

April 30, 2021

Dear Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

I am writing against LD 1373, An Act to Keep All Maine Students Safe by Restricting the Use of Seclusion and Restraint in Schools, not because I don't believe in the safety of our students, but because we need the tools to keep them safe available to us.

I speak at the risk of looking like the mean, tyrannical administrator the opposition is going to work hard to make me, and other administrators, look like. It is not easy to speak in favor of restraint and seclusion, because it is not something that any educator wants to do. Unfortunately, there are times that these tools are needed after all else fails and the student presents a significant safety risk to themselves or others. We work hard with over 90 staff members in Gorham annually to provide the training and certification through Safety Care Training so that we have a pool of staff in each school building to assist with significant behavior events. This training focuses primarily on de-escalation skills and stresses the importance of only using restraint and seclusion as a last resort, noting that restraint is less restrictive than seclusion. This training is revisited throughout the year in individual programs to give staff refreshers and staff are encouraged to ask for refresher training whenever they have questions. The rest of the staff are given strategies and techniques for de-escalation to use through regular professional development and our School Resource Officers have taken part in the de-escalation part of the trainings, as they wanted to develop an awareness of how to best support the school staff and students in times of need. Our staff do not make these calls lightly as they have an understanding of not only the legal concerns, but of the mental health concerns of the child involved.

Having one of these tools taken away could be detrimental to some students. Seclusion is the absolute last resort used when a student is exhibiting significant unsafe behaviors to themselves or others and it's determined that restraint cannot be implemented safely. There are a few cases that we must use seclusion vs restraint due to trauma based needs of a student and this is discussed with the school team and family as part of the behavior plan. Without the use of seclusion, I worry very much that we will be asking staff to put themselves in harm's way at times and I will not do that. An example of this, we once knew of a student that was highly escalated and the team had not had success helping utilize coping strategies to manage his emotions. He ran from the room and found the donation table for a food drive in the lobby and began to hurl canned goods so hard that he broke open the cans against the wall and windows. Staff were not able to safely get to him to restrain him, but instead, were able to close the halls off so that no other staff or students could be hurt during this time - seclusion was an absolute necessity at this time.

I also worry that without the tool of seclusion, we will have more calls being made to the police, which is truly our last resort currently. Our SRO's work very hard to develop positive relationships with our students and know that we prefer to have our school staff run through the Safety Care techniques and work to keep our students safe and work through their feelings and needs in school. When the police become involved, it creates a different level of response, and sometimes, trauma.

I fully support the need for monitoring of schools in use of restraint and seclusion. As an advocate and someone who has worked with students and adults with disabilities for 34 years, I do not want any student

to ever be abused. School must be a safe place for them at all times and these tools, when used the right way, can help create that for them. Let's work to make sure they are used correctly and continue to work to give our teachers the tools they need to mitigate the use of restraint and seclusion through goals of self-regulation and self-awareness.

Sincerely,

Kathy Hamblen
Director of Special Services
Gorham School District