



Education

Learning Curve

The forgotten rooms



My Opinion

Maureen Downey

Education researcher Mary Hollowell spent months chronicling an alternative high school in rural Georgia before she discovered the awful secret that continues to haunt her today.

Walking with the principal down a hall, Hollowell heard a loud pounding. She followed the principal into a room and then through a connecting doorway that led to a solitary confinement cell double bolted from the outside.

"The cell was dark inside and had a small, square window," she said. "It was the kind of set-up you saw in a mental institution, not a school."

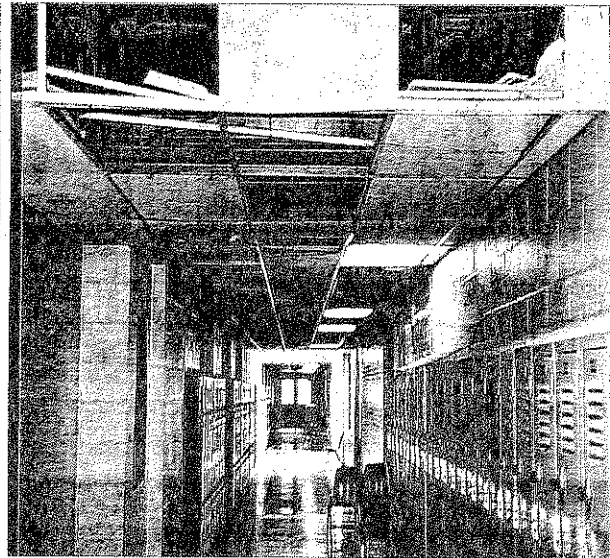
Inside the cell was a boy Hollowell recognized; she had tutored him in reading and even had artwork from him.

"I felt like I had been punched in the stomach when I realized what I was seeing," she says. "The principal's comment to me was that most people didn't know this room was there."

Hollowell hopes to make more people aware of such rooms — which she estimates are in use in 50 schools in Georgia — through her new book about her year in the alternative school, "The Forgotten Room."

Seclusion rooms are allowed in Georgia public schools provided they are big enough for children to lie down, have good visibility and have locks that spring open in case of an emergency such as a fire. In 2004, Jonathan King, 14, hanged himself in one such room, a stark, 8-foot-by-8-foot "timeout" room in a Gainesville public school.

Advocates, including Hollowell, have appealed to the state to ban the use of seclusion without success. They will try again at a meeting of the Georgia Department of Education



While "The Forgotten Room" refers to schools' solitary confinement cells, it could also describe the schools themselves. Mary Hollowell

State Advisory Panel for Special Education on Jan. 21 and 22 in Athens.

"Under federal regulations, no district has the right to restrain or seclude a child without parental consent. Unfortunately, this federal regulation has been ignored time and time again," says Lori Brown, an advisory panel member and director of forensic services, crimes against children unit for the Oconee County Sheriff's Office.

"The current situation in Georgia is very distressing and we must do what we can to stop this practice before another child dies because no one cares," says Brown.

The publication of Hollowell's book coincides with federal legislation by U.S. Reps. George Miller (D-Calif.) and Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-Wash.) to limit the use of restraints and confinement in schools after reports of children being pinned to the floor, handcuffed and locked in closets.

In her year at the alternative school, Hollowell came to admire the dedication of the teachers, who had chosen to work with chronically disruptive teens, some of whom had been charged with arson, assault or attempted rape. But

she could never reconcile the great teachers she met with the grim cell that she saw.

"It was very hard for me to understand how a school that I thought was very therapeutic would allow something like this to happen," says Hollowell, a Clayton State University associate professor of teacher education.

"But even good teachers can go numb. Even good people can participate in something like this if they are stressed or under duress," she says. "I believe we should abolish and disable these solitary-confinement rooms because if they are there, they will be used."

"There is no reason to have solitary confinement or whatever it wants to be called, seclusion rooms, the box, the cave. If public school students are dangerous enough to be put in solitary confinement, they are dangerous enough to be removed from the building," she says.

"No teacher, substitute, paraprofessional or administrator should ever have to think about removing a child's jacket and shoelaces so he won't hang himself in solitary confinement."

In interviewing teachers at the school, Hollowell found

that some convinced themselves the cell did not exist. Others avoided the room.

"One teacher told me that when she first saw the solitary confinement room, she went outside and started crying. I understood because I was nauseated from seeing it," says Hollowell.

Still, Hollowell forced herself to look at the tiny room, even photographing an obscenity that a captive student had written in blood on the wall.

While her book title references the seclusion room, it also is a metaphor for the alternative schools — and the students — themselves. Because these students are treated as discards, few resources and even less sympathy come their way.

The alternative school that Hollowell chronicled had collapsing ceilings, dark, abandoned hallways and boarded-up windows. In a single year, the enrollment shot up from 80 students to 200, pushing the school to near meltdown, according to Hollowell.

Yet, many teachers managed to maintain their focus and their faith. "One had been in counseling. One was a gifted teacher who wanted to apply the same standards to these students. One had been an alternative student himself. One had a daughter who had been at risk. Lots of their classrooms were oases of peace," says Hollowell.

And it's peace and support that these students need, says Hollowell. The notion that troubled kids can be scared straight by putting them in punishing circumstances or boot camps is wrong.

"Many of them are immune to punishment. There's nothing that's more punishing than their own lives. ... They have grown up with so much poverty, crime and deprivation," she says. "These students need last-ditch education."

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Join in the conversation with Maureen Downey throughout the week: blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog. E-mail her at mdowney@ajc.com