

As the parent of two students with disabilities, I don't have the time for formalities. Please excuse any abruptness that follows.

I'm writing today to ask members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee to stand by your support of LD 1373, in spite of pressure from other parents and special purpose schools. There are many other ways to "handle student behavior" that don't involve segregation in special purpose schools, that don't involve seclusion in scary spaces, and that don't involve traumatic physical contact with students. Anyone who says otherwise is misinformed (if they are parents) and/or guilty of educational malpractice (if they represent special purpose or public schools - notice I said that they represent SCHOOLS not STUDENTS).

Above, I used the term "handle student behavior" in quotes because framing this critical human rights issue in that manner is a mistake. What many in the field call "behavior" is actually (and always) communication. When teachers and other personnel in schools insist upon compliance rather than seeking to foster student belonging, building trusting relationships, listening to and valuing student communication, and responding to the give and take that is (or should be) part of all human relationships, those teachers and personnel fail to see options other than the extreme choices to restrain and seclude.

When experts observe teachers and other support staff with "problem" students, one of the things they joke among themselves about is noting the time at which they would have bitten the teacher or the ed tech. To a trained and experienced eye, the issues tend to be that obvious. Sometimes (often) it's excessive prompting. Sometimes (often) it's excessive touching. Sometimes (often) it's failure to notice and acknowledge the many adaptive ways the student has registered discomfort with a person or an activity before biting. I could go on, and on, and on.

Parents who aren't in the classroom to see the factors that lead up to "behaviors" are at a very serious disadvantage. Most of us have been advised on how to parent and teach our children from the beginning by "experts" who we never think to question regarding whether their advice is valid or up to date with current best practice. Most parents whose children are in special purpose schools have been through hell and back with their sending districts, including prolonged and traumatic lawsuits. These schools are their last best hope before institutionalization. They believe what the "experts" tell them, but the power differential makes the unidirectional trust incredibly problematic.

Tragically, "experts" give terrible advice all the time. Few of them are aware of best practice for educating students with disabilities, and most are stuck in the harmful paradigm that includes segregation in special education classroom, punitive responses to student communication and attempts at agency, and frequent ramping up of restrictive (and abusive) responses before even a fraction of less restrictive accommodations, modifications, and settings are attempted.

We need a systemic reboot and a return to the vision originally set forth by IDEA - we also need a hell of a lot more of the federal funding that was promised by the feds - but the VERY LEAST we can do right now, with LD 1373, is force schools to think outside the narrow boxes they've constructed for themselves. The change can't possibly come from within the systems where their definition of normal is inhumane. They need you to right this ship.

I ended my career as an occupational therapist to educate teachers and others in my own district, but - with my oldest in 7th grade - no changes that I fight for change the system, and we have to almost start from scratch each year. Fortunately my own children haven't - that I know of - experienced restraint and seclusion, but they have suffered other harms in response to perceived "behaviors." One recent example is a behavioral specialist who - because she couldn't find anything else to work on with my daughter - suggested that we track her use of her wheelchair at school and praise her for the times she chose to walk instead. As if laziness was the issue rather than chronic nerve pain. I suggested instead that we remove that particular service from my daughter's IEP, but so many other parents just nod and accept this kind of advice - and so much worse.

Again, please stand firm with your support of this bill. If the students who are being restrained and secluded had any idea that their voices mattered - chances are most don't because that's what they're being taught by the powerful adults in their lives - they would beg you to pass this bill. Since they can't, I'll beg you instead. Restraint and seclusion are inhumane. Full stop. Do the moral thing. I beg you.

When I asked my 13 year old daughter (who has Down syndrome) what she thought of restraint and seclusion she said the following.

"Teachers don't understand how students with intellectual disabilities need to be supported. They need to listen to students and treat them how they would want to be treated." She also likes to point out, to those who need reminding, "I'm a HUMAN BEING, and I HAVE RIGHTS."

She is fully included in regular education classes with nondisabled peers. She has agency because we've made sure of it. Unlike some teachers and "experts" she knows her life has as much value as any other, and she recognizes the weight of her duty to speak up for those who haven't been given the same opportunities that she has.

\*\*\* It's important to note that the above use of the word "given" should be taken with a grain of salt. We've taken those opportunities because we have the privilege and education to do that, and we've done so without attorneys ever being involved. It's exhausting and soul sucking, and it's probably forever. Oppressors never "give" anything up without a fight, and disabled people are among the most oppressed people in the world. If you're hearing this as an implication that teachers and "experts" are doing the oppressing, you're not imagining my meaning. There's nothing "special" about special education, and the outcomes are proof of that for anyone who cares enough to notice.

With that, I'll sign off and move on to the next bit of advocacy on my never-ending list. Please don't hesitate to reach out with questions or requests for more information. The above is just the tip of the iceberg. Also, I don't have the energy to proofread. I mean no disrespect, I'm just exhausted.

Here's a resource to help you unpack the idea of "parental choice." <http://www.startingwithjulius.org.au/parental-choice->

[segregation/?fbclid=IwAR0uIATVyndopDkZ-xA15gkErQLst4LFwYDDsc\\_K474qSIEjkGR-gNT5r\\_w](https://www.facebook.com/segregation/?fbclid=IwAR0uIATVyndopDkZ-xA15gkErQLst4LFwYDDsc_K474qSIEjkGR-gNT5r_w)

Sincerely,

Erin Rowan  
Scarborough