

**Libby Doggett's DRAFT remarks on Expulsion**  
**5/20/2005 3:43 PM**  
**3-5 minutes**

When I was a first grade teacher in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Austin, Texas I had 24 6-year olds, most of whom had never attended school before. Although I was a first year teacher I had many advantages: good conversational Spanish, my BA degree and teacher certification, all the course work for my master's degree, plus 12 additional hours of child development.

Yet without a strong, caring principal and the support of a resource teacher some of my children might have been expelled or placed in someone else's class.

Teaching our youngest children is hard, demanding work, and on some days it can be grueling. Teaching requires total self control, flexibility and creativity. It takes lots of energy and quick thinking. And it takes a system that gives teachers support when problems inevitably arise.

This report tells us that in many states we have failed our teachers. Every time a teacher is so desperate that he or she asks the principal or director to place a child somewhere else, that teacher knows she has failed—failed herself and that child. In early childhood we talk a lot about ready schools, schools where every child belongs, where every child is welcome, where every child succeeds at his own pace. Yet because we are not providing teachers the proper supports we are not creating ready schools.

While this report should be a wake up call for policy makers, advocates, teachers, parents and everyone who cares about our children, I want to remind folks that high quality pre-k programs with well trained teachers, comprehensive services for children, monitoring, and technical assistance work. Research over the last 35 years has clearly shown us that children who attend high quality pre-k do better in kindergarten and throughout school, and after graduation are less likely to get involved with the law and more likely to attend college, get a job and pay taxes.

The debate in this country has moved from “does pre-k work?” to “how can we make sure it works most effectively?”

This report clearly directs us to systemic improvements. We must assure that the pre-k system is well funded and that programs, teachers, children and families receive the services and supports they need early on when problems are more easily corrected—and before children are told, “you don't belong here”.

The fact that 5,117 three, four and five year olds are being expelled every year is outrageous. While I know that even a four year old, who on average weighs about 38 pounds and is about 3 ½ feet tall, can act out and try your patience, I also know that with excellent teaching and the right supports nearly every child can be successful. Most children, when provided a rich, stimulating but organized environment; clear and reasonable expectations; warm, caring, well-trained teachers who make time every day to interact one-on-one with every child; and opportunities to choose what they want to do for at least part of the day, will thrive in pre-k.

Research clearly shows the quality of the program makes a difference in child behavior. High-quality programs support learning as an individual process, provide behaviorally challenged students with alternative means of communication; teach, model and reinforce positive behavior and development; partner with parents; and link children and families with other services when needed.

Yet, too many children are required to wait quietly in line multiple times per day, sit too long at circle time, and complete worksheets that are boring and inappropriate for active, young children.

The report clearly indicates that in-classroom consultation may help in many cases. Yet as states build early education systems through collaborations among public schools, Head Start, public and private child care centers, and community based organizations, they often don't include the mental health and special education systems. IDEA requires that children with disabilities be served in the least restrictive environment, yet too few school districts are working with private and faith-based providers. I am not recommending all, or even most of these children, need special education, but I do know that linking the strong supports from special education to the private sector will bolster the quality of the classrooms and provide teachers more support before serious problems arise.

In most states pre-k is under-funded. With limited funding "in classroom consultation" is viewed as a frill and not a necessity. The per child spending for a child in K-12 is \$9,517. Federal funding per child in Head Start is \$7089. But the per child spending in pre-k is significantly below that. Only five state provide more than \$5000 per child in pre-k. Seven state provide less than \$2000 per child.

While funding is not the only answer, without more funding pre-k will never be able to offer teachers classroom based behavioral consultation which is clearly needed.

As states develop their pre-k systems policy makers must do more than fund programs, hire qualified teachers and link programs to other services. Someone in the state must champion the program. Leaders in the state departments of education and human services must value pre-k and set up strong systems to monitor the programs and provide ongoing training and technical assistance. Good programs must be nurtured, valued and built through funding, outside champions and ongoing support.

The most important take-away message from this report is that quality in pre-k programs really matters. In high quality pre-k programs can children learn to control their behavior, constructively solve problems with their words, and function in a group setting.