In the following report, Hanover Research summarizes best practices in time-out and seclusion implementation, with a focus on improving time-out and seclusion practices for students with special needs in the elementary grades.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Definitions of time-out and seclusion vary, and perhaps because of this variance, both practices are frequently poorly understood and implemented. Time-out is a continuum of punishment procedures that – while removing students from an area or item providing positive reinforcement – allows students to move freely if needed and subjects them to no physical restraint. In comparison, seclusion is an emergency procedure that can include limiting students’ freedom of movement to prevent injury. If unaware of these differences, educators may place students in “time-outs” that are, in fact, seclusion, or use seclusion as a behavioral management tool rather than an emergency response.

To clarify the differences between time-out and seclusion and discuss how school districts can improve their implementation of these practices, this report proceeds in two sections:

- **Section I: Understanding Time-Out and Seclusion Practices** discusses the definitions, practices, and goals of time-out and seclusion. The section also summarizes experts’ commentary on the implementation of these practices in school settings.

- **Section II: Improving Time-Out and Seclusion Practices** discusses best practices in implementing time-out and seclusion practices, with the goal of helping districts better understand how they can improve practices used in their schools.

KEY FINDINGS

**Understanding Time-out and Seclusion**

- **Time-out refers to a continuum of practices that remove students from the “sources of reinforcement” for negative behaviors.** The goal of all practices on the time-out continuum is to reduce negative behaviors and discourage future negative behaviors. Similar instructional procedures with different goals, such as encouraging students to spend time in a sensory room to relax after a period of stress, are not time-outs.

- **Time-outs should be swift and rarely used by educators.** Using time-outs too frequently decreases their efficacy as a punishment and may signal that the teacher needs a wider range of classroom management tools. When educators do use time-outs, they should be about five to 15 minutes long and not exceed 30 minutes.

- **Seclusion refers to the practice of placing students in a room that they are physically prevented from leaving.** The goal of seclusion is to prevent out-of-control, dangerous students from harming themselves or others. Any similar procedure that places students alone in a space that they are physically prevented from leaving (through locks, obstacles, etc.) is seclusion, regardless of the goal of the placement.

- **Seclusion should be used rarely, if at all, to control the behavior of students.** Seclusion should only be used in circumstances when less restrictive interventions have failed to de-escalate a students’ behavior, or the students’ behavior poses a
direct threat to their own health or to the health of other students or staff. Moreover, seclusion should end as soon as the student’s direct threat is over.

**IMPROVING TIME-OUT AND SECLUSION PRACTICES**

- **Educators should implement time-outs and seclusion, if necessary, within a broad and comprehensive framework of positive behavior supports.** Most experts recommend that this framework be a formal positive behavior support system like Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS), which emphasizes a positive approach to behavioral issues and focuses on introducing, modeling, and reinforcing what students should do rather than waiting for misbehavior to occur.
  - Within the positive behavior support framework, time-out should not the only possible teacher reaction to student misbehavior. Examples of alternatives include environmental adjustments (e.g., moving a student’s desk) and response cost (e.g., temporarily removing a students’ access to after-school activities or other extra-curricular).

- **Standards for implementing time-outs and seclusion should be clear, consistently communicated, and consistently followed.** These standards should be codified in an official school document and cover topics such as the school districts’ definitions of time-out and seclusion, implementation procedures, and follow-up procedures.

- **Educators need to maintain documentation recording when, why, and for how long students are placed in time-outs or seclusion.** However, the complexity and length of this documentation vary depending on whether students are placed in time-outs or seclusion. Generally, teachers using time-outs only need to maintain simple documentation noting when and why they place specific students in time-outs. In contrast, any staff involved in a seclusion should maintain more specific documentation describing information such as the exact actions that preceded the seclusion, the actual seclusion, and the actions following the seclusion.

- **Parents and guardians should be familiar with district time-out and seclusion policies.** Depending on local laws or regulations, they may need to provide permission before educators can place their children in restrictive time-outs or seclusion. Parents should also be promptly notified whenever their child is placed in more restrictive time-outs or secluded. This notification helps keep parents informed of their child’s behavior and the schools’ reaction to that behavior, demonstrating that the school views parents as equal partners in their child’s education. This notification is often necessary to maintain compliance with local laws or regulations.

- **Staff handling time-outs and seclusion should receive sufficient training on the proper use these tools.** Teachers should receive basic training on time-outs to increase their understanding of the qualified disciplinary actions to ensure that time-outs are not implemented inefficiently or unethically. Meanwhile, any staff implementing seclusion should receive more detailed training that covers topics such as local laws and regulations, conflict de-escalation, and the proper use of seclusion for students of different age groups and abilities.
SECTION I: UNDERSTANDING TIME-OUT AND SECLUSION PRACTICES

The following section discusses the definitions, practices, and goals of time-outs and seclusion, and summarizes experts’ commentary on the implementation of these practices in school settings.

DEFINITIONS

Definitions of time-out and seclusion vary, in part due to misunderstandings by both professionals and laypeople over how time-out and seclusion can be implemented. As the International Journal of Special Education describes, factors contributing to these variances include changes in “the conceptualization of time-out over time, the variety of ways to implement time-out, the multiple definitions which exist in the literature, occasional paradoxical effects, and difficulties in differentiating between time-out and response cost.”

Further complicating the definitions, some experts consider time-out and seclusion as separate practices, while others see seclusion as a type of time-out. For example, the U.S. Department of Education notes in an August 2016 Dear Colleague letter on the use of seclusion among students with disabilities that seclusion “does not include time-out,” whereas a fact sheet from the Minnesota Disability Law Center describes seclusion as a conditional type of time-out during which students are isolated in a specially designed room.

In this report, we follow the practice set by the U.S. Department of Education and define time-out and seclusion as separate practices. The following sub-sections further explore both definitions and the key differences between these practices.

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TIME-OUT

**TIME-OUT IS A BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION IN WHICH A STUDENT, FOR A LIMITED AND SPECIFIED TIME, IS PLACED IN AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE ACCESS TO POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT IS UNAVAILABLE. IN A TIME-OUT SETTING...**

**A STUDENT’S MOVEMENT IS NOT PHYSICALLY RESTRICTED. TIME-OUT LIES WITHIN A CONTINUUM OF PROCEDURES THAT HELP STUDENTS SELF-REGULATE AND CONTROL THEIR BEHAVIOR.**

Source: Michigan Department of Education

Overall, time-out refers to a continuum of practices that remove students from the “sources of reinforcement” for negative behaviors. However, sources’ depiction of this continuum vary. For instance, based on the Michigan Department of Education, this continuum includes four phases – planned ignoring, withdrawal of materials, contingent observation, and exclusionary or seclusionary time-outs. Figure 1.1, below, shows more details on the four phases.

**Figure 1.1: Time-Out Continuum (Michigan Department of Education)**

- **Planned Ignoring**
  - ... is the systematic withdrawal of social attention for a predetermined time period upon the onset of mild levels of problem behavior.

- **Withdrawal of Materials**
  - ... occurs when materials that the student is using are removed upon the occurrence of the inappropriate behavior.

- **Contingent Observation**
  - ... takes place when the student remains in a position to observe the group without participating or receiving reinforcement for a specified period of time.

- **Exclusionary (or Seclusionary) Timeout**
  - ... occurs when the student is removed from the instructional setting in response to behavior that requires immediate and direct cessation, and can occur in the same classroom or in a nearby supervised location.

Source: Michigan Department of Education

Meanwhile, the *International Journal of Special Education* states that the continuum includes three phases – exclusionary, non-exclusionary, and isolation time-outs, as explained in Figure 1.2 below.

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   http://www.state.ky.us/agencies/behave/bi/to.pdf


7 Content taken with minor edits from: Ibid., pp. 8–9.
Despite the differences, these two continuums both demonstrate how the time-out continuum generally moves from the least restrictive and non-isolated procedures (e.g., withdrawal of materials) to the most restrictive and isolated procedures (e.g., isolation).9

The goal of all practices on the time-out continuum is to reduce negative behaviors and discourage future negative behaviors by removing students from stimuli encouraging negative behaviors.10 As one writer notes in an article by the Autism in Education Partnership, “the proper use of the term [time-out] refers to a procedure... more accurately called ‘time-out from positive reinforcement.’” This removal is a deliberate punishment:11

In behavioral terms, it is a punishment procedure – a procedure in which a consequence is applied immediately following a behavior and the result is a decrease in that behavior in the future. The purpose of time-out is to remove access to the reinforcement that may be maintaining undesirable or challenging behavior, thereby reducing or stopping the behavior. Time-out may be considered an intrusive behavior reduction procedure because it interrupts a student’s instructional program.

Consequently, the efficacy of time-outs as a punishment is undermined if removal from specific stimuli is already the desired goal of students’ negative behaviors. For instance, if students behave poorly because they want to avoid participating in specific classroom activities and know that their teacher implements time-outs, then time-outs are not an effective punishment and do not encourage future improved behaviors.12

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9 Ibid., p. 23.
In addition, similar instructional procedures with different goals are not time-outs. Common examples of similar procedures include students’ use of a sensory room as a safe-haven from overwhelming stimuli, or students’ temporary removal from the general classroom to participate in one-on-one academic interventions in a separate location.

**EXPERT COMMENTARY**

**Time-out is a controversial topic in the literature.** Per the *International Journal of Special Education*, this controversy arises from “misunderstanding, ineffective use, and ethical consideration,” and leads to questions regarding how and when time-out represents an appropriate punishment.

Proponents of time-out argue that it is a proven strategy for controlling the behavior of young students aged three and older, and point to studies indicating “various effective uses of time-out with preadolescent children in the home, schools, and treatment facilities” as a “means of providing space and time for the young child to mull over wrongdoings, refresh feelings of guilt, and ponder socially desirable responses in similar circumstances.”

In comparison, critics of time-out believe that it does not meet children’s developmental needs and can easily be misused by parents or teachers unfamiliar with the differences between time-out and the harsher practice of seclusion. In regards to the former argument, a 2014 *Time Magazine* article suggests that time-out may indicate that “I’m only interested in being with you and being there for you when you’ve got it all together” and ignore the fact that children often misbehave because they want to connect with people around them.

Likewise, Gartrell’s 2001 analysis of time-out indicates that:

- The imposed external control of the time-out inhibits a child’s ability to build internal controls and may cause a child last feelings of being ineffectual;
- The child placed on a time-out chair does not have personal needs met, including the need to develop alternative strategies;
- The time-out diminishes the child’s developing self-worth and self-confidence, and may cause others to view the child as a trouble maker;
- The young child has difficulty understanding the relation of actions to consequences and may feel bewildered by the timeout experience; and

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Opportunities for learning valuable lessons in social relationships are lost during the period of isolation and humiliation from the time-out may diminish the value of adult follow-up.

Regarding the latter argument, some experts suggest that teachers and administrators often do not know how to implement time-outs in a safe and legally sound fashion. This ignorance leads to cases when children, particularly those with special needs, are isolated (i.e., secluded) and physically restrained in abusive ways not reflective of true “time-outs.”

**SECLUSION**

**SECLUSION IS THE CONFINEMENT OF A STUDENT IN A ROOM OR OTHER SPACE FROM WHICH THE STUDENT IS PHYSICALLY PREVENTED FROM LEAVING AND WHICH PROVIDES FOR CONTINUOUS ADULT OBSERVATION OF THE STUDENT. SECLUSION IS A LAST RESORT EMERGENCY SAFETY INTERVENTION.**

Source: Michigan Department of Education

Overall, seclusion refers to the practice of placing students in a room “from which [they are] physically prevented from leaving.” Students can be physically prevented from leaving by locks on the door, items in front of the door, or staff holding doors closed. It is important to note that any situation involving this physical prevention is considered seclusion, regardless of the goals of the procedure. As the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders (CCBD) explains, “any time a student is involuntarily alone in a room and prevented from leaving should be considered seclusion regardless of the intended purpose or the name applied to this procedure or the name of the place where the student is secluded.” For example, if a student is sent to sit alone in a “time-out room,” but the room is locked, then the student is experiencing seclusion, not a time-out, despite the name of the room.

Seclusion is commonly combined with restraint that restricts “the students’ ability to move his or her torso, arms, legs, or head freely” through physical (e.g., temporary touching or holding) or mechanical (e.g., prescribed devices, medical immobilization) means.

The goal of seclusion is to prevent out-of-control or dangerous students from harming themselves or others. As such, experts overwhelmingly recommend that seclusion should be used as a last resort in emergencies. However, many school districts use seclusion for non-emergency purposes, such as using it as a punishment for negative behavior, a provision of a “separate space” for students to calm down, or as relief for teachers challenged by student

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20 Ibid., pp. 26–27.
behavior in the classroom. All these practices are disparaged by multiple educational groups, such as advocates for students with special needs.

Given the definitions of time-out and seclusion, the key characteristics separating seclusion from exclusionary/seclusionary time-outs include physical prevention and purpose.

**Figure 1.3: Key Characteristics Separating Seclusion from Time-Out**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Time-Out</th>
<th>Seclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical prevention</td>
<td>Students are not physically prevented from leaving the space.</td>
<td>Students are physically prevented from leaving the space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>To punish and control negative student behavior</td>
<td>To prevent harm to students or staff during emergencies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: U.S. Department of Education27 and CCBD28

**EXPERT COMMENTARY**

Seclusion is a highly controversial practice. Critics argue that seclusion is rarely implemented ethically, leads to preventable student injuries and deaths, disproportionately impacts students with disabilities and students of color, is not backed by research, and lacks comprehensive standards. Figure 1.4 below displays more details on these arguments, which lead some lawmakers to propose “legislation to strictly limit the use of restraint, and to even ban the use of seclusion, in public schools.”30

**Figure 1.4: Arguments Against the Use of Seclusion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECLUSION...</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...is not backed by empirical research in schools.</td>
<td>Little research examines the implementation of or outcomes associated with seclusion in school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...lacks standards and accreditation processes.</td>
<td>In medical, psychiatric, and law enforcement settings, strict standards and accreditation processes govern the use of seclusion, but the same is not true of schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...disproportionally impacts specific student groups.</td>
<td>Data collected by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) found that a disproportionate share of secluded and restrained students with disabilities were black.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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30 Ibid.
In comparison, proponents acknowledge that seclusion can be implemented improperly and unethically, but argue that seclusion, when properly used, can be necessary to prevent students from harming themselves or others. As the executive director of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) notes in an interview with National Public Radio (NPR), “[seclusion] is used when a child is acting out in a way, for example, where they are in the process of clawing their eyes out, or tearing their hair out, or smashing their head up against the wall... or when a child will attack another child. Or when a child will attack a member of the staff.”

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   http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/03/13/24data.h31.html
SECTION II: IMPROVING TIME-OUT AND SECLUSION PRACTICES

This section discusses best practices in implementing time-out and seclusion practices, with the goal of helping districts better understand how to improve these practices in their schools.

FRAMEWORK

The following sub-sections discuss the broader framework of behavior management strategies within which time-outs and seclusion should occur.

IMPLEMENT WITHIN A FRAMEWORK OF SUPPORTS

Educators should implement time-outs and seclusion, if necessary, within a broad, comprehensive framework of positive behavior supports. Most experts recommend that this framework be a formal positive behavior support system like Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS). The Kentucky Department of Education, for example, advises that time-outs “must always be used in conjunction with an array of positive reinforcement,” and the Center for Disability Resources notes that schools should address and prevent the root causes of misbehavior by implementing PBIS. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education argues that “positive behavioral strategies should be in place in schools.”

Specifically, these experts argue that when schools consistently implement positive behavioral support systems, staff can pro-actively prevent student misbehavior and more effectively address and improve student behavior using less restrictive strategies.

POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION AND SUPPORTS (PBIS)

PBIS is a proactive approach to improving student behavior that consists of a three-tiered framework of supports reinforced by data and school systems. Overall, PBIS emphasizes a positive approach to behavioral issues and focuses on introducing, modeling, and reinforcing what students should do rather than waiting for misbehavior to occur.

Below, Figure 2.1 outlines PBIS’ three-tiered framework of support strategies. The first and universal framework contains proactive supports for all students at school (e.g., positively stated and clearly posted classroom behavior expectations), whereas the second and third

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36 Ibid., p. 5.
41 “What Is School-Wide PBIS?” PBIS. https://www.pbis.org/school
tiers contain supports for students who require additional behavioral interventions. Because the three tiers are composed of a series of general guidelines, each level is flexible and encompasses a “broad range of systemic and individualized strategies for achieving social and academic outcomes.” No school programs need to be exactly alike. Rather, every PBIS program can be adapted to suit the surrounding environment.

Figure 2.1: PBIS Framework

**Tier Three:** Individual supports implemented with students who have chronic patterns of problem behavior. The focus is on the completion of a functional behavioral assessment that leads to an individualized positive behavior support plan.

**Tier Two:** Secondary or small group/targeted level of supports focusing on students who require additional intervention to achieve outcomes. Features include small group instruction in self-management and social skill development as well as academic support in groups.

**Tier One:** Universal supports for all students within a school or district. Essential features include positively stated expectations, strategies to teach expectations, high rates of reinforcement for complying with expectations, and clear routines to increase the likelihood of success.

Source: Lewis, 2005.

This framework of strategies should be reinforced by *data* and *systems* to create durable, school-wide structures that better support student outcomes. Data is “information that used to identify status, need for change, and effects of interventions,” such as data on who gets disciplined, when they get disciplined, and why, whereas systems are “supports that are needed to enable the accurate and durable implementation of the practices of PBIS,” such as administrator support, collaborative time, and professional development.

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**CONSIDER ALTERNATIVES**

Even when implementing PBIS, teachers still need to react to student misbehavior. When doing so, they have many options – including, but not limited to, time-out. Below, Figure 2.2 displays a menu of eight possible reactions to student misbehavior. Notably, only some reactions, like time-out and response cost, punish the student for acting out. Others, such as academic or environmental adjustments (e.g., moving a student’s seat, changing a problem set) discourage future misbehavior by changing the classroom environment. Some reactions even trigger discussions about the reasons underlying the misbehavior.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>When to Use</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behavioral Reminder</strong></td>
<td>A behavioral reminder is a brief, neutral prompt to help the student to remember and follow classroom behavioral expectations.</td>
<td>A behavioral reminder is a brief, neutral prompt to help the student to remember and follow classroom behavioral expectations.</td>
<td>The teacher makes eye contact with the student who is misbehaving and points to a classroom rules chart.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Adjustment</strong></td>
<td>An academic adjustment is a change made to the student’s academic task(s) to improve behaviors.</td>
<td>Academic adjustments can be useful when the teacher judges that the student’s problem behaviors are triggered or exacerbated by the required academic task(s).</td>
<td>The teacher allows the student additional time to complete an academic task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environmental Adjustment</strong></td>
<td>An environmental adjustment is a change made to some aspect of the student’s environment to improve behaviors.</td>
<td>This strategy is used when the teacher judges that an environmental element (e.g., distracting activities, proximity of another student) is contributing to the student’s problem behavior.</td>
<td>The teacher moves the student’s seat away from distracting peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Warning</strong></td>
<td>A warning is a teacher statement informing the student that continued misbehavior will be followed by a specific disciplinary consequence.</td>
<td>A warning is appropriate when the teacher judges (a) that the student has control over his or her behavior and (b) that a pointed reminder of impending behavioral consequences may improve the student’s behavior.</td>
<td>The student is warned that continued misbehavior will result in the teacher’s calling the parent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time-out</strong></td>
<td>Time-out (from reinforcement) is a brief removal of the student from the setting due to problem behaviors.</td>
<td>Time-out from reinforcement can be effective in situations when the student would prefer to be in the classroom setting rather than in the time-out setting.</td>
<td>The teacher sends a student to a study carrel in the corner of the classroom for 5 minutes for misbehavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REACTION</td>
<td>DESCRIPTION</td>
<td>WHEN TO USE</td>
<td>EXAMPLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Cost</td>
<td>Response cost is the taking away of privileges or other valued elements ('cost') in response to student misbehavior.</td>
<td>Response cost can be an effective response to misbehavior, provided that the student actually values the privilege or element being taken away.</td>
<td>Because of misbehavior, a student loses access to classroom free time at the end of the day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Conference</td>
<td>A behavior conference is a brief meeting between teacher and student to discuss the student's problem behavior(s).</td>
<td>When the teacher wishes to better understand reasons of the student behavior problem before acting, and/or wants to model that it is better for the student to communicate their needs before acting out.</td>
<td>The teacher takes a student aside to discuss behavioral expectations and understand what triggered the misbehavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defusing Techniques</td>
<td>Defusing techniques are any teacher actions taken to calm a student or otherwise defuse a situation with the potential for confrontation or emotional escalation.</td>
<td>When the teacher judges that the student's negative emotions are a significant contributor to the problem behaviors, defusing techniques are appropriate to stabilize the situation.</td>
<td>The teacher sends a student to the guidance counselor to discuss the issue(s) causing him anger.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When deciding how to react, teachers should keep in mind what the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs calls the four “purpose(s) of effective consequences” – pre-empting escalation, minimizing inadvertent rewards of problem behavior, creating learning opportunities for emphasizing desired behavior, and maintaining instructional time for the rest of the class.  

**Figure 2.3: Purposes of Effective Consequences**

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48 Content taken verbatim from Ibid.
TIMING AND FREQUENCY

The following sub-sections describe the timing and frequency with which educators should implement time-outs and seclusion. The recommended best practices include avoiding excessive use of time-outs and using seclusion rarely.

AVOID EXCESSIVE USE OF TIME-OUTS

Educators should use time-outs rarely, and they should be swift. Teachers may be tempted to overuse time-outs, as "once the misbehaving student is removed from the classroom, the aversive behavior is also removed, providing them with a period of calm."\(^{49}\) However, using time-outs more frequently does not necessarily improve student behavior, and in some cases, may even encourage misbehavior if students are misbehaving in the hopes of receiving a time-out and avoiding specific classroom activities.\(^{50}\) For example, if a student misbehaves because he/she wants to avoid part of their math class and knows the teacher relies on time-outs as a punishment, then time-outs will likely incentivize continued misbehavior.\(^{51}\)

Using time-outs frequency also decreases their efficacy as a punishment and signals that the teacher needs a larger suite of behavior management tools. Teachers’ first response to minor misbehaviors (e.g., talking out of turn, getting out of a seat without permission) should be “positive or less intrusive reductive techniques” applied systematically, not time-outs.\(^{52}\) Time-outs applied indiscriminately and broadly may ultimately be more a sign of ineffective instruction and classroom management than a sign of student misbehavior.\(^{53}\)

Most experts recommend that time-outs last no more than half an hour and describe the ideal length of a time-out as five to 15 minutes.\(^{54}\) Others more specifically recommend that teachers use the “one minute for one year of chronological age” rule, under which a four-year old child receives four-minute time-outs, for example, and a ten-year old child receives 10-minute time-outs. However, teachers should not continually place students in time-outs for five to 15 minutes to avoid exceeding a single time-out of 30 minutes or more.\(^{55}\)

Teachers frequently overestimate the ideal length of time-outs. As the Iowa Department of Education explains, “most adults tend to make timeout last too long. This often happens to provide a respite for the teacher, rather than to do what is best for the student.”\(^{56}\)

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**Use Seclusion Rarely**

Experts repeatedly emphasize that seclusion should be used rarely, if at all, to control the behavior of students. As the U.S. Department of Education describes in a resource guide, “every effort should be made to prevent the need for the use of restraint and for the use of seclusion.”\(^{57}\) Likewise, CCBD advises that seclusion “should be used only rarely in school settings.”\(^{58}\) Notably, this emphasis on using seclusion rarely, if ever, applies to all students, regardless of their special education status.\(^{59}\)

Specifically, seclusion should only be used when the following three conditions are met:\(^{60}\)

- The student’s actions pose a clear, present, and imminent physical danger to him/her or to others;
- Less restrictive measures have not effectively de-escalated the risk of injury; and
- The seclusion should last only as long as necessary to resolve the actual risk of danger or harm or while awaiting the arrival of law enforcement or crisis intervention personnel such as when the student has possessed a weapon or committed a crime.

Unlike time-outs, seclusion should never be used as a punishment for negative behaviors or as a behavioral management strategy. Similarly, seclusion should never be used as retaliation or a tool to provide relief to a teacher by removing a disruptive student from the classroom.\(^{61}\)

The repeated use of seclusion – instead of indicating that a serious issue exists with individual students – indicates that a serious issue exists with **systematic school policies related to student behavior**. CCBD warns that as an emergency response to uncontrollable, injurious behavior,\(^{62}\) the repeated use of seclusion demonstrates that the school is experiencing repeated emergencies and “a large number of emergencies,” and “is a clear sign that the normal educational or behavioral programming is failing and should be revised.”\(^{63}\)

**Time-Out and Seclusion Policies**

The following sub-sections discuss policies recommended for school districts to implement to improve time-out and seclusion practices. These sub-sections cover standards, documentation, family communications, and staff training.

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\(^{59}\) Ibid.

\(^{60}\) Content taken verbatim from: Ibid., p. 10.


RELY ON STANDARDS

Standards for implementing both time-out and seclusion practices should be clear, consistently communicated, and consistently followed. The following paragraphs explain why these standards matter and how educators can implement them in classrooms.

TIME-OUT

Before implementing time-out, educators should check that time-out is allowed in their district and state, and determine what policies, if any, exist on time-out. If no such policies exist, school leaders should create them and share them with teachers and parents. Alternatively, teachers can create their own policies and then confirm them with school leaders and parents. As one special education expert explains:

When you are using a time out technique in your classroom (with or without children with disabilities), you need to inform some key people of your procedure and clearly define it for them. First, you must inform your principal and make it clear that you have taken provisions to not allow the procedure to harm children. If your principal can’t support the procedure you defined, then my advice is to yield to the principal and find a way to modify it so that he or she is comfortable with it. Because of the damage done by misuse, time out can be a controversial technique and you need administrative support just in case.

The second set of people who need to be informed are the parents of the children in your class with whom you may use time out. In my classes, all parents were made aware of the process for time out, and each parent knew the target behavior(s) we were using for their child. They were also informed of progress made in regard to these target behaviors. I informed parents about time out through the newsletter that I sent early in the school year, typically within the first week. They were invited to call, email or visit me if they had any concerns.

Similarly, the Autism in Education Partnership argues that educators should ask themselves the question – “is it feasible to implement a time-out procedure” – before using time-out, and if a procedure is not feasible, “then time-out may not be the best choice.” Likewise, a Special Education Guide author notes that educators need to both define the behaviors that can lead to time-out and define what constitutes time-out within their classrooms (e.g., where time-out occurs, how long it occurs).

Below, Figure 2.4 describes how time-out can fit into a larger disciplinary policy and discusses the elements of a formalized time-out policy that schools should include.

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68 Ibid.
### Figure 2.4: Classroom Policies for Time-Outs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers Should Establish...</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A set of classroom rules and consequences for their infraction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A hierarchy of planned consequences for behavior, with timeout as one of several alternatives for consequent misbehavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A range of timeout locations that are suited to your classroom, your pupils, and your personal classroom management plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>A set of personal guidelines for deciding when to use timeout and what level of timeout to employ.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 5                          | Written procedures for applying timeout, including:  
  - A warning signal, if appropriate.  
  - What you say to pupils when giving them a timeout.  
  - Decision rules regarding which level of timeout to impose, and when to go from one level to another  
  - Due process procedures for obtaining administrative and parental consent to use seclusion timeout, if applicable.  
  - Specification of the duration of each timeout, how duration is monitored, and decision rules for varying the duration of timeout.  
  - Specification of desired student behavior in timeout.  
  - Procedures for releasing pupils from timeout.  
  - A data sheet for recording instances of timeout.  
  - Decision rules for evaluating the effectiveness of timeout with individual students |
| 6                          | Alternative interventions when it is concluded that timeout is not effective in a given instance, or in general. |
| 7                          | Procedures for teaching students to take timeouts appropriately. |

Source: Kentucky Department of Education[^69]

### Seclusion

Before implementing seclusion, educators must be aware of the federal and state laws governing the use of seclusion in schools. However, this awareness is only the foundation of knowledge that educators need to implement seclusion. Educators should also be aware of and follow local school district standards when using seclusion. If these standards do not exist, then it is critical for school leaders to formally create and disseminate them. As the Kentucky Department of Education explains, how and when seclusion can be used “should be thoroughly discussed and explained... so that everyone involved with [students] has a clear understanding of the topic.”[^70] Standards should also be explained to students to make sure that they understand the “circumstances under which he or she may be put into time-out and what to expect from the experience (e.g., length of time and expectations for release).”[^71]

[^70]: Ibid., p. 4.  
[^71]: Ibid.
Below, Figure 2.5 summarizes the information related to who should know seclusion policies, who the policies should apply to, what the policies should contain, and how leaders can help ensure implementation fidelity of such policies.

**Figure 2.5: School District Policies for Seclusion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who should know the policies?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• District and school polices should be made known to all staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Compliance with district and school policies should be mandatory for all school staff with clear lines of responsibility and oversight identified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• District and school policies should be available to parents and the public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• This plan should be on file with the state or provincial education agency and available for review by parents and advocacy or parent organizations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who should the policies apply to?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Policies should apply to all students, not just students eligible for special education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Policies should apply to all schools, not just one school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What should the policies contain?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Any school district which employs seclusion procedures should have a written school-wide positive behavior support plan which includes the use of positive behavior interventions and de-escalation techniques, training of all school personnel on how to implement positive behavior supports, and documentation procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Policies should provide specific definitions due to confusion over terminology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The fact that seclusion might be used in school should be made known to all parents and students in school via the code of conduct, crisis or emergency procedures document, or other mechanisms for informing parents about school policies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How to ensure fidelity of implementation to the policies?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• These policies and related training should be a part of school-wide accreditation standards. Senior administrators (i.e., the school principal or designee) must ensure the implementation of these policies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CCBD

Alarmingly, research suggests that few school districts have standards or policies governing the use of seclusion. The 2009 survey of South Carolina school districts, for example, found that 36 of 51 districts (71 percent) reported that they had no policies on the use of restraint or seclusion. The survey instigators described how other institutions that use seclusion, such as hospitals, follow clear policies for seclusion and concluded: 73

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Without a [school] policy, the protocol for intervention is murky at best. Without a policy, how can parents know what to expect of school personnel in whose care they place their children and their trust?

**CREATE DOCUMENTATION**

Educators need to maintain documentation recording when, why, and for how long students are placed in time-out or seclusion. The following sub-sections explain why documentation matters and how educators can create good documentation.

**TIME-OUT**

The use of time-out, particularly exclusionary and isolationary/seclusionary time-out, necessitates simple documentation recording when the time-out took place, what type of time-out was used, how long the time-out was, and who was involved in the time-out. These time-outs may include, for instance, being sent to the principal’s office, a monitored and unlocked common detention room, or an unlocked isolated room that a student is free to leave at any time and knows he/she may leave at any time.74 Below, Figure 2.6 displays a sample time-out record.

![Figure 2.6: Time-Out Record](image)

**SECLUSION**

Because seclusion should only be used in emergencies, educators must carefully document the details of each seclusion to ensure that it is used responsibly and meet state and local standards.76 This documentation also helps educators consider why seclusion is necessary and inform further behavioral interventions and staff professional development. As the U.S. Department of Education explains, “each incident of the use of restraint and of the use of seclusion should be properly documented for the main purposes of preventing future need for the use of restraint or seclusion and creating a record for consideration when developing a plan to address the student’s needs and staff training needs.”77

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Below, Figure 2.7 displays a sample seclusion record developed by the Iowa Department of Education to help school districts meet state legal requirements.

**Figure 2.7: Physical Restraint or Seclusion Record**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name:</th>
<th>Date of Occurrence:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building of Attendance:</td>
<td>Time of Occurrence:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEP?</td>
<td>Duration of Occurrence:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Name of staff members involved:

Describe the actions of the student and employees involved before the occurrence:

Describe the actions of the student and the employees involved during the occurrence:

Describe the actions of the student and the employees involved after the occurrence:

Describe student and staff debriefing:

Describe alternatives to physical restraint or physical confinement and detention attempted before the occurrence:

Describe any injuries to the student, employees or others, and any property damage:

Describe future approaches to the student’s behavior (including possible IEP meetings to address behavior concerns):

If the occurrence involved a period of physical confinement and detention that exceeded the shorter of 60 minutes or the school’s typical class period, the name of the administrator or designee who authorized any additional period of physical confinement and detention:

- Student’s Parent or Guardian Contacted by: Date ____ Time ____ Method ____
- If the parent or guardian is not contacted on the same day of occurrence, describe attempts to notify the parent or guardian that day.
- Date that a copy of this documentation was provided to the parent or guardian (must be within 3 school days of the occurrence): Date ____
- Documentation provided by: ______________

Source: Iowa Department of Education

Notably, this example meets most of the recommendations set by the U.S. Department of Education in a guide for restraint and seclusion. According to this guide, documents should record details including but not limited to the people involved in the seclusion incident, the

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events that triggered the seclusion incident, and any injuries or damage. The only recommended details not included in the Iowa Department of Education example include:79

- How the child was monitored during and after the incident;
- The debriefing that occurred with staff following the incident; and
- The extent to which staff adhered to the procedural implementation guidelines (if established by the State, district, or school).

INVOLVE FAMILIES

Parents and guardians should be familiar with district time-out and seclusion policies. Moreover, parents should also be promptly notified whenever their child is placed in more restrictive time-outs or secluded. The following sub-sections explain why these procedures matter and how educators can implement them in classrooms.

TIME-OUT

Parents do not typically need to be formally notified before or after their child is placed in less restrictive time-outs (e.g., time-outs in the classroom). As the Autism in Education Partnership notes, “...less intrusive time-out procedures, like withdrawing attention or materials for short periods of time, are commonly used and typically do not require parental consent prior to use, although it would be expected that parents would be kept informed.”80

However, parents should be formally notified before and after their child is placed in more restrictive time-outs, such as exclusionary or isolationary/seclusionary time-outs.81 The notification before these time-outs occur can be a simple letter explaining how and why time-outs will be used in the district and asking parents to sign off on the use as a behavioral management tool.82 In comparison, the notification after the time-outs occur can explain why a time-out occurred and the details of the time-out.83

SECLUSION

Parents must be formally notified before and after their child is placed in seclusion. The notification before seclusion should be sent to all parents and contain information on laws and policies governing the use of seclusion.84 Below, Figure 2.8 displays the sample annual notice to parents posted on the Iowa Department of Education website.

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81 Ibid.
State law forbids school employees from using corporal punishment against any student. Certain actions by school employees are not considered corporal punishment. Additionally, school employees may use “reasonable and necessary force, not designed or intended to cause pain” to do certain things, such as prevent harm to persons or property.

State law also places limits school employees’ abilities to restrain or confine and detain any student. The law limits why, how, where, and for how long a school employee may restrain or confine and detain a child. If a child is restrained or confined and detained, the school must maintain documentation and must provide certain types of notice to the child’s parent.

If school or AEA has additional policies or procedures, briefly describe them here.

If you have any questions about this state law, please contact your school. The complete text of the law and additional information is available on the Iowa Department of Education’s web site: www.iowa.gov/educate.

If their child is secluded, parents must be notified promptly. Ideally, the notification should be made on the same day when the seclusion occurs. This notification is necessary regardless of the number of times a child has been secluded before, and should contain all of the information already recorded in the schools’ documentation of the incident, such as the student and staff behavior before and during the seclusion. This prompt and thorough notification “ensures that parents are fully informed about their child’s behavior and the school’s response and helps parents participate as informed team members.”

Despite the emphasis on parental notification by educational policy-makers, leaders, and advocates, the literature on seclusion is heavily populated with stories of children isolated and locked into rooms without their parents’ or guardians’ knowledge. For example:

The grandmother (his guardian) of a young South Carolina student with developmental disabilities found her grandson locked in a seclusion room. The student was placed in the room for being too noisy in the classroom. She had no knowledge of how long her grandson had been locked in seclusion nor when the school started using this room.

Failing to notify parents of seclusion policies before placing their children in seclusion or failing to notify parents after secluded their children can have severe legal consequences. When the Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigated restraint and seclusion practices in schools, they found “hundreds of cases of alleged abuse and death related to the use of seclusion and restraint on schoolchildren.” Of these cases, several led to staff convictions or settlements with families of restrained or secluded children. The GAO analyzed

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89 Rotholz et al., Op. cit., p. 3.
these cases and found that the failure to obtain permission from parents before using seclusion was “a common theme,” as was the use of seclusion as a non-emergency measure.\textsuperscript{90}

**Provide Training**

Staff handling time-outs and seclusion should receive sufficient training on the proper use of these practices. The following sub-sections explain why training matters and what information training should include.

**TIME-OUT**

Teachers should receive basic training on time-out to increase their understanding of qualified disciplinary actions and ensure that time-outs are not implemented inefficiently or unethically. As the Iowa Department of Education notes, “time-out has great potential for misuse if staff are untrained or if implementation is inconsistent. To ensure the integrity of the procedure, it is best to take time to fully prepare all staff who might be involved in using timeout.”\textsuperscript{91} A What Works Brief prepared by the Child Care and Head Start Bureau similarly recommends that teachers receive training on the proper use of time-out.\textsuperscript{92}

Ideally, training for time-out should include an opportunity for teachers to review any existing time-out policies in place at both the school and district levels,\textsuperscript{93} and involve role-play that allows teachers to practice “how, when, and where they will use time-out.”\textsuperscript{94} Recommended activities may include:\textsuperscript{95}

- Explaining the behavior of concern;
- Explaining what the student must do;
- Explaining how long time-out will last;
- Explaining what behaviors will lead to avoiding time-out in the future;
- Using a calm voice and positive language; conveying care and concern; and
- Ignoring arguments and objections.

**SECLUSION**

Staff who implement or may need to implement seclusion should receive detailed training to increase their understanding about when seclusion is necessary and what qualifies as seclusions to ensure that seclusion is not implemented inefficiently or unethically. As the CCBD reports, “If seclusion is to be used with students, it is critical that anyone using these

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{90} Ibid., p. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{91} Knoster, Wells, and McDowell, Op. cit., p. 15.
\item \textsuperscript{93} Knoster, Wells, and McDowell, Op. cit., p. 16.
\item \textsuperscript{94} Dunlap, G. et al., Op. cit., p. 5.
\item \textsuperscript{95} Content taken verbatim from: Knoster, Wells, and McDowell, Op. cit., p. 35.
\end{itemize}
procedures is carefully trained in all aspects of their use.”

Notably, training on using seclusion should also teach staff how to prevent seclusion. Experts recommend that seclusion training should cover topics emphasizing the value of conflict prevention and conflict de-escalation tactics, as demonstrated in Figure 2.9 below.

**Figure 2.9: Seclusion Training Topics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict prevention</th>
<th>Conflict de-escalation</th>
<th>The crisis cycle, and interventions at each stage</th>
<th>Safe use of seclusion for each age group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possible effects of seclusion, especially given age groups and pre-existing conditions</td>
<td>First aid and CPR</td>
<td>Local and state regulations</td>
<td>Documenting seclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CCBD and U.S. Department of Education

Seclusion training should occur at least twice per year — once before the start of the school year and again during the middle of the school year. The U.S. Department of Education prefers this continual practice over fire drills. Educators who teach students with histories of dangerous behavior that may necessitate seclusion should receive more frequent training. Educators who implement seclusion practices frequently or incorrectly may also require more training.

Ideally, staff who complete the training should receive a “form of certification or credential.” However, receiving external certifications or credentials is uncommon, as few external providers offer training specifically on seclusion. Consequently, school districts may need to design their own training programs.

**Additional Considerations**

If seclusion must be used to protect the student or others from harm, educators need to implement additional policies to ensure students’ safety. These policies may include:

- **Continually observing students**: During seclusion, staff must continually observe the secluded student. Observing a student occasionally (i.e., just “checking in”) is not appropriate. Per the U.S. Department of Education, “every instance in which restraint or seclusion is used should be carefully and continuously and visually monitored to ensure the appropriateness of its use and the safety of the child, other

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97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
102 Ibid., pp. 11–12.
children, teachers, and other personnel.” The observing staff should be trained on the use of seclusion and use an observation checklist.\textsuperscript{103}

- **De-briefing staff after a seclusion:** All staff involved in the seclusion, an administrator, and “at least one other staff member who was not involved in the seclusion procedure” should hold a de-briefing within 48 hours after the seclusion to discuss why the seclusion occurred and how to prevent future seclusions. This de-briefing should be open to the parents of the secluded child.\textsuperscript{104}

- **Conducting environmental inspections:** Staff need to inspect the space used for seclusion prior to implementation to ensure that nothing in the space can be used to injure the student.\textsuperscript{105} The space should also be appropriately lit, of reasonable size (students should be able to sit down or lie down), allow for continuous monitoring, and have locks that can automatically release during emergencies. The fire department or other trained safety inspectors should also inspect the space annually “for programmatic implementation of detailed state or provincial regulations or guidelines with violations affecting school accreditation.”\textsuperscript{106}

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