

Follow 10 steps to improve procedures on restraint, seclusion

By Anne Littlefield and Leander Dolphin*

Newspaper headlines about “isolation chambers,” “scream rooms,” and the physical restraint of students in schools abound. Few topics generate such media interest.

Federal legislation on restraint and seclusion is on hold in Congress, and the U.S. Education Department has not issued formal guidance, leaving the rules about if, when, and how to use these approaches to the jurisdiction of individual states.

Despite this, there are best practices school administrators and educators can adopt to ensure student safety and avoid disputes.

Here are 10 steps to improve districtwide procedures on the use of physical restraint and seclusion:

1. Know your state law. The extent to which states regulate restraint and/or seclusion varies widely. Some states explicitly limit restraints that restrict breathing; others limit the use of restraint to instances where there is an emergency involving immediate or imminent risk of injury to the student or another person.

2. Publish clear policies, procedures. Develop policies that restrict the use of restraint and seclusion and that define these terms. Such policies should be published to parents and educators in areas that members of the general public and school community can readily access, such as parent/student handbooks and district and school websites. Periodically revisit, review, and revise district procedures based on experiences, lessons learned, and improved practices.

3. Train staff on restraint, seclusion. Restraint and seclusion should be carried out only by staff members who have been properly trained. The training should utilize a well-established, research-based curriculum, and refresher training should be conducted regularly. Assign at least one staff member to receive advanced training so that she can serve as an in-house coach or

consultant to others about their use of these interventions. Only physical intervention procedures that have been expressly authorized for use should be applied.

4. View seclusion, physical restraint as emergency interventions. There is a continuum of behavioral supports, and restraint and seclusion should be viewed as the most restrictive interventions. These are last-resort procedures designed to prevent imminent harm. District policy must specify the use of less restrictive strategies and techniques to try to manage the student's behavior prior to the use of restraint or seclusion. A comprehensive, positive behavioral intervention plan, implemented early and consistently, may prevent the need for restraint and seclusion altogether.

5. Evaluate student before including seclusion in IEP. Only after an evaluation has been conducted should an IEP team determine that seclusion is an appropriate intervention. Such an evaluation should consider whether there are factors in the child's psychological profile that make the use of seclusion inappropriate. If the IEP team determines that seclusion may be used, the student's IEP should explicitly identify the location that seclusion may occur, the maximum length of any period of seclusion, the frequency of monitoring, and the means of communicating with parents about the need for seclusion.

6. Monitor student during seclusion. District policies should provide for consistent visual monitoring by staff of any secluded student. Such procedures should also require an administrator be involved when the procedure has continued beyond a set period of time, so that staff can seek direction on how to proceed. When employing seclusion or restraint, the child must be monitored for any signs of distress.

7. Investigate complaints of injury. Involve the school nurse whenever a student complains of an injury resulting from restraint or seclusion or when a staff member observes or suspects an injury. Follow district

policy and state law regarding the reporting of any such injury to state child welfare authorities and parents.

8. Take time to answer parent questions. Meet with parents in anticipation of the use of such strategies. Ensure that they understand the district's policies and procedures, the law, training received by staff, and applicable documentation requirements. Give parents an opportunity to ask questions about when and under what circumstances the district may contemplate restraint or seclusion.

9. Record use of restraint, seclusion. Instruct staff to keep accurate records of each time restraint or seclusion is used on a child. Also, each time restraint or seclusion is used on a student, report the incident

to parents as soon as possible. Again, know your state law on reporting.

10. Know when to reconvene IEP team. If a student shows an increased need for restraint or seclusion, reconvene the IEP team to review and address the student's behavioral decline. The team may consider whether additional evaluations or assessments are necessary and may revise the IEP as appropriate. ■

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