

Anonymous Minnesota Seclusion Accounts

The Multicultural Autism Action Network (MAAN) and Solutions Not Suspensions (SNS) collected these stories and testimonies. MAAN and SNS have not edited the language provided to us in these various testimonies, these are the words provided by the parents and individuals who have directly experienced seclusion in MN schools. These are their statements, unedited, as they were received.

Fardowsa's story

My name is Fardowsa. When my son was 12, he started at a new school that was overwhelming for him. I had asked to visit while school was in session to see if it was a good fit, but they only allowed a visit when the building was empty. Once school started, I didn't hear much and assumed things were going well.

One day I got a call saying my son was injured and needed to be picked up. I rushed to the school and, on my way to his classroom, saw a janitor standing by a closet. Inside, my son was banging on the door, trying to get out. I was horrified. The janitor said he had been put in that closet nearly every day since school started — for almost two months — and I had never been told.

At a meeting, the school claimed he had only been secluded once and that it "didn't count" other times because the door wasn't locked. But my son was clearly traumatized. He was overwhelmed by the sensory environment, yet no one discussed his needs with me. Seclusion didn't help — it only taught him that school isn't safe. Several years later school still does not feel like a safe place to him.

Mason's story

My name is Jamie. I recently moved to Duluth, MN with my now 16-year-old son, after living in Two Harbors for 13 years. My son, who was diagnosed with Autism at the age of 3, was part of the Lake Superior School district since he was 4. Mason went to a special program before going into kindergarten. The program was supposed to help him learn skills so he was ready to be with his peers, but that didn't happen. He was secluded in "special rooms" over 250 times because of his behavior. In first grade we tried a private school that asked my son to leave after attending for less than a month. He resumed a life of abuse and seclusion at yet another district. In second grade he was referred to a Co-op that oversees special ed services for 13 counties.

They decided to put together a level 4 (which is the most restrictive setting) program in a "central location". This school was over 60 miles away from our home. This so-called school consisted of 4 kids and was in a hallway of a church. He finally started in our home district for the first time at FOURTEEN years old.

He was not welcomed. He had to sit alone at lunch and was never included in anything

in or outside of school. He had been isolated his whole life and it should come as no surprise that he hated school because of how alone he felt. He was segregated, isolated, and alone. Because his peers never spent time around him, they didn't know how to react, so being mean was their go-to. My son is on his 6th school in ten years. The harm of seclusion and isolation never goes away. If any of his schools had actually taken the time to learn how to support kids like him, we wouldn't be where we are today. No child deserves to feel like they don't matter.

M's Story

When we first met M he was a second grader. He was one of these kids that the schools are talking about when they tell their horror stories. When we first met him the school had just completed data collection that showed 200 "infractions" in a single week, which included everything from hitting, spitting, throwing furniture, and elopement. When we met M, he had experienced multiple seclusions, restraints, and missed over 70 days of school due to suspensions. M's ticket on the school-to-prison pipeline was bought and paid for before he was eight years old. His family reached out to our organization for help, and we could quickly see that the IEP he had in place was woefully inadequate. He did not have the right diagnoses or support in place, so the first step was to get those in place, and then work on finding him a school that could meet his needs. He moved to a new school halfway through his 2nd grade year, and it made a world of difference for him to move to a place that did not see him as a problem child, but rather as a struggling child in need of support.

When he moved to a calm, sensory-friendly environment, where his teachers were focused on building a relationship with him, things did a 180 degree turn for him. We just attended his 4th grade IEP meeting, and his teacher said "I was going to pull discipline data but there wasn't any." This same child who was written up 200 times in one week has had no suspensions, no seclusions, no restraints in over two years. It is important to note that it wasn't the child that changed, it was the adults who changed their approach and the environment that met his needs. Those two things made all the difference in the world.

Anonymous Minnesota Parent and Child:

"Why did you send me to that school?" This is a question I have heard too many times. And, each time I have not had an answer that justifies. My now 16-year-old African-American son wonders why he was sent to a Level 4 school. Why was he shoved alone into a seclusion room with blue padding and chaotic writing on the walls? Why did adults stand outside the thick door and do nothing while he screamed?

The experiences did absolutely nothing but enrage him, making him feel like a caged

animal. He was not threatening the lives of others. He was not threatening his own life. How was an autistic six year old supposed to interpret the experience in seclusion? He was being forced to comply with a punishment system that his disability did not allow him to understand. The tragic reality was, the punishment was cruel and unusual.

Our son was adopted at birth and received a disability diagnosis at the age of 4. We were led to believe the Level 4 school was a great option for him. Before placing him in the school, I requested to visit while the school was in session. I was told a visit would be a HIPAA violation. So, no visitors were allowed. This, however, was not a policy as I discovered in May. I demanded to visit for a day. I, as his parent, was faced with the sorrowful reality of each day. There was nothing appropriate about this education setting. There was nothing enriching.

After that horrific year and a hard fight, he was placed in a different school and awarded what is sadly a luxury. That being his own one-on-one paraprofessional. This changed everything. She grew to know him. A bond was built and trust was earned. We, as his parents, worked tirelessly with his teachers and administration and together built on his successes, instead of tearing him down for his failures. The cost and rewards system was thrown out, replaced instead by a strongly built behavioral plan, filled with personalized motivators. Adults work better with motivators, too. Who doesn't love a bonus or a free lunch? He is now a sophomore. And, after first grade has never spent time in seclusion.

Now, if we could adequately answer the question as to why it ever happened. We can't. So we fight to ensure it never happens to other children. Minnesota can and must do better.