

Protesters urge ban on use of shock therapy at center

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Dozens of people gathered in a steady rain in front of the State House Saturday afternoon to call for a ban on the use of electric shock at the Judge Rotenberg Educational Center in Canton, which is believed to be the only school in the country that gives students such shocks as a form of treatment.

Arguing that electrical shock is a cruel and dangerous method of treatment, speakers and attendees at the rally lauded pending legislation that would ban the practice across the state. The state Senate passed the ban in its budget last month.

The House of Representatives did not include a ban in its budget but it could be part of the final version.

After three years teaching at the school, which serves students with special needs, Greg Miller quit in March 2006.

Miller said in an interview he had to choose between keeping his job or administering shocks to students for minor infractions such as ripping a paper cup or refusing to take off a winter coat.

Miller, who now lives in the northern Sierra Nevada region of California, said staff turnover at the school was high during his tenure. Teachers were suspended or fired for failing to report on other teachers who did not shock students for misbehavior, he said.

Administrators at the Rotenberg Center contend that their methods have merit and are uniquely effective with certain special-needs cases.

But Miller said he has no tolerance for this position.

“Exercise multiple times a day, engaging the students in interesting lessons, and building trust between students and teachers all show results,” said Miller, who went on to work at a school in California for students with special needs. “You don’t need to shock or drug them.”

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“Our son Andrew has spent 18 years severely injuring himself and others, sending over 40 people to the hospital with severe human bites and concussions,” Robin and Joe Pisano of Revere said. “Nine months ago we made the very difficult decision to petition the court to try the GED [skin shock treatments]. It has been a miracle. . . . There is no torture here.”

Louisa Goldberg of Newton said her son was assaultive and was heavily drugged and “restrained

on the floor for hours” in other programs.

“It is my job as his mother to find a treatment that helps him to be safe, calmer, healthy, happy and educated,” Goldberg said. The Judge Rotenberg Center is the best program for him.”

Last October, Governor Deval L. Patrick’s administration enacted new regulations that prohibit the school from punishing any newly admitted students with electrical shock. The school can still administer shock treatment to those who obtained court-approved therapy plans before the new rules took effect — 88 of the school’s 233 students.

“The effort to ban this practice has been going on for decades,” said state Senator Brian A. Joyce, a leading advocate for the ban in the Legislature, in an interview during the rally. “I’ve learned to temper my optimism with the reality that there are well-paid lawyers, lobbyists, and PR people defending the school. But I’m more hopeful than ever before that this will pass” because of support from Governor Patrick, the success of the new regulations, and the recent circulation of a video showing a student getting shocked.

Cheryl McCollins of Brooklyn told the crowd about her son’s experience with the shock treatment, which was caught on video.

“There’s video of my son being tortured,” McCollins said. “It’s mind-boggling. We’re trying to stop something that never should have started.”

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