



Stop Hurting Kids

Policy Review

Report on the Review of the Adoption of Policies on the Use of Physical Restraint and Seclusion in B.C.'s School Districts

Positive Behavioural Intervention Support is a fundamental element of prevention and could actually avoid the harm and trauma that physical restraint and seclusion cause on students by not having to use these practices.

Background

In 2015, the Ministry of Education issued the [Provincial Guidelines – Physical Restraint and Seclusion in School Settings](#) (Provincial Guidelines, hereinafter) as a response to the profoundly concerning stories that Inclusion BC and the Family Support Institute reported in the [first Stop Hurting Kids report](#) from 2013. In our report, we detailed how physical restraint and seclusion have been used against students, particularly students with disabilities and extra support needs.

While Inclusion BC continued focused on advancing the prohibition of the use of physical restraint and seclusion in B.C. schools, the issuing of the Provincial Guidelines was a step forward in establishing policies and procedures that would limit and control the use of these practices and establish some accountability standards. However, the limited voluntary response from the school boards in adopting these guidelines, as identified in the [Stop Hurting Kids II report](#), granted the need for additional work and advocacy. The 2017 review of the adoption rate of the Provincial Guidelines found that only 20 school districts had adopted a policy on the use of physical restraint and seclusion. Two years after the Ministerial recommendation, only nine additional school districts had adopted a policy. The Ministry of Education then instructed all school boards of education to adopt policies and procedures on the use of physical restraint and seclusion in schools following the Provincial Guidelines by December 2019.

As a continuation of the work done through the Stop Hurting Kids campaign, Inclusion BC made a provincial review of the adoption of policies on restraint and seclusion by school boards in B.C. The purpose of this review was to examine whether the boards of the 60 school districts have adopted policies and procedures and if they include the elements required by the Ministry's Provincial Guidelines. The review included doing online research to find the policy and identify how accessible or visible they are on their websites. The Provincial Guidelines were broken down into twenty criteria to guide the analysis of each district policy, identify how much the district policy aligns with the Provincial Guidelines, and if there are any missing or innovative elements to be considered.

In terms of online accessibility or visibility of the policies in their online platforms, six school districts did not have their policy available on their websites and were directly contacted to request a copy. By December 2019, there were 56 school districts with an approved policy and/or administrative procedure that incorporates (in full or in part) the Provincial Guidelines on Physical Restraint and Seclusion. Within the first half of 2020, three additional school boards had adopted their policy, and one school district remains with only a draft policy as of March 2022.

Terminology

School districts used a variety of terms to refer to the adopted policy. These included “policy”, “policy statement”, “administrative procedures”, “administrative regulations”, “regulation”, “operational procedures”, “district protocols”. The terminology used in policy has implications on the force or effectiveness of its content. The Ministry of Education indicates that ‘policy statement’ is a quick description of what the policy does and who it affects; ‘regulations’ are a list of sections from the School Act and they are law; ‘procedures and guidelines’ are an outline of steps required to implement a policy and indicate who does what, how and in what order. Although there were differences in the use of the terminology by school districts, almost all have adopted policies and/or procedures that incorporate in full or in part the Provincial Guidelines. Significant differences were not found in the contents due to the terminology used for the title of the policy.

Highlights from the analysis and comparison

The review of the policies shows that almost all school districts acknowledge the importance of using **Positive Behaviour Intervention Support (PBIS)**, using terms like “positive support,” “de-escalation,” “focus on prevention.” The Provincial Guidelines request the boards of education to include the description of PBIS and conflict de-escalation procedures into their physical restraint and seclusion procedures. The mention of PBIS was mainly located in the first part of the policies, like the introduction, context, and background sections. Although it is encouraging to see that many of the districts acknowledge the importance of positive behaviour intervention and adopted these phrases into their policies, there was only one that included the specific definition of PBIS that applies in their district. Since this is a concrete requirement in the Ministerial guidelines, further compliance reviews are needed to ensure every district includes a clear description of PBIS and conflict-de-escalation procedures that are in place, which would set clear expectations and training for school personnel. Positive Behavioural Intervention Support is a fundamental element of prevention and could actually avoid the harm and trauma that physical restraint and seclusion cause on students by not having to use these practices.

Mental Health

Regarding the description of mental health support, only ten districts mentioned the provision of mental health supports to students. Every district needs to consider how they can support students who may possibly demonstrate challenging behaviours at a prevention stage and include health and other professionals who can offer effective mental health support when needed. So far, only one school district addresses the necessity of including various members in developing an appropriate intervention plan for a student, such as psychologists, psychiatrists, paediatricians, and behaviour consultants. Incorporating multiple perspectives and disciplines is essential to developing a comprehensive and truly supportive plan to meet a student’s needs.

According to the Provincial Guidelines, “physical restraint or seclusion is used only in exceptional circumstances where the behaviour of a student poses an imminent danger of serious harm to self or others.” Most school districts include a statement to address this requirement. There were slight differences in the language used, such as “used as the last measure,” “used as the last option,” “emergency situation” instead of “only in exceptional circumstances.” However, almost all of the districts seemed to acknowledge that physical restraint and seclusion **should be used only in exceptional circumstances**, and interventions and procedures must be supportive and positive.

The term “hands-off policy” is included in the policies of a few districts and is described as the “best practice when dealing with students who are acting out.” One school district went further by incorporating restorative practices focused on returning control to the student who has acted-out, giving back responsibility regarding their own behaviour along with adult support and encouragement. According to this policy, this practice helps students understand that someone is on their side to support building coping strategies and their dignity is protected.

The Provincial Guidelines set as one of the principles on the use of physical restraint and seclusion that **“school and district staff are aware of and engage the assistance of additional program and resource supports that may be available in their community.”** However, there was no evidence of the adoption of this principle as part of any district’s policies. Some districts’ policies address the need to make various staff aware of a student’s safety plan. In these cases, they assign principals the responsibility to ensure that bus drivers, clerical, custodians, support staff, and all casual staff read the plans and understand the importance of adhering to students’ safety plans.

Almost all districts included in their guidelines some sort of **procedures on the use of physical restraint and seclusion** following the Provincial Guidelines. Some districts developed or further elaborated on them so they could respond to their district's specific needs. Some districts developed separate sections for restraint and seclusion processes. As part of those processes, several districts (12%) included sentences addressing the use of equipment, such as the requirement of setting up an observations window for seclusion rooms or the circumstances where a harness can be used to physically restrain a student.

The Provincial Guidelines expect school districts to have a mechanism to document every instance where physical restraint and seclusion occurred and a reporting process. From the review of the policies, only 21% (13) of B.C. school districts include the forms to be filled out when there is an incident of physical restraint and seclusion, and the format and elements that need to be included in the forms are different from district to district. Further review and analysis of these reporting forms are necessary to develop recommendations for an effective reporting and documentation process so every school district can demonstrate better accountability. **The lack of reporting mechanisms and the disparity across reporting mechanisms generate a vacuum of information at the local and provincial levels about the use of these practices. This is concerning given that these practices and procedures cause significant harm and trauma to the children and youth on whom they are imposed.**

Only 21% of school districts have included in their policy the incident report form when it is a requirement of the Ministerial Guidelines.

Training

Training of staff, or the lack of, is an element that can significantly impact the use of physical restraint and seclusion on a child or youth. The Provincial Guidelines expect school districts' policies to include offering training opportunities for staff in themes like positive behaviour interventions and supports and de-escalation techniques. Additionally, the Guidelines expect school districts' policies to include providing specialized staff opportunities to participate in training on the use of physical restraint and seclusion. Five school districts include a specific name of training such as the one offered by the Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI), Non-violent Crisis Intervention (NCI) training. This training is mandatory in one school district, and two others encourage their school staff to receive it and keep their certificates up to date.

Under their autonomy, school districts adopted the Ministerial Guidelines differently. Therefore, there are some districts that were innovative and went to further lengths to adopt more robust policies and procedures, while other districts only copied the statements of the Provincial Guidelines without actually fulfilling the request and didn't meet the expectations.

Closing Remarks and Call to Action

This review looked at how many elements of the Provincial Guidelines have been adopted in district policies. Further review and analysis are required to make recommendations that look at the quality of the policy and procedures to ensure that students' rights are respected, their dignity is maintained, and everyone involved is safe.

Inclusion BC continues to affirm that physical restraint and seclusion have no place in our schools and advocates for an absolute ban on these practices. We continue having concerns when policies are adopted, but practices do not change, and children are being harmed and traumatized. From our partnership with BCEdAccess on school exclusions and the experiences we hear from families through our advocacy line, children continue to be subjected to these harmful practices. Incident reports are not filled, parents are not fully informed of the incidents, and positive behaviour support plans are not put in place. As long as we consider these practices acceptable, they will be used, regardless of how regulated they are. [Studio III](#) accurately affirms that we need to eliminate the option to stop the practice. The situation in which a student is experiencing challenging behaviours is a highly stressful and emotional situation. In those states, people react with the tools they have been trained to use. **If physical restraint and seclusion are taken out of the options for response, then the least harmful and trauma-inducing options can surface.**

We call on the B.C. Ministry of Education to do a full review on the content and implementation of the Provincial Guidelines. Every school district should present their documenting and reporting mechanisms, and superintendents should be able to inform of every incident in their district. Where physical restraint and seclusion have been used, there needs to be a review on how prevention, de-escalation and positive behaviour support planning have not been effective and develop concrete, measurable plans.



227 6th Street, New Westminster, BC V3L 3A5

T 604-777-9100 E info@inclusionbc.org

inclusionbc.org