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STAR

Carpet Land
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SPORTS, C1



Young Nebraskans increasingly
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LOCAL, B1

Which Lincoln car washes offer
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BUSINESS, D1

EDUCATION



ARTHUR H. TRICKETT-WILE, JOURNAL STAR

Above: Michele Zephier and her son, Dylan, stand outside the state Capitol on July 22. Dylan Zephier, who has autism and Down syndrome, was placed in seclusion rooms at schools across Nebraska. School districts use seclusion supposedly as a last resort to isolate students who misbehave in the classroom. **Below:** A seclusion room in Fairbury Public Schools' Central Elementary building features grey padding and a door with a small window.

LIKE
'JAIL
CELLS'

Nebraska schools force kids
into seclusion rooms. We don't
know how often it's happening.

LIVIA ZISKEY
Lincoln Journal Star

Donning a blue cap and gown, Dylan Zephier crossed the Pinnacle Bank Arena stage at Lincoln East High School's graduation last May with a smile on his face.

The milestone was a proud moment for his mom, Michele Zephier, but also a massive source of relief.

Dylan, 19, would never again be forced into a seclusion room — something that became all too familiar as he moved through five Nebraska school districts.

"He was so depressed about going to school that he would rather die than go," Zephier said.

At first, she didn't realize how often the seclusions were happening to her son, who has Down syndrome and autism. He would eventually be secluded hundreds of times for failing to meet demands in the classroom, his

Please see **SECLUSION**, Page A6

New asylum
rule removes
interview
requirement

Trump admin opens
thousands to deportation
without reviews of cases

CHRISTOPHER CANN
USA Today

The Trump administration announced a change to the asylum system that could funnel hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers into deportation proceedings without an initial interview to plead their case.

The rule, which took effect July 27, scraps the requirement for trained asylum officers to interview asylum seekers who entered the country legally or have not been charged with an immigration violation.

Now, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the agency that oversees a large share of asylum claims, can send those cases directly to immigration court for removal proceedings, which could lead to a surge in deportation orders.

In a joint statement, the Department of Homeland Security and USCIS said the new rule is designed to reduce a significant backlog in the asylum system, which has an estimated 1.4 million cases pending.

"For far too long the asylum system has been exploited for purposes of delay and work authorization, not legitimate claims of protection," USCIS Director Joseph Edlow said in a statement.

But immigration law experts criticized the new rule as an effort to boost the administration's deportation agenda by stripping immigrants of their already limited protections while in the U.S. immigration system.

The new policy could "prevent people from having a meaningful review of their asylum claims," and risks placing credible asylum seekers into an immigration court system that's increasingly denying asylum claims, said Ingrid Eagly, an immigration law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles.

"This (rule) will allow that to happen without even granting people an interview," she said, highlighting the risk that asylum seekers face if they're

Please see **ASYLUM**, Page A2

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Weather
Plenty of sunshine
High: 88 Low: 64
Forecast: C10

Inside

BUSINESS/LIFE C8-C9, D1-D10	OPINION B8-B9
CROSSWORDS A2, D9	SPORTS C1-C7
OBITUARIES B4-B5	TV C8





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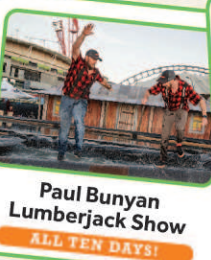
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Seclusion

From A6

sometimes multiple times a day. When his parents asked LPS to stop secluding their son, who has an individualized education plan, they said they were always met with the same statement.

“I wrote something on the IEP last time,” the Lincoln mom said. “I said, ‘I do not agree with this.’ They will still use it.”

LPS’ policy states that seclusion should only be used with special education students if it’s included in the student’s written plan. But the Lincoln parents said their son, now 9 years old, is still secluded occasionally.

In an email to the Journal Star, LPS director of special education Mindy Roberts said the district is aware of parents “who may disagree with the use of seclusion.” She pointed to the district’s policy and said she is not aware of any school “that is not following our district policy on the use of seclusion and restraint.”

Restraint refers to physically controlling a student, and it’s often used in combination with seclusion as a supposed safety measure. LPS’ policy states that restraint can be used to move a student to a seclusion room.

In the 2024-25 school year, LPS reported to the state 518 counts of restraint or seclusion. Of those, 443 were students in special education.

Roberts said LPS never uses seclusion as discipline but as “a safety intervention that is used only in rare circumstances when a student’s behavior presents an imminent risk of serious physical harm to themselves or others and less restrictive interventions have not been successful or are not appropriate in that moment.” Roberts said staff are trained in de-escalation strategies before considering seclusion.

The Lincoln couple whose son was secluded at Campbell has considered moving to a state with more support for students like their son, but they don’t want to leave the city they’ve grown to love.

“We very wholeheartedly believe in this town, and this is where we want to be,” the Lincoln mom said. “But it’s unfortunate that there’s not the special needs help — the right way.”

The seclusions happen less frequently — not because his

Seclusions, restraints by district

Lincoln Public Schools led all districts in reportable seclusions and restraints in the 2024-25 school year. But because of limited reporting requirements, some districts, like Omaha Public Schools, report none at all.

Public school district	Seclusion/restraints	Percentage involving special education students
Lincoln	518	85.6%
Summerland	212	11.8%
Bellevue	45	86.7%
Papillion-La Vista	44	77.3%
Fremont	37	94.6%
Westside	29	93.1%
Beatrice	24	95.9%
Gretna	23	60.9%
Wahoo	21	76.2%
Kearney	12	100%
Hastings	12	83.4%

Elementary school seclusions

The use of reportable seclusions and restraints at LPS was largely confined to elementary schools in the 2024-25 school year. Elementary schools not listed reported less than 10.

LPS elementary school	Seclusions/restraints	Percentage involving special education students
Belmont	37	78.4%
Arnold	28	85.8%
West Lincoln	24	62.5%
Everett	23	91.3%
Lakeview	23	78.3%
Roper	21	66.7%
Clinton	20	85%
Brownell	19	84.3%
Kooser	17	88.3%
Campbell	17	82.4%
Prescott	16	100%
Hartley	16	81.3%
Riley	15	93.4%
Huntington	15	93.4%
Elliott	15	86.7%
Fredstrom	14	85.8%
Randolph	12	83.4%
Pershing	12	83.4%
McPhee	12	91.7%
Calvert	10	100%

Source: Nebraska Department of Education

behaviors have changed — but because he’s bigger than he used to be, the Lincoln mom said. She said it shows that schools don’t seclude young children because they are truly being dangerous or out of control, but because it’s a quick way to deal with behavior issues.

Wiese, the Fairbury mother, said her 18-year-old daughter now

attends day programs at Apace, an organization that assists individuals with disabilities through living spaces and day programs. Apace doesn’t use seclusion rooms, Wiese said.

“Now, why would grown adults at Apace — disabled adults — not need a room like that, but children do? Why are we afraid of kids, but an adult program can run smoothly

that they don’t even need those to exist in that format? What are we doing wrong?”

Advocates call for stronger law, more teacher support

Nebraska has been a leader in protecting students before, Conrad said. The state banned corporal punishment in schools in 1988, a practice that is still legal in 17 states.

“The time is right for us to set a bright-line standard, just as we did for corporal punishment, when it comes to restraint and seclusion,” Conrad said, adding that the disparities within seclusion use should concern any lawmaker.

While students with disabilities are overrepresented in seclusion data, so are students of color.

“That’s pronounced, and that’s clear,” Conrad said. “That’s not OK on any level. I think that any serious policymaker has to look at that very clear-eyed, and I don’t think this is a political issue.”

Along with a stronger state law, Eynon-Kokrda said education leaders across the state also need more support.

“We have the capacity to forbid this in our public schools, and we have the capacity to provide the support and guidance to our educators so that they understand and have the means to lift up all children — not put children in boxes,” she said.

Stephens said when educators view seclusion as an acceptable way to handle student behavior, they begin to see the children they serve through a different lens.

“You see them as challenging. You see them as trying to give you a difficult time,” Stephens said. “And when that happens, you can see some dehumanization.”

His organization promotes alternatives to the use of seclusion, but Stephens said he advocates most strongly for a proactive approach that keeps students in the classroom.

He said educators should adopt trauma-informed approaches, and school systems should make sure they’re prepared to support children with intense needs. Most of the behavior strategies implemented in classrooms don’t work for the kids that need the most help, Stephens said.

“Sticker charts, rewards... these things are not going to help a kid who really needs help and support, who needs to learn skills,” he said.

If a child is struggling to regulate their emotions in the classroom, Stephens said there are still ways to help them return to a calm state without putting them in a seclusion room.

One crisis management approach is called Ukeru, where an educator can use pads for protection and avoid laying hands on a child who is struggling.

“Even though the kid is kicking, you’ve got a way to stay safe and continue to help the child to deescalate,” Stephens said.

Whatever the solution looks like, Wiese hopes other parents won’t have to worry about the safety of their children when they drop them off at school.

“When you have a severely autistic kiddo that isn’t verbal, you have to trust that the people you’re sending them to are going to take care of them like you would,” Wiese said. “These rooms just destroy that trust.”

Zephier said it’s going to take a cultural shift — one that treats children with disabilities with more respect — to make progress in limiting the use of seclusion rooms. Dylan has already been traumatized. She hopes, one day, that future kindergarteners in Nebraska aren’t met with the same fate.

“It is just an environment that is rich with opportunity to abuse,” she said.

Zephier said Dylan was recently diagnosed with moyamoya disease, a rare blood vessel condition that can cause cognitive impairment. It’s likely the disease added another layer of challenge for Dylan to be able to follow directions, she said.

“We have to maybe consider that they’re not just being naughty or noncompliant. Maybe there’s a medical reason,” she said.

Now that Dylan is out of school, Zephier said she’s working to find a program that will be able to support his needs.

It’s going to be a long and slow process, she said, one that requires her to find the patient and understanding people who have the skills and empathy to help Dylan be successful.

So far, she hasn’t been able to find what she’s looking for.

“And then we’re sitting in a room by ourselves again,” Zephier said. “So I don’t know how that’s going to go.”

Reach the writer at lziskey@journalstar.com.

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