

**Senate Bill 246**  
**Interested Party Testimony**  
**Dr. Laura Justice**

Senate Finance Committee

Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Skindell, and members of the Senate Finance Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on SB 246. I am the Executive Director of the Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy and the Schoenbaum Family Center within The Ohio State University's College of Education and Human Ecology. I am submitting this testimony as a social scientist, early childhood researcher, and director of a high-quality early care and education center serving infants and children ages 0-5. My views do not represent the position of the university.

First, I want to thank Senators Lehner and Manning for your leadership in developing this legislation. In prohibiting out of school suspension and expulsions for our state's youngest learners, the Supporting Alternatives for a Fair Education (SAFE) Act aligns with research showing that a child's early years offer a vital window for healthy academic and emotional development. As such, it's essential that state policies align with best practices to ensure that children—especially our most at-risk—are not harmed. Rigid and/or exclusionary discipline practices are often not developmentally appropriate or effective, nor do they take into account the realities of children living in poverty and experiencing the adverse impacts of trauma.

By proposing this legislation, you join legislators from peer states who are following what social science tells us about child development and trying to implement systems that set students up for academic and later life success. In 2017, 18 states proposed legislation that would modify suspension and expulsion practices; in 2016, 22 states proposed such legislation. Over a dozen states were successful in passing suspension and expulsion laws in the last two years alone. The issue is a bipartisan one, with red as well as blue states alike moving to collect and report more data on discipline, prohibit expulsion of their youngest learners, and/or institute alternative disciplinary approaches.<sup>1</sup>

This issue is too important to leave up to districts to determine on their own. The data on the high number of suspensions and expulsions in Ohio—and the disproportionate impact on children of color and those living in poverty—suggests that state action is justified.

I appreciate that this legislation is not just regulatory in nature but also provides competitive grants for schools to help them implement evidence-based positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS). Additionally, requiring teacher preparation programs to include training on PBIS, asking that the Department of Education establish model PBIS courses, and creating a phase-in period are all reasonable provisions that move the state in the right direction.

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information on who these states are: "[Policy Snapshot: Suspension and Expulsion](#)," Education Commission of the States (January 2018).

I hope you'll consider a few additional thoughts as it relates to supporting young learners.

First, many publicly-funded, non-school based early learning centers and preschools, as well as private providers, could benefit from additional training on PBIS or other evidence-based approaches to managing children. Ohio's myriad providers—not just school-based sites—would benefit from opportunities to apply for a competitive grant like what you have included in SB 246 for additional staff training.

Given that childhood trauma does not happen in a vacuum, I also hope you'll consider ways in which Ohio can support the emotional needs of children beyond school settings. As noted in a joint policy statement from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, early childhood mental health consultations are one promising way of “increasing children’s social skills, reducing children’s challenging behavior, preventing preschool suspensions and expulsions, improving child-adult relationships, and identifying child concerns early, so that children get the supports they need as soon as possible.”<sup>2</sup> Access to mental health screenings as well as to other health and social services for children and families should be viewed as a necessary part of the overall effort to minimize disruptive behavior in schools, and should be supported accordingly.

Finally, I hope that SB 246 is part of a continued conversation to improve the manner in which we equip our youngest learners for success—academically, emotionally, and physically. Toward that end, please don't hesitate to reach out to me, or to the school leaders, teachers, or researchers at my center who spend their days studying, observing, teaching, and caring for children. We would be happy to share our insights, best practices, and evidence-based research to inform public policy.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'LJ', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Laura Justice, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Crane Center for Early Childhood Research & Policy and Schoenbaum Family Center  
EHE Distinguished Professor, Educational Psychology  
The Ohio State University

---

<sup>2</sup> [“Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings,”](#) U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education (2016).