

February 8th, 2021

Dear Madame Chair and members of the Ways and Means Committee,

**Support for HB 715: Public Schools - Self-Contained Special Education Classrooms - Use of Video Recording Devices**

Good afternoon, my name is Guy Stephens, I am a father of two amazing children who attend Maryland schools. I am also the founder and executive director of a Maryland-based grassroots organization called the Alliance Against Seclusion and Restraint (AASR). I started AASR after my autistic son Cooper was inappropriately restrained and secluded numerous times while attending a Maryland public school. This should have never happened to my son. In fact, under the laws in place, my son should not have been restrained and secluded. While he was not physically injured when he was restrained he was severely traumatized, so much so that he was unable to return to his home school. Most of his eighth grade school year was completed in a home and hospital program. Today he attends an amazing non-public school and is doing well.

Cooper was one of the lucky ones. Many are not so lucky. Children, teachers, and staff often become traumatized and injured in the response to challenging behaviors. Some students have even died due to the use of restraint. On April 29, 2020, Cornelius Frederick, a student at Lakeside Academy, a residential facility in Kalamazoo, Michigan threw a sandwich at another boy in the cafeteria. A staff member responded by tackling Cornelius to the ground, and then holding him down, for 12 minutes, as Cornelius struggled and gradually grew still. Seven men who worked for Lakeside held him down in a face-down restraint. Cornelius died at the hospital two days later. The incident was captured on camera. The medical examiner ruled it a homicide, the result of Cornelius being asphyxiated. There are far better ways to work with children.

Behavior is communications, and sometimes it is the primary means of communication. We were fortunate that our son was able to come home and tell us what happened to him at school. However, not all students can come home and talk about their day. Non-speaking students and students with an intellectual or developmental disability may not have the verbal ability to share what happens to them during their school day. This put such students at an increased risk of mistreatment and even abuse. Even those children that can verbally communicate may not. Often children assume that their parents or caregivers are aware of everything that happens to them at school each day. If they are restrained, secluded, or mistreated they may assume that you are aware. Alternatively, they may feel shame or guilt for “getting in trouble” or being a “bad kid” and they may not want to share. A parent's only indication that something is wrong might be escalating behaviors at home or a child coming home with an injury. Remember behavior is communication. Cameras can provide a voice for children that need and deserve to be heard.

I am here today to support House Bill 715 because I believe that we can and must do better for students, teachers, and staff in our schools across the state of Maryland. I believe that cameras in our self-contained special education classrooms can provide necessary accountability and oversight and a voice for children that need one. Cameras are not the answer to every issue, but I believe they can be a useful tool to ensure safe, transparent, and accountable schools especially for students that are at increased risk. Thank you for your time today. I hope you will support this legislation to make our classrooms safer for all.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Guy Stephens', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Guy Stephens  
Lusby, Maryland