently report that the most pressing need for training is addressing children with challenging behaviors (Fox et al., 2011; U.S. DHHS/DOE, 2016). Therefore, professionals often have unrealistic expectations (e.g., sitting for long periods, verbally expressing needs, hitting, biting) of children and lack the ability to identify children with developmental delays and disabilities and often see children’s behaviors as challenging and resulting in exclusionary practices (Zero to Three, n.d.).

Implicit Bias in Early Childhood Practices. Secondly, implicit bias in professionals leads to suspension and expulsion of young children. Implicit bias is defined as what’s happening when, despite our best intentions and without our awareness, stereotypes and assumptions creep into our minds and affect our actions (Desmond-Harris, 2016). Implicit bias contributes to how professionals act towards certain populations of students, particularly children of color, children who are multilingual, and children with disabilities (National Center on Early Childhood Health & Wellness, 2020).

Early childhood professionals are often untrained in culturally appropriate practice and implicit bias, which often leads to a disproportional exclusionary practice across race and gender (An-

*Refer to paper’s Appendix on page 66 for all tables and figures.

derson, 2015). Figure 2 shows the racial disparities of young children who are suspended or expelled. Black children (birth – five years old) are 3.6 times more likely to be suspended than their White peers (U.S. OCR, 2014).

- Black children (birth – five years old) are suspended or expelled at a rate of four times greater than their White peers (Neitzel, 2018).
- Black girls make up 20% of the early childhood population (birth – five years old); however, they account for 54% of the girls who are suspended from early childhood programs (U.S. DHHS/DOE, 2016; NCPMI, 2018).
- Boys represent 54% of the early childhood population (birth – five years old); however, boys account for 78% of those suspended from early childhood programs (U.S. OCR, 2014).
- The odds of being suspended or expelled are 14.5 times larger for young children diagnosed with any disability or social-emotional challenge (Novoa & Malik, 2018).
- Young children with any disability or social-emotional challenge make up only 13% of the early childhood population; however, they constitute 75% of all early suspensions and expulsions (Novoa & Malik, 2018).
- The odds of being suspended or expelled in early childhood were more than 43 times higher for young children with behavioral problems (e.g., crying, biting, using fingers to eat, not sitting for long periods of time; Anderson, 2015; Novoa & Malik, 2018).

Impact of Exclusionary Practices on Children and Families

The early years of development are crucial to building the foundation for learning, health, and wellness in school (Gilliam & Reyes, 2018; Miller et al., 2017). During this time, children’s brains are developing quickly with positive and negative experiences significantly impacting their development across all learning (Steglin, 2018). Exclusionary practices in early childhood are stressful, negative events that have harmful effects on a child’s self-esteem, social-emotional development, and relationships with peers and adults. They also disrupt children’s routines and sense of security (Mitchell et al., 2016; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Stressful events are negatively associated with future school experiences, increasing the likelihood of dropping out, academic failure, grade retention, and incar-

ceration (Michell et al., 2016; U.S. DHHS/DOE, 2016) particularly for boys of color (Neitzel, 2018) and have not been effective at improving student behavior (Craven, 2016).

Exclusionary practices also hurt families (Steglin, 2018). When a program removes a child, parents experience emotional stress by forcing families to find alternative care immediately, question their own parenting and children’s developmental course, and reduce their confidence in educational programming. Consistent requests to pick up a child early or to leave a program entirely disrupts a parent’s ability to meaningfully attend to their employment or education. They also need to find childcare, often without support from the previous program (Steglin, 2018; U.S. DHHS/DOE, 2016). These negative experiences can be prevented through strong family partnership and communication and early intervention for children in need for development support.

Scope of the Problem in Nevada

According to the survey of early childhood professionals administered by Nevada TACSEI Pyramid Model Partnership (2018), now named Nevada Pyramid Model Partnership (NPMP), 51% of providers have asked a child to leave their program because of challenging behavior and 44% of providers have asked a child to take a break for several days or to shorten the hours they attend the program. However, the exact number of suspensions and expulsions of young children are difficult to measure because the state does not systematically collect these data from programs and families and the use of ‘soft’ exclusionary practices are hard to measure and often go undocumented.

During the last Nevada legislative session, AB293 added legislative provisions targeted to reduce the suspension and expulsion of students in grades K-12; however, there is no current legislation to prevent these practices to children birth to five years old in Nevada. The state does have some documents, policy recommendations, and has enacted some practical efforts in early childhood settings to reduce exclusionary practices; however, these recommendations are not part of state legislation nor regulated.

There are several documents that give clear recommendations about using exclusionary practices in early childhood. In 2016, The Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council instated an expul-

sion and suspension policy statement that mirrors the U.S. DHHS/DOE's Policy Statement (see Table 4; 2016). This statement makes general recommendations for programs that may reduce the use of exclusionary practices; however, these policy statements lack infrastructure and accountability to meaningfully address this persistent issue. Nevada's State Systemic Improvement Plan (2019), further addresses exclusionary practices of young children by focusing on creating healthy and positive learning environments and developing positive relationships for staff and students.

Nevada has begun some efforts to support programs in reducing exclusionary practices. For example, any program receiving federal or state funding, such as the Child Care Development Fund subsidy, are prohibited from using exclusionary practices. But, due to lack of understanding of what practices are and data systems to track incidents, it is difficult to appropriately ensure this. Secondly, Nevada has embedded indicators related to practices that reduce and eliminate exclusionary practices in its Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), Nevada Silver Stars; however, this system is voluntary with only 54% of licensed childcare and 20% of public preschool programs currently enrolled (Children's Cabinet, 2018; Edge & McCann, 2017). Finally, NPMP provides on-site technical assistance to help programs and professionals address exclusionary practices and their related factors (e.g., professional learning about social and emotional development, culturally appropriate practice, addressing challenging behaviors, program assessment, data collection; see Table 4*).

Recommendations to Reducing Exclusionary Practices in Nevada

Within the last two years, 18 states have proposed legislation on suspension and expulsion that specifically restrict states from suspending and expelling young children. There are 12 states and D.C. that proposed legislation to promote alternatives for suspension and expulsion (see Table 3* and Table 4*; Administration for Children & Families, n.d., NCPMI, 2018).

Embed Preventive Practices into Early Childhood State Requirements. Although Nevada has begun to identify indicators and practices to reduce exclusionary practices in their QRIS program, a lim-

ited number of programs have participated in the program and lower levels of the star system do not include the robust indicators that should prevent exclusionary practices. Furthermore, since lower quality programs are more likely to engage in these practices, it is recommended that indicators such as professional development in social-emotional development, implicit bias and equity, child development, and assessment and referral be included for all programs and initial qualifications for professionals; and having comprehensive policies to address challenging behaviors and exclusionary practices (Nevada Department of Education: Office of Early Learning, 2019).

Data Systems to Better Understand Practices.

Currently, a significant barrier to reducing exclusionary practices in early childhood is that we do not have accurate data on practices. Without data systems to track incidents, it is impossible to understand, analyze and measure the problem. Recently, Arkansas, Illinois, and Colorado have used data tracking using statewide technical assistance systems (Arkansas Department of Human Services, 2018; Vinh et al., 2016; Zinsser et al., 2019). NCPMI has a publicly available program-wide data system, Behavior Incident Report (BIR) that may be viable to track incidents of challenging behavior, staff or program response, and exclusionary consequences (Zero to Three, n.d.). This system allows for analysis of patterns of an individual child's behaviors and use of practices across race/ethnicity, age, gender, teacher, classroom, and program. Analysis of these data would allow state and program leaders to identify programs and professionals in need of targeted professional development or intensive targeted technical assistance and to understand trends across the state.

Professional Development and Technical Assistance for Programs. Initial and ongoing training for early childhood professionals is essential in reducing exclusionary practices. However, due to the lower income rates of early childhood professionals and extended work hours, attending costly training or seeking out degree programs is challenging. Arkansas and Colorado offered statewide training and technical assistance to program directors and early childhood professionals on social-emotional development of young children with and without disabilities (Arkansas Department of Human Ser-

*Refer to paper's Appendix on page 66 for all tables and figures.

vices, 2018; Vinh et al., 2016). By providing free and low-cost professional development to early childhood professionals particularly in implicit bias, child development, addressing challenging behaviors, and the inclusion of children with disabilities would build the capacity of Nevada's early childhood workforce (Administration for Children & Families, n.d.). Nevada has adopted some national resources that are available to support programs to facilitate professional development through the Nevada Registry, however many of these are limited, one-time training that provide basic awareness of content without in-depth application of practices to their programs. Nevada should consider investing in ongoing, individualized technical support to early childhood programs (State Capacity Building Center, 2017).

Consistent Developmental Screening and Referral of Young Children in Need. To support the development of young children, programs must engage in regular developmental screenings of all children birth to 5 years old (Weglarz-Ward et al., 2019a). Illinois uses a referral model to address the child's needs which includes observations, communication with the family, and referral to services (e.g., pediatrician, special education services, mental health; Illinois Action for Children,

n.d., Steglin, 2018). These screenings can provide professionals with information on children's developmental needs and identify children with possible disabilities and delays. However, it is regularly reported that early childhood professionals do not have enough training and awareness of screening and available services for children (Weglarz-Ward et al., 2019b). Additional resources such as assessments, intervention procedures, social emotional supports, and mental health consultation should be available to all early childhood programs.

Conclusion

Exclusionary practices in early childhood are detrimental to the child, the family, and the community. Because exclusionary practices often go undocumented, there is a great need in Nevada to reduce the number of expulsions and suspensions of young children by 1) embedding preventive practices into early childhood state requirements, 2) developing data systems to better understand and track practices, 3) delivering high quality professional development and technical assistance on social emotional development of young children, and 4) using developmental screening and referrals for young children in need and increasing family engagement.

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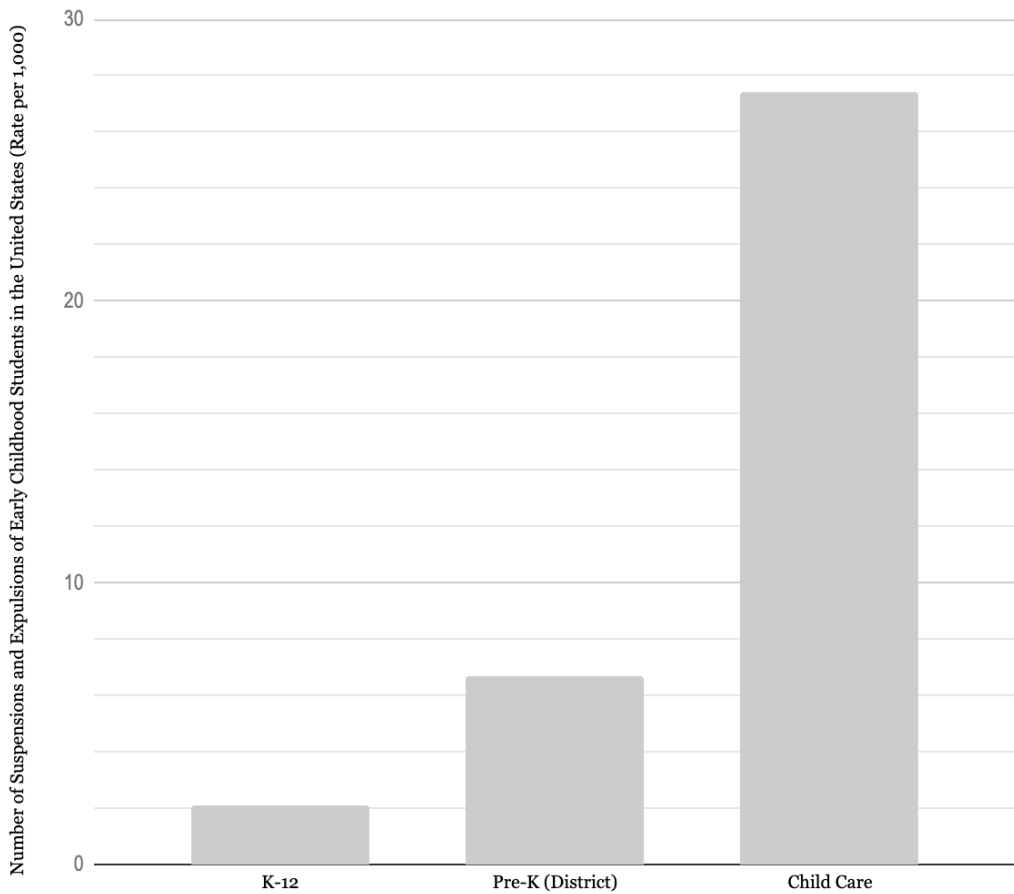
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Figures & Tables

Figure 1. Number of Suspensions and Expulsions of Young Children in the U.S.



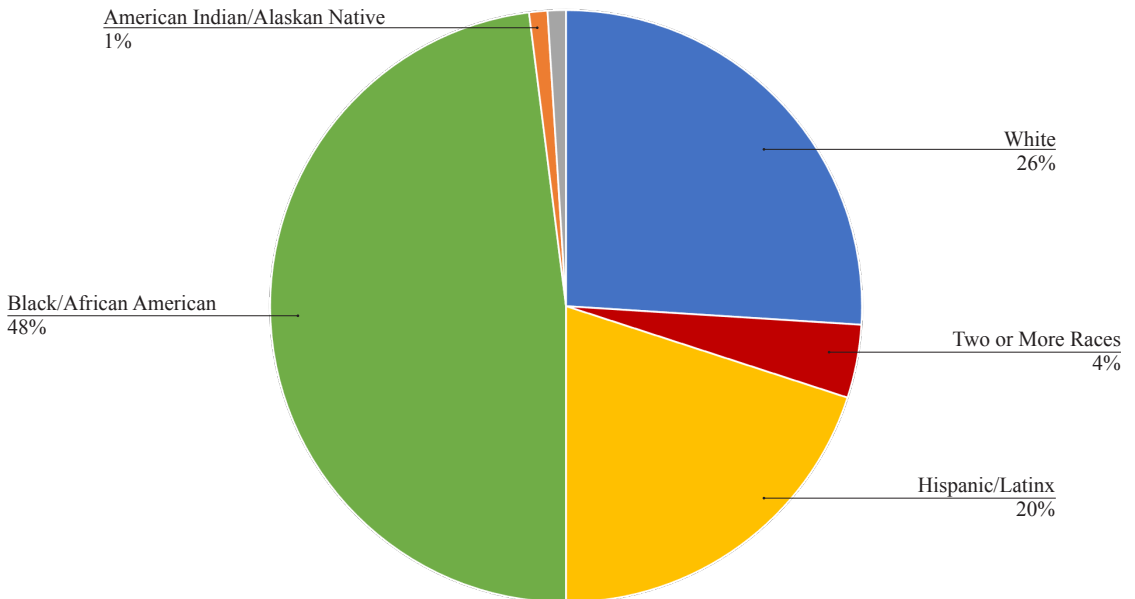
Note: Adapted from Gilliam and Shabar (2006)

Table 1. Child Enrollment Across Early Childhood Programs in Nevada

Type of Program	# Children Enrolled	% Children Enrolled
Childcare programs	41,786	59%
Early Head Start/Head Start	3,364	4.7%
Public school programs	12,046	17%
Children ages 3-5 in IDEA Part B (early childhood special education)	5,187	7.4%
Children ages 0-3 in IDEA Part C Programs (Early Intervention)	3,274	4.6%
Licensed Family Child Care Homes	1,286	1.8%
Licensed Group Child Care Homes	3,874	5.5%

Note: As adapted from Nevada Institute for Children’s Research and Policy (2019).

Figure 2. Percentage of Preschool Students (3 to 5 years old) Receiving Out of School Suspensions by Race/Ethnicity in U.S.



Note: Adapted from U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014)

Table 2. Definitions and Examples of Exclusionary Practices

Exclusionary Practice	Definition	Examples of Practice in Early Childhood
In-school or soft suspensions	Practices that involve removing or excluding the child from the classroom.	Having a child sit out of activity, room, or program space or sending them to the administrator’s office.
Out-of-school suspensions	Practices that involve temporarily removing the child from the program.	Asking families to pick up their child early from a program due to behaviors including challenging behaviors, crying, or disability-related issues.
Expulsions	Permanent removal or dismissal from the program.	Telling a family they must find a different program or care arrangement for their child due to behaviors including challenging behaviors, crying, or disability-related issues.
Soft-expulsions	Practices that make it so that the program is not a viable or welcoming care arrangement for the family and leaves the family with little choice but to withdraw their child	Repeatedly asking families to pick up their child from a program due to behaviors including challenging behaviors, crying, or disability-related issues resulting in families leaving the program.

Table 3. State Policies on Early Childhood Suspension and Expulsion

	<i>States' Policies</i>			<i>Guidance to Programs</i>	
	Prohibit or Restrict Expulsion	Prohibit or Restrict Suspension	Prevent or Address Behavior	Partner with Families to Address Behavior	Training to Staff Support
Arkansas	X	X	X	X	X
California	X		X	X	
Colorado	X	X			
Connecticut	X	X	X		
DC	X	X	X		
Georgia	X		X	X	X
Illinois	X			X	X
Maryland	X	X	X	X	X
New Jersey	X	X	X	X	X
Oregon	X	X			
Texas	X				
Virginia	X		X	X	X
Washington	X	X			X

Note: Adapted from Fox et al. (2019).

Table 4. Resources on Early Childhood Exclusionary Practices

Policy Statements

State of Nevada Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension in Early Childhood Settings

This 2016 policy statement provides guidance to early childhood programs to addressing issues related to suspension and expulsion including supporting children’s social-emotional skills and preventing challenging behavior, creating clear exclusionary policies, increasing family engagement, engaging in professional development, and using regular developmental screening.

Link: <http://nvecac.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/SuspensionExpulsionPolicy.pdf>

U.S. Departments of Human Development and Education Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings

This joint statement provides current research on exclusionary practices, implications of these practices on children and families, and recommendations for individuals, programs, and states.

Link: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/expulsion_ps_numbered.pdf

State Efforts

State and Local Action to Prevent Expulsion and Suspension in Early Learning Settings: Spotlighting Progress in Policy and Supports

This report from the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides an overview of the federal policy statement on suspension and expulsion and descriptions of efforts across multiple states. See reference list for specific resources on individual states including Arkansas, Colorado and Illinois.

Link: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/state_and_local_profiles_expulsion.pdf

Pyramid Model and Technical Assistance Centers

Nevada Pyramid Model Partnership (formerly Nevada TACSEI: Pyramid Model Partnership)

This initiative helps to promote the social-emotional development of young children and support families and professionals in reducing challenging behaviors. In Nevada, this project provides technical assistance to programs, regional and state training, collaboration with institutions of higher education, and resources to families, professionals, and policymakers.

Link: <http://nvtacsei.com/>

National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations

This national technical assistance center, funded by the US Department of Education, supports research and training in issues related to social-emotional development, challenging behaviors, suspension and expulsion, implicit bias, and family-centered practices. This site offers free live and recorded webinars, practitioner and program tools, and teaching and training materials. The Center also offers state-specific technical assistance that of which Nevada has received for their IDEA Part C programs.

Link: <https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/>