

As educational leaders representing the 24 educational collaboratives in Massachusetts, we, the leaders of the Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (MOEC), are writing to correct what we feel is a mischaracterization and misrepresentation of the vital work of our dedicated special educators.

The recent Boston Globe article, “Secluding a child is supposed to be prohibited ...” has several factual inaccuracies. The article raised concerns about the use of calming spaces in Massachusetts schools, suggesting practices that are inconsistent with current regulations. As leaders from the educational collaboratives in Massachusetts, we believe it is crucial to address these concerns.

Since educators are prohibited from directly responding to the allegations made due to confidentiality laws, we are not able to respond to specific cases. Therefore we wish to speak generally about the work of our collaborative educators, who are some of the most dedicated and selfless educators in Massachusetts.

Special education collaboratives exist because the law guarantees a free and appropriate public education to all school-aged children with a disability. In some of our programs, our students may have a history of trauma, mental illness, developmental and intellectual disability including autism, or a wide variety of other disabilities. These precious children’s needs often cannot be met in a general public school classroom setting. By forming collaboratives, school districts come together to provide appropriate educational settings for these children while sharing the per-pupil costs, which are generally many times more than the cost of educating other students. Collaboratives are public schools and are not for profit.

In our specially designed programs, safety comes first. Staff are highly trained and specially licensed to work with the children we serve. In particular, there is extensive training that our faculty and staff undergo to help them deescalate students who appear headed toward a situation in which they need to be in a calming environment.

On most days the majority of our students are able to regulate their behavior and emotions, but there are times when some students’ behaviors and emotional vulnerabilities may rise to the level where staff need to take immediate action to help them deescalate for the safety of everyone involved.

One necessary tool to help students deescalate is the use of a calming space. Calming spaces are *not* punishment spaces. In all cases, professional deescalation strategies are first used and a calming space is only utilized after those efforts have been exhausted. Their use is carefully regulated by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

Calming spaces are needed for students who are in acute distress, often when a student is actively harming themselves or others. However, in their best intended use, calming spaces are also a place for students with sensory processing problems or who are beginning to become dysregulated to take a break and regain control. In fact, students in collaboratives are taught to recognize their emotional state, and they often will proactively request to sit in a calming space.

By their nature, calming spaces need to be bland – free of sensory distractions and other items that may be triggering for students. To avoid injury – or to stop harm already occurring – these spaces are often lined with mats and soft padding. Items that could be used for self-harm or to injure others are removed. The space used for calming must be clean, safe, sanitary and appropriate for the purpose of calming. The spaces all have windows and do not have locks and in some instances where appropriate, there are no doors at all. These spaces are regularly inspected by DESE.

Students are required to be under the constant supervision of a trained staff member, and while the student is utilizing the space, the staff member is working proactively with the child to help them regain control of their emotions. Once it is safe for the student and their peers, the student returns to the education setting.

We have used the word safety in this writing, not as a scare tactic but as an example of reality in our schools. A child in crisis or with significant mental illness may harm themselves, another student or a teacher in any variety of ways. Special education professionals have the highest rate of injury among all educators (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6580785/>), and speaking frankly, our teachers go above and beyond to support the needs of our students.

Additionally, if a student is placed in such a space, DESE requires the use of a log, which includes the reason the room was used, including specific behaviors displayed; alternative behavioral management strategies attempted; the time in and out of the room; and a list of strategies used to calm the student while in the room. If the amount of time in the room needs to exceed 30 minutes, a Principal must approve it and give a reason for the extension. The Globe included information without acknowledgment of the extensive records kept by collaboratives consistent with MA state regulation of calming spaces.

It is important to note that what we are describing is not seclusion, which is defined as the involuntary confinement of a student alone in a room or area from which the student is physically prevented from leaving. Calming spaces, as defined by the Code of Massachusetts Regulations, are a behavioral support strategy in which a student temporarily separates from the learning activity or the classroom, either by choice or by direction from staff, for the purpose of calming.

In our schools, staff work in tandem with families to help them gain the skills they need to assist the students when not in school. When the families and schools are working collaboratively and

using the same strategies, students are increasingly able to generalize from one setting to another.

For many of us, when we're feeling angry, anxious or upset, having the capacity to distance ourselves from the issues that are causing those emotions can be a powerful way of helping us regulate those emotions. Calming spaces are designed to be just that — a place for a child to gain composure, and to once again calm themselves so that they can be a successful student in the classroom. The goal of all staff is to help students to recognize when they are becoming agitated or dysregulated and be able to employ strategies so that they do not lose control and hurt themselves or others.

The Massachusetts Collaboratives and their staff are honored to provide special education to some of our most vulnerable students in the Commonwealth and support them to succeed both academically and in their social/emotional development. Our commitment to student safety and well-being is unwavering, and we are dedicated to continuing our ongoing improvements to support all of our students effectively.

*Joanne Haley Sullivan is the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (MOEC).*

*Francine Rosenberg is the Executive Director of the Northshore Education Consortium and the president of MOEC.*