

# Preventing Restroom Discrimination In Schools

by Jill Heidi Osborne MA

When Jamie Barkley found that her 9 year old daughter was hiding urine soaked underwear around the house, she was shocked to discover that her child had been “holding it” at school out of fear that she would get into trouble for asking to use the restroom. A week later, her daughter ended up in the ER with a bowel obstruction that required surgery. Two other children confirmed that the principal had announced during a school assembly that children would only get TWO bathroom passes a year and that bathroom trips could lead to detention.

Appalled? You should be. Mrs. Barkley justifiably filed a lawsuit against the San Diego Unified School District this Spring. Her attorney, Michael Jeandron said *“When a parent sends their child to school the last thing they should have to worry about is if the school will deprive their child of this fundamental need.”*

The consequences of restroom denial are significant. Children (and adults) who don’t empty their bladders may struggle with accidents and incontinence leading to bullying and embarrassment in school. Urinary tract infections can occur. Rather than being a normal and natural process, children may begin to fear using the restroom in school and other locations.

Astonishingly, when confronted

about the policy, the principal told Mrs. Barkley that *“children need to learn to hold it.”* I consider this an unconscionable violation of a child’s welfare. Worse, if a child in that school were struggling with interstitial cystitis or irritable bowel syndrome, restricting access to a restroom would be devastating. Retired elementary school teacher Helen Osborne was appalled by this story. She said *“I would never argue with a child who needed to use the restroom. If they needed to go, I let them go.”* After thirty years teaching elementary school, she shared that children who had been out sick often needed to use the restroom more frequently but even healthy children will occasionally need a pass.

Restroom discrimination continues to be a hot button for adults as well. Last summer we shared the story (“Being Punished By Your Employers For Using The Restroom”) of employees for the Chicago WaterSaver Faucet Company who unfairly disciplined 19 workers for excessive restroom use. Their policy was that employees could only be in the restroom 6 minutes during a work day, a standard that anyone with bowel, bladder or kidney disorders would fail. In another lawsuit, a woman with a medical condition was forced to pee in a box after being routinely denied restroom access by her supervisor.



Access to restrooms, regardless of age, is a fundamental right. What shocks me the most about this story is that children are being held to a higher standard of behavior than adults, especially at a time when they are learning and developing normal bathroom behaviors. This school district must establish a policy that is fair and compassionate for all students, especially those who struggle any type of voiding dysfunction or disorder.

If you have a child with interstitial cystitis beginning school this year, take the time to talk with both the teacher and school nurse about their need for restroom access. If necessary, share some articles about interstitial cystitis. Your child should not be censured, mocked or denied the opportunity to empty their bladder by their teacher and other school staff. Your child deserves their encouragement, compassion and support.