

PEOPLE First of Nevada Reno Chapter



Scream Rooms

An investigation of the existence of seclusion rooms in the Washoe County School District

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Your freedom and mine cannot be separated.

-Nelson Mandela-



This publication is supported by the Nevada Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, Administration for Children and Families CFDA #93.630. The contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the NGCDD, Administration of Developmental Disabilities, Nevada Center for Excellence in Disabilities or any other supporting organization or agency.

The Law

In Nevada, in 1999, the legislature heard testimony from children and parents of children who had been abused as part of their “special” education programs. Many groups testified that the use of aversive interventions should be stopped. Nevada passed a law that said that it is prohibited to use seclusion rooms. The law says this:

NRS 388.5215 “Aversive intervention” defined. “Aversive intervention” means any of the following actions if the action is used to punish a pupil with a disability or to eliminate, reduce or discourage maladaptive behavior of a pupil with a disability...

8. The placement of a person alone in a room where release from the room is prohibited by a mechanism, including, without limitation, a lock, device or object positioned to hold the door closed or otherwise prevent the person from leaving the room;

NRS 388.5265 Aversive intervention prohibited. A person employed by the board of trustees of a school district or any other person shall not use any aversive intervention on a pupil with a disability. (Added to NRS by [1999, 3238](#))

People First Scream Room Subcommittee

The People First subcommittee was formed on March 1, 2012 at a meeting where a member - who is a dad - talked about his little six year old child being put in a scream room without his knowledge at Caughlin Ranch Elementary School. He showed us pictures of the room (Appendix 1) and a note from her banging to get out.

Some of us have been locked in scream rooms ourselves when we were children/students in the Washoe County School District. Some before it was illegal, and some after it became illegal.

“Scream rooms” is a name given by children who get put in seclusion rooms and are prevented from leaving. Nondisabled children in schools say scream rooms, because they can hear the students with disabilities screaming to get out. Most often, it is children labeled with a disability and put in a segregated classroom who face the unlawful use of seclusion. But they are not the only ones harmed by the use and the presence of scream rooms in our schools. Sometimes these rooms are called “time out room,” “quiet area,” “quiet room,” “white room,” or “sensory room,” but if the child is forced to go there, and/or prevented from leaving the room, we call it a scream room.

What We Did & What We Found

Research:

The first thing our subcommittee did was to learn about some national reports. They were:

- The Right to Be Safe In Schools - The Council of Parent Attorney's and Advocates (2011) https://copaa.site-ym.com/store/view_product.asp?ID=1259526
- School is Not Supposed to Hurt - National Disability Rights Network (2012) <http://disabilitylawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads2/2012/03/School-is-Not-Supposed-to-Hurt-3-v7.pdf>
- Seclusions and Restraints: Selected Cases of Death and Abuse at Public and Private Schools and Treatment Centers - United States General Accountability Office (GAO 2009) <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d09719t.pdf>

The Right to be Safe in Schools explained the name “Scream Rooms.” The GAO report found that children with disabilities were sometimes put in scream rooms even when they did not appear to be physically aggressive. It also found that children were “...confined to small, dark places and prevented from leaving the rooms to use the restrooms, forcing them to urinate on themselves.” It also found death resulting from students hanging themselves in the rooms. The GAO report found that teachers were often not trained about safe use of techniques, and often continued to work as teachers, or be licensed to do so, after seriously injuring or contributing to the death of a child. The GAO report found that the average age of seclusion (and restraint) is *ten years old*.

Personal or Local Reports

Among our members and individuals interviewed for this report, we found similar results for Washoe County. The PEOPLE First, Reno Chapter, members who had been forced into scream rooms had this happen to them between the ages of six and thirteen. Children from the community were reported to have been forced into scream rooms between the ages of five and eleven. Common reactions experienced and reported because of use of scream rooms are:

- 1) Terror/fear
- 2) Horror
- 3) Anger
- 4) Hopelessness/loss of trust
- 5) Physical aggression;
- 6) Urinating and defecating on self because locked in the room;
- 7) Removal from regular education classes to more or complete segregation;
- 8) Loss of academic skills;
- 9) Loss of social skills;
- 10) Loss of connection to friends/family;

Working with School Administrators:

We contacted the Washoe County School District Planning and Design Department to find out how many scream rooms were in the school district. It was very difficult to get a meeting. The district was doing bids for work over the summer so it took a long time to work out a meeting.

In the meantime, we decided to do a survey of principals to see if they could tell us what school had scream rooms. We designed three layers for surveys. First we sent out an electronic “survey monkey” to all the principals in the whole school district. We only got back two responses.

The next step was to send out a paper copy of the survey with a self-addressed stamped envelope for them to return it to us. Only four schools responded.

We would like to give praise and commend the schools that answered the surveys:

Huffaker Elementary School
Sun Valley Elementary School (even invited us to visit!)
Gerlach Elementary School
Dilworth Stem Academy
Nancy Gomes Elementary School
Coral Academy of Science

These schools were open and honest and one invited us to come by for a visit. (Appendix 2)

On September 4, 2012, we finally met with Mr. Scott Reynolds, Chief Student Support Services Officer (special education), and Mr. Joe Gabica, Director of Planning and Design (buildings). Mr. Gabica was very helpful. He explained that since we had first contacted him in the spring for a meeting, he had directed staff in his department to remove the doors off of all of the scream rooms in the district.

Mr. Gabica then reported that the district has thirteen schools which appear, from the blue prints, to have scream rooms. They are:

- **Brown Elementary School**
- Moss Elementary School
- **Hidden Valley Elementary School**
- Alice Smith Elementary School
- **Ester Bennett Elementary School**
- **Van Gorder Elementary School**
- Rolland Melton Elementary School
- Hunsberger Elementary School

- **Double Diamond Elementary School**
- Bernice Matthews Elementary School
- Alice Taylor Elementary School
- **Caughlin Ranch Elementary School**
- **Piccolo School**

The members of the committee looked at the blue prints and listened and realized that at least one scream room was not listed, and that one school which was reported to us to have scream rooms was not on the list.

We told Mr. Gabica that there was a scream room in what we thought was the B-hall of Caughlin Ranch Elementary School (Appendix 1). We also said Bud Beasley Elementary Schools had at least one scream room that we had heard about. Mr. Gabica explained that it is possible that a parent group or a school built rooms that were not built by his department. He said the staff of his office had come across such rooms, and if they found them being used for students they would advise administration immediately to stop doing so, because they often had no appropriate “air exchange” (ventilation).

Mr. Gabica and Mr. Reynolds reported that an estimate to completely remove the rooms described to the committee would be \$49,155.00.

Survivors and Victims:

Four members of our subcommittee were subject to repeated seclusion in Washoe County schools. Three are adults and one is a child. Two were before the change in the law. Two were after (Appendix 3). We received reports about eight children who were put in seclusion who were not members of our committee. The **bolded** schools above show all the schools for which we have personal knowledge or reports of the use of seclusion. One of the reports came from *Bud Beasley Elementary School* which is not on the list. One of the victims at Picollo reportedly continued to be put in the room after the doors came off and sat on the cold bare linoleum floor.

Later in our investigation, another victim from Bud Beasley was found, for a total of nine community survivors/victims, or twelve survivors/victims in all.

Missing Scream Rooms:

Right after our meeting with Mr. Gabica and Mr. Reynolds, we decided to go to some schools and see if we could find missing scream rooms or be sure the doors had been removed. One of our members went to Caughlin Ranch Elementary School and two other members contacted the principal of Marvin Picollo by email and then called to set up convenient times to visit the schools.

At Caughlin Ranch, our member met with two special education teachers. They assured him there were no scream rooms/seclusion rooms in Caughlin Ranch. They also gave him a tour of two special education classes in the A-hall to prove it. A-hall had two rooms, and the doors had been removed. These were the rooms that we had already been shown on the blue print. After he reported back to us, we were concerned that this room had a lack of ventilation and might be a fire hazard, especially because no one seemed to know it was there. We guessed what classrooms rooms in B-hall might have the scream room we had a picture of, and sent a letter to the Reno Fire Marshall. He wrote us back right away and said he looked in one room we suggested, but that the second room we suggested did not exist (appendix 4).

We found a teacher to ask what number the room on our Caughlin Ranch Elementary School map the scream room might be. S/he suggested B-5, so we asked the Reno Fire Marshall to look one more time. He wrote back and said there was no scream room at all in the B hall. (Appendix 5).

We thought maybe there would be a permit for building the rooms since it was not on the blue prints of the district. Two members volunteered to go to the Reno Permit Place to see if they could find building permit requests for Caughlin Ranch Elementary School. The person who helped them reported that their child had also been locked in seclusion. It was reported to have occurred at Bud Beasley Elementary School. It was reported that the walls were covered in carpet. There were *no permits to build* a room at Caughlin ranch that would be what we were looking for, but there was a permit for “*alterations for a janitor’s closet*” issued after our meeting with Mr. Gabica and Mr. Reynolds. We have asked for a copy from the school district under FOIA and state records law, but have not received it. We hope that the room was removed when the permit was issued and that is why the Fire Marshall could not find it.

We did know for sure Bud Beasley had a scream room in it after visiting the Reno Permit Place.

We sent letters asking to visit a number of schools to see if we could locate the scream rooms, and/or make sure the doors had been removed. Not one school would administrator would set up a tour. Not even after school. (Appendix 6)

At Picollo, the members went after school because they had contacted the principal and he never contacted them.

We contacted Scott Reynolds to see if he had anything to report about the missing rooms or anything that had happened after our meeting. He said “No issues were noted.” (Appendix 7) We contacted Sparks’ City Hall and spoke with a Records Technician there who provided is with a copy of the floor plans for Bud Beasley. The scream rooms are on the floor plans in the C hall

(Appendix 8). It was very hard to read and the halls were named different than the schools name them.

A community advocate who was familiar with our subcommittee because she sat in on the meeting with Mr. Reynolds and Mr. Gabica, reported to our subcommittee on June 12, 2013, that she was at a meeting at Bud Beasley Elementary School helping plan for a student there. The child was having significant problems with toileting accidents. After the meeting ended, the family took the advocate to see a scream room like the one in the child's classroom (it was a mirror image of the student's classroom). We were provided a picture that shows our committee it still has a door on it (Appendix 9). It is also carpeted with very thick shag carpet the way you would to make it sound proof. It was also looks like it is being used for students. The teacher of the student reportedly came in from the class next door and became upset about them looking at the room. The advocate reports attempting to explain to the teacher that the doors needed to be removed from these kinds of rooms, but reportedly the teacher did not seem to be interested in the problem of the doors for children attending the school, perhaps because she was teaching in a room with a scream room in it also. The advocate reported that she and the family walked out to the parking lot to talk and the school staff called school police, who asked them questions while they stood outside the school. The advocate says the rooms and doors were reported to school police and their existence should be noted if the police did a report for that call, because school police are there to protect children.

Access to public records:

We learned about our right as citizens to get public records. We requested all the reports in the school district filed under the rules of AB280/56, the bill numbers for the law that prohibits the use of scream rooms and other aversive interventions. They sent us the information on May 3, 2012. They said they don't have the information for three school years from 1999/00, 2000/01, and 2001/02. They gave us 2002-2003 through 2010-2011 (Appendix 12 and available through Randy Drake's office).

We do not think there should be *any* aversive interventions in schools. Under the law, more than five (5) requires an IEP team to meet again and fix the plan. So we decided that more than six was excessive in a single school year. Most schools *never have any*. Then we made a list of schools that had excessive aversive interventions. (Appendix 13) The lowest number was 8, and the highest was 92 in a single school year. Only 24 schools are on the list of excessive aversive interventions over a nine year period. The average is 6 schools per year, with a high of 11 and a low of 2. One school of significant concern is Dodson elementary School which is not listed as having a scream room, but has a consistently high rate of the use of aversive interventions. We are concerned it may have a scream room. We found that eight (8) of the thirteen (13) schools (61%) which contain a scream room also are on the list of schools with excessive aversive interventions.

We also asked for the types and location of all special education programs. We received that information for the 2012-2013 school year on October 18, 2012. (Appendix 14) We requested additional years from the school district's legal counsel but our request has not been responded to.

We found that students in three eligibility categories are *most likely* to be placed in a school with a scream room:

- 1) Early childhood/DK – students labeled developmentally delayed (under age six)
- 2) Strategies – student most likely labeled autism
- 3) Community Life Skills – Students most likely labeled intellectually disabled and related conditions

We believe the information would be similar for other years. We think this may be discrimination on the basis of disabilities for children in those three categories, because they are far more likely than nondisabled children or children with other disabilities to be put in scream rooms in unlawful seclusion.

Conclusion:

There are 35 known scream rooms in Washoe County School District, if we assume the B-hall scream room was taken out when they got a permit to “alter a janitor’s closet.” Taking the doors of is not enough. Phone calls and work orders can put doors back on. Private companies can put doors back on with school or parent group funding.

Scream Rooms have no lawful purpose. We want you to think about the prejudice that was created in the minds of *many* people about the dangerousness of children – little children - with disabilities when these elementary school scream rooms came into being. The architects who made the plans had to be told children with disabilities are so dangerous that they sometimes need to be locked in *closets*. They had to be asked something like “Please, put some closets in these classrooms for the dangerous little children with disabilities.” The school board committees and trustees who approved the plans had to be told the same prejudice. The builders who used the plans to build the schools had to be told the same. Teachers, administrators, parents, foster parents, and grandparents were all told the same. Visitors to the schools were all told the prejudice, and if not told, they could see it with their own eyes. School police who came to arrest little eight year old children with disabilities probably did not question their anger and their violent behavior, because the room was right there. It was solid, and it was real. Children with disabilities *must* be dangerous. And the students outside those classes who could hear the screaming, they came to believe that those children are so dangerous, they had to be locked up. Would you be friends with someone you thought was dangerous?

Everyone came to believe it.

Everyone but us. We knew all the time.

Still, that is a lot of prejudice to get undone.

And since we still live in this community and because care very much for the little children with disabilities, we think it would be right to undo that prejudiced thinking.

Recommendations for the Board of trustees:

- 1) So that the community knows the truth about these rooms, we recommend the Washoe County Board of Trustees immediately require staff to make a thorough search of all schools to determine if all scream rooms have been located, and require a report to a public board meeting.
- 2) So that there is no immediate danger of children, we recommend the WCSD Board of Trustees require staff to remove all doors from all known scream rooms.
- 3) So that we have an accurate estimate, we recommend that the WCSD Board of Trustees require Building and Design to create a new cost estimate for removal of these rooms entirely.
- 4) So that we know if there has been discrimination against students with *certain disabilities*, we recommend the WCSD Board of Trustees direct staff to do an accounting for all the years the rooms have been in place of the types of programs placed in the classes with scream rooms, and require a report in a public board meeting.
- 5) So that children in our community are not faced with witnessing, or experiencing this kind of violence ever again in the name of education, and so that these rooms no longer pose a liability to the district from legal action by families who may seek damages for their children hurt by unlawful seclusion, we recommend the WCSD Board of Trustees vote to include the amount necessary into its 2013-2014 school budget to remove the rooms, and order the rooms to be removed entirely at the next school break.
- 6) So that those of us who have been, and continue to be, injured by the old prejudiced beliefs can be healed, we recommend the WCSD Board of Trustees publically apologize to all former victims for the prejudices and discrimination of the past, and promise a new start in its response to children with disabilities. You didn't start the fire, but you can put it out for good.

TABLE OF APPENDIX

Appendix 1 – Photo: Caughlin Ranch Elementary School Scream Room

Appendix 2 – Survey sample

Appendix 3 – Proof of scream room use after 1999

Appendix 4 – Contact and Response from Fire Marshall re: Caughlin Ranch
Scream Room

Appendix 5 – Second contact with Reno Fire Marshall

Appendix 6 – Letters Requesting Tours of Public Schools

Appendix 7 – “No Issues” letter from Reynolds

Appendix 8 - Bud Beasley floor plans

Appendix 9 – Photo: Bud Beasley Elementary School Scream Room

Appendix 10 – Cover letters re: Aversives reports

Appendix 11 – List of schools with excessive reports of aversive intervention

Appendix 12 – Cover letter and types and location of programs for 2011-2012