

Oral Testimony: Guy Stephens SB 705

Chairman Pinsky and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to share my testimony today. My name is Guy Stephens. I am a father and the executive director of the Alliance Against Seclusion and Restraint.

About three years ago, my neurodivergent son was illegally restrained and secluded for the last time. The experience left him traumatized and afraid to return to school. As a result, he finished the remainder of the school year in a home and hospital program. Before our family's experience, I would have never imagined that children were routinely restrained and secluded in schools across the state. I talked to my son about what had happened to him. I made a promise to him that I would do anything in my power to make sure it never happened to him again.

After making my promise, I immersed myself in research. I wanted to understand why this was occurring and its impact on children and educators. I tried to understand what we could do to reduce and eliminate these harmful practices. I began by looking for data. I examined data that resulted from 2017 legislation that required school districts and nonpublic schools to report the use of restraint and seclusion. In the first report, I learned that my school district, Calvert County Public Schools (CCPS), had the highest rate of seclusion and the second-highest rate of restraint when viewed against enrollment. This data prompted me to reach out to our board of education to raise awareness and promote change. I successfully worked with our school district to change our policy, practice, and training.

In 2019 Calvert County Public Schools implemented Ukeru, a trauma-informed alternative to restraint and seclusion. Additionally, in early 2020 they began training in a program called Collaborative and Proactive Solutions, an evidence-based approach to minimize restraint, seclusion, suspensions, expulsions, and corporal punishment.

In the 2017/2018 school year, Calvert County Public Schools (CCPS) reported 576 instances of restraint and 701 instances of seclusion. In the current school year, CCPS has reported 14 instances of restraint and just three instances of seclusion. The change in school culture and training led to a significant reduction in restraint and seclusion. A current proposed change in policy will prohibit seclusion in the coming school year, and with your help, we can end the practice in all public schools. Today I ask you to be proactive in supporting a favorable outcome for SB 705.