

The State of Iowa has rules about corporal punishment, physical restraint (restraint), and physical confinement and detention (seclusion) in educational settings. These rules are published in Chapter 103 of the Iowa Department of Education’s administrative rules and are referred to as “Chapter 103.”

The rules apply to employees of local public school districts, Area Education Agencies (AEAs), accredited private schools, and all of the children these employees serve regardless of the child’s age, disability or other factors. School boards or AEAs may adopt their own policies, but only if they exceed the minimum requirements of Iowa’s Chapter 103 rules. 281—103.1(256B,280)

It is important to note that if a School Resource Officer (SRO) is not employed by the school district, Chapter 103 does not apply.

What is Chapter 103?

Chapter 103 provides rules on physical restraint and seclusion. It includes a definition of reasonable and necessary force, and the limitations on physical contact with students. It also provides information on when seclusion or restraint is appropriate as a last resort.

Any use of seclusion or restraint is subject to the rules of Chapter 103, regardless of what language is used to describe it. Labeling the method “time out” or “cool down” rather than “seclusion” does not exempt the school from Chapter 103.

Which students does Chapter 103 apply to?

Chapter 103 applies to all students, including those receiving special education services and supports. A student’s IEP may contain seclusion and restraint practices or procedures that are individualized to meet a student’s needs, but cannot be out of compliance with Chapter 103.

What practices should be used to reduce or eliminate the need for seclusion and restraint?

Evidence-based practices are expected to be used proactively during behavior incidents and debrief processes to reduce or eliminate the need for further seclusion and restraint. There are many alternatives to seclusion and restraint. The IEP team should consider prevention, de-escalation and response strategies that address the unique needs of the individual child. If there is a pattern of seclusion or restraint, the IEP team should consider meeting to determine additional support. Conducting additional assessments and involving the Challenging Behavior Team through the AEA are options to be considered.

Definitions within Chapter 103

- **Seclusion:** Involuntary confinement of a child in a seclusion room or area from which the child is prevented or prohibited from leaving.
- **Seclusion Room:** A room, area or closed space, in or outside the classroom, designated for seclusion.
- **Physical Restraint:** A personal restriction that stops or reduces the ability of the child to move the child’s arms, legs, body or head freely.
- **Reasonable and Necessary Force:** That force “and no more” which a reasonable person would judge to be necessary in that situation, that is not intended to cause pain, and that does not go beyond the amount or time required.
- **Bodily injury:** Physical pain, illness, or any damage to the body.
- **Imminent threat:** A situation that poses a direct and immediate danger now or immediately after.
- **Corporal Punishment-Prohibited:** Any purposeful physical punishment of a student. It includes the use of unreasonable or unnecessary physical force, or physical contact made with the intent to harm or cause pain.
- **Evidence Based Practices:** Effective educational strategies supported by evidence and research.

What is banned by Chapter 103?

The rules ban all corporal punishment, prone restraint and mechanical restraint. This is not a new requirement. Corporal punishment is not: verbal reprimand; any reasonable request for physical activity or extracurricular athletics; or detentions within reasonable time limits.

When can physical restraint or seclusion be used?

Less restrictive options should be considered. If they are not effective, practical, or have failed, at least one of the following four conditions must be present for seclusion and/or restraint to be reasonable and necessary:

1. To prevent or end an imminent threat of bodily injury to the student or others;
2. To prevent serious damage to property of significant value;
3. When the student's actions seriously disrupt the learning environment or when necessary to ensure the safety of the student or others.
4. When less restrictive alternatives would not be effective or feasible or have failed in preventing or terminating the imminent threat or behavior.

Physical force is allowed if it is necessary and within reason. "Reasonable" and "necessary" are judged by:

- Size and physical, mental, and psychological condition of the student
- The context of the event (necessity)
- The method used to apply physical force
- The extent of injury to the student (if any, including mental and psychological injury)
- Employee motivation for using physical force

What expectations are there for seclusion time?

Seclusion or restraint should last no longer than necessary to allow the student to regain control; or that the student becomes at risk of harm for a medical condition.

If the seclusion or restraint exceeds 15 minutes, two things must happen:

1. The student shall be provided breaks for personal and bodily needs, unless doing so would endanger the child or others.
2. An employee must get approval from an administrator or designee at 15 minutes and every 30 minutes thereafter.

When will parents be notified of the use of seclusion or restraint?

An attempt to verbally notify parents of seclusion or restraint must occur:

- as soon as possible after the situation is under control;

- no later than within one hour or the end of the school day, whichever occurs first.

When will parents be notified of the use of seclusion or restraint?

A report must be provided to parents or postmarked by the end of the third school day following the incident. Parents may agree to receive written documentation by email or fax. Documentation must include the following:

1. Name of student
2. Name and job titles of employees who observed, implemented, or were involved in the use of seclusion or restraint (to include the name of the administrator who approved exceeding 15 minutes and every 30 minutes thereafter), as well as the date that involved individuals last completed Chapter 103 training.
3. Date of the incident
4. Beginning and ending times
5. A description of the student's actions before, during, and after
6. A description of the employee's actions before, during, and after
7. Any approval exceeding 15 minutes and a reason for the time extension
8. A description of the less restrictive options attempted to avoid seclusion or restraint
9. A description of any injuries to the student, others, or property damage
10. A description of future approaches to the student's behavior (including any consequences or disciplinary actions)
11. The time and manner that parents were notified
12. Reasons for any non-compliance (i.e. restraint or seclusion lasted longer than necessary or parent notification rules not followed)
13. In addition to the written report, parents will also receive a letter inviting them to participate in a debriefing meeting.

A debriefing meeting is required after:

- First incident of seclusion or restraint in a school year;
- After 7 instances of seclusion and/or restraint.

A debriefing meeting could be held:

- Whenever personal injury occurs;
- Whenever suggested by a student's IEP team; or
- Whenever agreed to by parent and school officials.

Relevant staff, family and others that would contribute to thorough discussion of the incident should be in attendance.

An agenda and written report are required for each debriefing meeting and parents should be provided a copy of the written report within 3 school days.

What are the requirements for a seclusion room?

Requirements for a seclusion room include but not limited to the following:

- Provides a means of continuous visual and auditory monitoring of the student.
- Adequately lighted and ventilated; and maintains a temperature within the normal human comfort range and consistent with the rest of the building.
- Free and clear of objects and fixtures that could be potentially dangerous to a student, and contains no free-standing furniture.
- Constructed of materials safe for its intended use, including wall and floor coverings designed to prevent injury to the student.
- Doors must open outward and is not fitted with a lock unless it releases automatically when not physically held in the locked position; it permits the door to be opened from the inside.
- Not isolated from school employees or the facility.
- Walls are part of the structural integrity of the room and not free-standing or portable units.
- The dimensions of the room shall be of adequate width, length and height to allow the student to move about and recline safely. (Size requirements do not have to be met until January 20, 2026 or whenever the portion of the school containing the room was renovated.)
- Additional room requirements are listed in IAC 281.103.9

What are the training requirements for staff involved in using seclusion and restraint?

All employees who will be involved in performing restraint or seclusion must be trained. At the minimum, substitutes who may fill in for these roles must be offered the training.

Training must include the rules of Chapter 103; school specific policies and procedures including documentation and debriefing requirements; research-based alternatives to seclusion and restraint; positive behavior intervention and supports and evidence-based approaches; crisis prevention, crisis intervention and crisis de-escalation techniques; and safe and effective use of seclusion and restraint.

Related Resources

Look for the following information sheets on our website:

- A Chapter 103 Checklist for Parents
- ABC's of Challenging Behavior
- Top 10 Points About Chapter 103: Seclusion and Restraint by the Iowa Department of Education

ASK Essential Questions

- Was I notified and did I receive the appropriate documentation from the incident of seclusion and/or restraint?
- Is a debriefing meeting required or needed?
- Did the team review any existing plans?
- If the student does not have an existing plan, has the team discussed next steps?