

In Maine, the Alliance Effect is Reducing Suspensions and Expulsions from Early Childhood Programs

It's perhaps no surprise. When families are stressed, children are stressed. And in 2014, Maine families were stressed—by an opioid crisis, lingering financial hardship from the Great Recession, and thinning safety nets. Nearly half the families of young children in [a survey](#) of child care providers in the state faced health, mental health, substance abuse, or domestic violence challenges at home. Four in ten families were facing severe financial hardship.

Young children often have no way to express their fear and anxiety except by acting out. And Maine had a strained early intervention system that often wasn't able to identify children who needed services early in life. So it wasn't a surprise when in 2014 Rita Furlow, a child advocate with the [Maine Children's Alliance](#), began hearing from early childhood teachers about a rise in children's challenging behavior: hitting, biting, fighting, and being unable to be consoled. It was a big concern.

The teachers were at wit's end. Providers were worried about the children and frustrated with this persistent challenging behavior that they didn't feel they had the resources to manage. Furlow heard reports that very young children were being suspended and expelled from early care and education programs.

"Far too many children were leaving classrooms," says Sheila Smith, co-director of the [National Center for Children in Poverty](#) (NCCP) who conducted the survey. "It was more difficult for teachers to attend to children's needs, and it was negatively affecting teachers' own well-being."

Teachers and families, it was clear, needed support. But how? At the time, advocates in Maine needed more information: How



After six years of coordinated research, planning, and advocacy, Maine advocates are celebrating the beginning of a new statewide early childhood mental health consultation program.

widespread was this problem in the state? And in a conservative political environment, how could solutions be funded?

The journey to a solution saw many bumps in the road — including three pieces of legislation, a comprehensive study of early childhood practitioners in the state, many legislative sessions, and some vetoes. But six years later, Maine is about to launch its first statewide early childhood mental health consultation program, designed to prevent suspensions and expulsions in early childhood classrooms.

Trained consultants will now support parents and teachers of young children to teach children social emotional skills and give teachers and care providers tools to combat behavioral problems and reduce suspensions.

It's a powerful win for kids and early educators. And Furlow is quick to share the credit — especially with the [Alliance for Early Success](#). “I could never have done all of these things on my own,” she says.

The Alliance Effect

In all 50 states and the District of Columbia, the Alliance for Early Success provides highly customized support for early childhood advocates like the Maine Children's Alliance. By combining funding support, technical assistance, rapid-response problem solving, access to national experts and connections to peers in other states, the Alliance provides a unique kind of responsive support that maximizes the chance for gains for kids. It's what people in the network have come to call the “Alliance Effect.”

As an Alliance for Early Success advocacy organization, the Maine Children's Alliance had access to more than just grant dollars. They had a long list of experts and strategists who were standing ready to help develop and implement a solution.

Furlow had heard of a regional effort in Washington County, Maine called [Early Childhood Consultation and Outreach](#) that was having great success. Perhaps it could be replicated statewide. But what other models existed? The Alliance connected Maine advocates to peers in other states and national experts at the [National Center for Children in Poverty \(NCCP\)](#), [Zero to Three](#), and [the Ounce of Prevention Fund](#), with whom Furlow “literally spent hours on the phone strategizing.”

Early convenings — and then a crucial 2016 [NCCP survey](#) commissioned by the Maine legislature — helped answer questions about the extent of the problem. Research showed that 86 percent of preschool teachers identified at least one child under age 5 with challenging behavior. On average, they reported five children with behavioral problems. One-third of all teachers reported that the challenging behavior made it very hard for them to attend

The work revealed that Maine had one of the highest preschool expulsion rates in the country, which was pivotal in spurring the legislature to act.

to the other children, and one-fourth reported children leaving their class as a result.

The survey also revealed the deep extent to which families were struggling with mental health issues, domestic violence, financial problems, and other critical stressors. Those results, Smith says, “broadened everyone’s thinking about where the solutions lie.”

As the legislative work took shape, staff at the Ounce of Prevention Fund, Zero to Three, and NCCP helped provide technical assistance, helping with research on program design and writing policy papers. They connected the Maine Children’s Alliance to national scholars like [Walter Gilliam](#), an expert on suspension and expulsion prevention policy from the Yale Child Study Center, who presented to the legislative committee. Gilliam’s finding that Maine had one of the highest preschool expulsion rates in the nation would ultimately help spur the legislature to act. The team also helped with legislative strategy, drafting possible bill language and connecting local advocates with other states such as Connecticut, Colorado, and Arkansas that were working on similar issues.

“Having the support of national people was a time saver,” said Barbara Gebhard, the former assistant director of public policy at Zero to Three. “I spent many years in state government and it’s really a luxury to have someone who is a national expert rather than trying to figure it out on your own.”

That ability to extend the capacity in small states is a key part of the Alliance’s impact, said Margie Wallen, vice president of national policy at the Ounce of Prevention Fund, who worked closely with Furlow and the Maine Children’s Alliance.

Change Rippling Outward

Since passage of Maine’s legislation, Alliance advocates in Colorado have utilized language from Maine’s legislation as they crafted their legislative proposal. And early childhood advocates in Virginia utilized Dr. Sheila Smith’s experience designing the survey in Maine to assist them in drafting a similar survey of Virginia early educators.

What’s most effective for young children isn’t always clear at first, but with resources, expertise and strategic support, state advocates can develop and work to implement solutions that improve outcomes for kids in their state – and, in some cases, across the country.



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