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My name is Audrey Bartholomew and I am Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Education at the University of New England. I want to share my experience of supporting our education students in fieldwork placements in local schools.

A year and a half ago our department was debriefing with our students who had just completed student teaching and were about to graduate when one commented he “thinks UNE should offer restraint training to all the Education students”. You can imagine my surprise as I have worked for the past 24 years with students with significant needs, including challenging behaviors, and I have never restrained or secluded a student, nor have I even been trained. It is true I have my bachelors, masters, and PhD all from programs grounded in positive behavior supports and evidence-based practices, so my training is excellent. However, I am not a Board Certified Behavior Analyst nor have I ever even worked with one. One does not need advanced training to be able to support students with challenging behaviors safely.

Since then I have spoken with many students on what they have seen in the field. Including the seclusion room used as a punishment. Stories of the same student being restrained over and over again for the same, non-emergency issue. Stories of students exhibiting non-compliance and refusing to move, dragged across rooms. One student in particular, spent approximately three hours per week for one semester. When asked if she could provide an overall impression of how often she was seeing restraints and/or seclusion, she responded with one to two times per visit. She shared some examples with me and in each example, there was an opportunity for de-escalation that was not being implemented.

Its clear the culture in many schools is that restraints and seclusion is an appropriate behavior management technique and can be used to exert control over students.

Experts on this issue are unequivocally in agreement. Restraints and seclusion DO NOT change behavior. What they do is cause loss of instructional time, emotional trauma, injury, and death. Restraints and seclusion are designed to keep students and others safe in an emergency; however, there was not one single story from the many shared by my students describing a situation in which de-escalation strategies were effectively used and/or danger was involved.

What is possibly even more distressing is examining the data reported from some of the districts we partner with indicate an obvious problem with underreporting. If one of my students, who attends a school weekly, sees one to two incidents every week, the levels of occurrence reported by districts is just not reliable. In the majority of the stories my students shared, the students who were being restrained and secluded had very limited communication abilities and were most likely not able to share what was happening to them in school.

I believe this bill would not only put much needed limitations on the use of this dangerous practice but also start to turn the tide on the culture and acceptability of these practices. Please consider moving this bill forward to protect Maine’s most vulnerable population, many of whom I am speaking for today.