

## GUEST COLUMN

# Mitch Henck: Is LEAP working?

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One staff member in the Madison School District's Landmark Elementary Alternative Program (LEAP) is blunt about working conditions.

"I get punched, kicked, scratched or spat on by my students on a regular basis," the staffer told me recently.

LEAP is for 24 children with severe behavioral challenges in three Madison elementary schools. They are special education students who were removed from mainstream classrooms. They throw books, trash cans and "anything that isn't bolted down" at staff and fellow students. They rip things off walls and some use vulgar language.

I'm not naming the staffer to avoid repercussions from the district. The staffer's family members approached me with this story, saying they are worried about the physical and emotional health of their loved one.

John Harper, director of student services for the district, said he understands and can empathize with the family's concern. But LEAP has achieved more success stories than failures, he insisted. About 80 percent to 90 percent of students who are expelled from LEAP because of bad behavior go through one-on-one instruction sessions and end up back in the group setting.

If a student is too violent, the student is placed in a "safe room." The goal is to calm the student in about 10 minutes before rejoining the group. LEAP is designed to have two teachers and two special education assistants per classroom.

But it doesn't always stay that way, if a staff member heads for the door because of the high-stress environment, according to the staffer.

Harper said two teachers and one special education assistant will be added next year to help shore up individual sessions in LEAP, as well as a similar middle school program called New Educational Options and Networking (NEON).

"This means we won't have to siphon teachers from the group program to do individual sessions," Harper said.

Current staff are happy to see the reinforcements. If a student understands that LEAP staff will never give up on them, Harper said, the student can be stabilized and ultimately may be able to go back to their home school.

The front-line staff I spoke with acknowledged a few of those success stories. But the staffer, who has never met Harper, said he is painting too rosy a picture.

"We are told that social workers or psychologists are going to stop by, and that almost never happens," the staffer said.

The problem is a lack of accountability, according to the staffer.

"Students always know how far they can push," the staffer said. "If a student damages property or punches or kicks a teacher, it's off to the safe room for 10 minutes and right back to group."

So what's the solution?

The employee I spoke with thinks the state needs to provide a structural institution with plenty of discipline and counselors to instill accountability with a path toward a job skill. Many of the children also come from broken homes, according to the staffer, who has never met a father of any of the students. Foster homes or a state facility might be better environments than a difficult home life.

Harper responded: "There aren't any boot camps."

The district believes individual sessions with mental health services and other assistance can successfully stabilize all of our students -- even if they go through severe behavioral problems for short periods of time.

Having worked as a substitute teacher, I know how hard it is to maintain order in a mainstream classroom in middle or high school. I can't imagine the emotional drain that comes with teaching severely behaviorally challenged students at any level.

If we believe every student is worth it, then we should have an honest debate on how to best serve the most behaviorally challenged students among us. We should start by ending abuse and neglect at home when necessary, and allow the courts to place a child in a loving, stable environment when parents repeatedly abuse and neglect their own.

As for boot camps or state funded alternatives it is worth debating. After all, prisons already cost a lot.

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