



MAWSECO
MEEKER AND WRIGHT SPECIAL EDUCATION
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Serving the following programs:

Cornerstones Program • Eastern Wright Program • Journeys Program • Sholund School • STEP Program
TREK Program • Village Ranch Alternative Program • Wings Program • Birth - 2

Members of the Seclusion Working Group:

My name is Melissa Hanson, and I serve as Executive Director of the Meeker and Wright Special Education Cooperative (MAWSECO), a special education cooperative serving seven member school districts in central Minnesota. MAWSECO operates eight specialized programs, including three schools located within residential care and treatment facilities and five Federal Setting IV special education programs. The students in the residential programs within MAWSECO are placed there by court order. The students attending our special education programs are placed by their IEP teams. Our role is to serve students with the most complex educational and behavioral needs; students whose disabilities require intensive, highly structured programming and supports to access education safely.

For many years, MAWSECO has invested heavily in staff training focused on prevention, de-escalation, and emergency response. All staff receive Handle with Care training in crisis prevention, safe physical intervention, and training on legal compliance. Four years ago, we added Ukeru to our Federal Setting IV programs to further reduce the use of restraint and seclusion. Ukeru has proven effective for many students and has meaningfully reduced restrictive interventions across our programs.

Despite these efforts, there are rare but critical situations where seclusion serves as the safest and least harmful emergency response for a student.

When Minnesota's restriction on the use of seclusion for students in grades K-3 went into effect on September 1, 2024, one student in a MAWSECO Federal Setting IV program raised significant concern for their IEP team. This student experienced sudden and severe behavioral escalations without predictable triggers. Even neutral or positive interactions (e.g., a staff member giving feedback such as, "good job") could result in immediate physical aggression. Despite extensive data collection, expert consultation, and consistent implementation of proactive strategies, the team could not identify reliable methods to prevent escalation. This team included highly experienced Setting IV special educators, board-certified behavior analysts (who were also Ukeru and Handle with Care trainers), a licensed mental health professional, a lead teacher who was also a Ukeru trainer, and paraprofessionals trained extensively in crisis response. Our cooperative's lead Ukeru trainer provided regular on-site coaching to ensure fidelity of implementation.

When the student escalated, the student would immediately begin physically attacking staff. Due to the sudden and unpredictable onset of physical aggression, staff and, sometimes other students, in the room were injured. Ukeru blocking strategies were implemented with fidelity but frequently lasted over an hour and often resulted in continued or increased escalation. Physical holds were also ineffective and frequently intensified the student's distress. In contrast, when seclusion was used appropriately as an emergency intervention, the student more quickly de-escalated and more frequently remained regulated. For this student, **seclusion functioned as a stabilizing intervention, not a punitive one.** It appeared that the lack

of direct contact with others in a quiet, small space with no distractions, may have helped the student to feel secure and seemed to support the student's ability to regulate.

After seclusion was no longer permitted, staff injuries increased, and law enforcement was called regularly to assist in maintaining safety. Emergency medical services were engaged more frequently. These outcomes occurred despite extensive training in trauma-informed practices, neurobiology of stress and trauma, de-escalation techniques, and ongoing professional support and coaching.

Ultimately, the IEP team discussed whether a referral to a residential treatment program was necessary; not solely because the team believed the student required a higher level of care, but because the Federal Setting IV program no longer had access to a critical safety tool that supported this student. The student's parents strongly opposed the placement of their student in a residential program.

This example illustrates some of the potential unintended consequences of removing seclusion entirely from the emergency response toolbox. These consequences include, but are not limited to:

- Increased reliance on prolonged physical holds and blocking techniques
- Higher rates of staff injury
- More frequent involvement of law enforcement and emergency medical services
- Shortened school days
- Increased recommendations to place the student in a more restrictive setting (e.g., home-based or residential placements)

These consequences disproportionately affect students in rural and out-state Minnesota. Residential options, particularly those for elementary-aged students, students with significant aggression, and students with lower cognitive profiles, are extremely limited. Furthermore, most special education placements above Setting IV are privately run so these programs can say no to taking students who do not fit their desired client profile. For many families, Federal Setting IV programs are the highest level of care realistically available within their community. When these programs lose the ability to respond safely to emergencies, students face fewer educational options, greater disruption, and more restrictive placements.

I strongly believe that seclusion, when tightly regulated, carefully monitored, and used only as a last resort in true emergencies, can be an appropriate and necessary intervention for a small number of students. Allowing seclusion supports safety, preserves access to education, and promotes equity for students in rural Minnesota who lack access to alternative services.

I urge policymakers to consider the real-world impact of this restriction and to allow limited, regulated use of seclusion to ensure student and staff safety while maintaining access to appropriate educational placements.

Sincerely,



Melissa Hanson
Executive Director