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MPS panel approves handcuffs

Flexible restraints would allow safety aides to hold out-of-control students

By **SARAH CARR**
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Posted: April 17, 2007

After hours of emotional debate, a Milwaukee School Board panel approved a measure Tuesday night that would allow safety aides to use flexible handcuffs to restrain students who demonstrate threatening behavior.

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"We've been in situations where we've had to restrain students for 30 minutes, 40 minutes, an hour," said Shawn Buford, a safety aide at Custer High School. Buford said he has been out of school three times this school year after being assaulted by students.

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But Raphiel Cole called use of handcuffs "a form of pre-institution that you are doing for our kids."

Cole, who has nieces and nephews in Milwaukee Public Schools, added: "Anything but these handcuffs. You are going to have holding cells for the children, what's next?"

The speakers were deeply divided on the issue.

Several safety aides and school administrators testified that the flexible handcuffs are increasingly necessary in rare cases to protect school staff and the students themselves.

Handcuffs MPS

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But several parents and community activists argued that using handcuffs in school will send a message to children that they're coming to jail."

The move is one of several steps the district is taking in the series of high-profile assaults and fights in the city's schools. A couple of months ago, for instance, two pairs of police officers began to work full-time in the schools and the school district hired special teams to respond to a "mental health crisis" in the school. In one incident this school year, a 15-year-old student attacked a principal. In another, a high school student sexually assaulted a teacher in front of the class.

Although the panel approved the measure on a 3-1 vote, it must pass the full board at a meeting Thursday night. If it does, the handcuffs would be available on a trial basis this spring in a few schools, according to Superintendent William Andrekopoulos.

Safety aides would be required to have training from the Milwaukee Police Department before they used the handcuffs, which administrators say would only be used in the most "extreme cases."

Board members also were divided on the issue. Jeff Spence, David Goldberg and Ken Johnson voted for the measure, but Charles Hardin was adamantly opposed, arguing that such measures could start a form of "slavery all over again."

However, board member Joe Dannecker responded that the measure is "about dealing with thrashers."

He said if one of his school-age daughters were to act out violently, he would much rather have her restrained with flex cuffs . . . than a 300-pound safety guard sit on her."

In a proposal sent to the board, administrators noted that in the past, safety aides sometimes have had to hold students by force, which raises risks of "positional asphyxia," in which breathing is cut off.

Several school staff members who testified in favor of the measure said they would not have supported the measure even a few years ago.

"This is a sad statement about the level of violence in our schools," said Myron Cain, the principal of Hamilton High School. He added: "There are situations every day when safety aides will have to literally wrestle a student to the ground."

Community member Frenchie Jones said such testimony made her want to spend more time in schools to see why some students may be out of control. "I don't see a single child out of control in my neighborhood," she said. "I don't see a single child out of control in the stores."

The district has a security staff of more than 200. They do not carry weapons or have the right to arrest students.