

Madam chair and members of the committee,

Thank you for taking time to hear my testimony regarding the use of seclusion rooms. My name is Molly Hoffard. I am the mother of two children, Lucy and Charlie. Lucy is 12 and a dancer and math wiz. Charlie is 8, an amazing swimmer, and has nonverbal autism. We live on an acreage in New Market Township, south of Lakeville. My husband Dan is the Director of Engineering at Seagate in Shakopee.

As a college student in Mankato, I was sent by a temp staffing agency to work for the public schools as a paraprofessional. I spent the majority of my days in a padded seclusion room with children with severe emotional behavioral disorders and developmental disabilities like autism. I was urinated on, severely bruised from them banging their heads into my chest, and bitten. Worst of all, most of these children would cry out for their mothers, and plead to be let out. I was a temp employee, making less than \$10 an hour, and I was never once given training on de-escalation techniques or even how to properly handle these children during an outburst.

One third grader with bi-polar disorder spent entire days at a time in the padded seclusion room. I was made to sit with him and was subjected to kicks and punches as the hours went on and started to aggravate his mental health issues. Most of the days he would peek through the small window looking into the special education room and promise to be good if they would just let him out. Most often, they didn't.

Eventually I was hired as a school employee and sent to work as an aide for a pre-schooler with emotional and behavioral issues. This child was 5 years old and the center of a very upsetting custody battle. Pre-school should have been where he could let his burden down and receive comfort. Instead, we reacted to his emotional outbursts with physical restraint and seclusion.

No behavior was ever improved by restraint or seclusion. If anything, behaviors became more extreme as school became an unsafe place for these children. They would get to school, see me or the other paraprofessionals, become anxious and upset, escalate, and the whole ugly cycle would begin again.

The majority of the paraprofessionals I worked with were good, caring people. They didn't enjoy working this way with children, but we were not in a position to change or challenge decades old methods for dealing with outbursts in school. I believe today that we do know better, and we can do better. No child development expert or disabilities expert stands by these awful practices. We have PBIS today, we have a better understanding of autism, we have functional behavioral assessments, we have sensory tools. We don't need restraint and seclusion as behavioral modification.

These experiences were so severely damaging to me both physically and emotionally that I left the job and never returned to work as paraprofessional again. I strongly believe that these methods of behavioral intervention are nothing less than child abuse and I am ashamed to say that I participated in the physically aggressive and dehumanizing treatment of young children.

To this day, I remember the names and faces of these children. I wonder how they feel when they look back at their elementary school years. Being part of their trauma is something I will always feel shame over. Today, as the mother of a child with non-verbal autism the thought of my son experiencing what these children went through is a something I cannot bear. My experience as a paraprofessional and a mother of a child with autism drives me to keep working to remove these barbaric practices from our classrooms. I have met with U.S. Representatives from my state and I will meet with more until we see a reintroduction of the Keeping All Students Safe Act. I owe it to the children I worked with.

Sincerely,
Molly Hoffard
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