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The Tobinworld II special education school on Country Hills Drive in Antioch.

CONTROVERSIAL PSYCHOLOGIST FOUND WORKING AT SPECIAL ED SCHOOLS

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By Jane Meredith Adams



He is among the nation's leading believers in "[aversive therapy](#)," in which students with behavior disorders are pinched, deprived of food and [shocked with electricity](#) to control their behavior. For more than 30 years, [state attorneys general](#), [U.S. congressmen](#) and the [U.N. Special Rapporteur on torture](#) have alleged his methods violate the health, safety and educational rights of children with disabilities.

Now Matthew Israel has been tripped up by investigators at the California Department of Education for a seeming technicality: failing to submit school-employment paperwork.

Prompted by a citizen complaint, state investigators found that Israel is working as a behavior analyst or administrator for two Antioch special education schools run by his wife, Judy Weber-Israel, without being listed on the schools' applications for state certification, as required by the California Education Code. Nor were the school districts that send students to the schools – including Antioch Unified, Oakland Unified, River Delta Unified and Mt. Diablo Unified – notified that Israel had been added to the roster of licensed staff, as required by the Education Code.

The state investigation concluded that Matthew Israel is designing behavioral intervention plans and “is not qualified to do so.”

As a result of these failures, effective Aug. 24, the California Department of Education has suspended the certification of Tobinworld II and Tobinworld III, a status that prohibits the schools from accepting new referrals from school districts. The schools may continue to operate with their current students and the state has established a series of deadlines, starting with Sept. 16 and ending Dec. 31, for them to address noncompliance issues before their certification status is reconsidered.

Israel, who holds a Ph.D. in psychology from Harvard as well as a J.D. from Harvard Law School, was licensed in California as a psychologist in 1978, but his license expired in 1987. His job duties at Tobinworld II included designing special education behavioral intervention plans, which are strategies to encourage students to act appropriately. State regulations specify that such plans must be designed by staff members who hold a valid license to practice psychology or a related specialty, an appropriate teaching credential, or a master’s degree in psychology or other relevant fields. Tobinworld II did not provide evidence that Israel met any of those criteria, according to the investigation.

The investigation concluded that Israel is designing behavioral intervention plans and “is not qualified to do so,” which the report called potential grounds for suspending or revoking the school’s certification.

Martin Orlick, an attorney for Tobinworld, a Glendale-based nonprofit organization that operates the two Antioch schools as well as a special education school in Glendale, known as Tobinworld, said the schools were investigating the state’s findings. “Naturally, we have a dispute about the claims,” Orlick said.

Asked if Israel would be continuing to work for Tobinworld, Orlick said, “Dr. Israel does not work at the schools. He is an independent consultant who has been working on projects from time to time.”

The state immediately ordered Tobinworld II to submit all behavior intervention plans created by Israel, from the 2014-15 school year through the present, to school districts to be reviewed by each student’s special education team. Israel has been barred from Tobinworld II until he provides a tuberculosis test clearance, and until the school proves it has procedures in place to prevent the hiring of employees before they obtain criminal background clearance, evidence of valid licenses or credentials, and tuberculosis test results, according to the investigation report. The report stated that the schools had a pattern of hiring staff whose criminal clearances and tuberculosis tests were far out of date. In addition, the report said the schools employed behavior specialists with expired certifications.

Aversive behavior-control techniques, which are listed in [Education Code Section 56521.2](#) as methods that include causing students physical pain or depriving them of food, water or access to bathroom facilities, are not allowed in California special education. The state investigations did not address what behavior-control methods Israel was using at the school. Investigators interviewed staff and students at Tobinworld II and Tobinworld III and said they gave “no indication” that there was “a health, safety or any other issue regarding the well-being of students,” according to the report.

“It’s a nightmare that he’s out there,” said Barbara Trader, executive director of TASH, a national disability rights advocacy group, referring to Israel’s involvement with Tobinworld II and Tobinworld III. “This man has a history of doing absolutely the wrong thing. He’s been the major proponent of procedures that deliver pain through electric shock. Nobody else does that.”

Tobinworld has long maintained it has no official relationship with Israel, although the school is the offshoot of the Behavior Research Institute of California, located in Northridge, which was co-founded in 1977 by Israel and Weber, who were not married at the time. Israel started the school as a Los Angeles-area branch of his first school, the Behavior Research Institute, in Rhode Island.

In 1982, an [investigation](#) of the Behavior Research Institute of California by then-California Attorney General George Deukmejian found that teenagers and adults with autism were handcuffed to chairs, sprayed with a garden hose, refused access to a bathroom and denied food. Residents were pinched to the point of screaming and forced to take part in “behavior rehearsal lessons” where they were told to destroy property and then were squirted with water as punishment for their actions, according to the investigation. In 1981, a 14-year-old boy died while being restrained in bed.

That investigation led to a settlement in which the Behavior Research Institute of California agreed not to use aversive therapy. According to a 1986 Los Angeles Times [story](#), California officials banned Israel from entering the Behavior Research Institute of California. Weber took over the administration of the institute, and after a few years she renamed it Tobinworld.

GOING DEEPER

- [Restraint in the Shadows: An EdSource Today report on restraint and seclusion in special education classrooms](#), April 19, 2015
- [The School of Shock](#), a special report, and an interview with Matthew Israel, Mother Jones, Aug. 20, 2007
- [Fire Closes Embattled Institute for Autistic Care](#), early history of the Behavior Research Institute of California, Los Angeles Times, April 17, 1986
- [Torture Not Treatment](#), a report on the Judge Rotenberg Educational Center by Mental Disability Rights International, now known as Disability Rights International, 2010
- [Judge Rotenberg Center Trial: Tape Shows Teen Being Shocked 31 Times \(Graphic Video\)](#), Huffington Post, April 12, 2012

In the meantime, Israel moved his Behavior Research Institute from Rhode Island to Massachusetts and eventually changed its name to the Judge Rotenberg Educational Center, now located in Canton, Mass. Disability advocates say the center is the only institution in the nation that uses electronic skin-shocks to control student behavior.

The use of the shocks at the center has been investigated by officials in [New York](#) and Massachusetts for possible violations of health and safety codes and the educational rights of disabled students. A U.S. Department of Justice [investigation](#) of the use of electronic skin-shocks at the Rotenberg center is ongoing. In 2013, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on torture [found](#) that students who were subjected to [severe electrical skin-shocks](#) at the Rotenberg center had their rights violated under the U.N. Convention on Torture.

His methods do have supporters. Groups of Massachusetts parents have [kept the Rotenberg center from being closed](#) by the state by arguing that their children are engaged in violent, self-abusive behavior, such as self-hitting, and that the skin-shocks have kept that behavior under control.

day.

“We’re talking about kids who the sole reason they are placed there is for a behavioral program, and yet they do not have qualified people there,” said Maggie Roberts of Disability Rights California.

In a plea agreement with the Massachusetts attorney general, Israel resigned as executive director of the center and was placed on probation for five years. His involvement with the Antioch schools appears to have begun a few years afterwards, investigators found.

In unannounced visits to Tobinworld II and III on Jan. 16 and 17, investigators also found that the schools were employing behavioral analysts with expired certifications and teachers without the required credentials to teach students with certain disabilities. The school also failed to comply with state regulations that require behavior plan reviews after staff members have physically restrained students or isolated them in rooms they cannot leave.

Maggie Roberts, associate managing attorney of Disability Rights California, a state watchdog organization, called the state findings “serious” and said they were enough to warrant the revocation of the schools’ certification.

“This is a vulnerable population,” Roberts said. “We’re talking about kids who the sole reason they are placed there is for a behavioral program, and yet they do not have qualified people there.”

The three Tobinworld schools serve a total of 440 students with autism, emotional disturbances, developmental disabilities and learning disabilities, according to income tax statements that nonprofits are required to file. Weber-Israel is executive director of Tobinworld and the schools are named after Weber’s son Tobin, who has autism.

Tobinworld reported \$14.7 million in revenues in 2013, the most recent data available, and receives district, state and federal money to serve special education students school districts are unable to accommodate. According to the state investigation, Tobinworld is currently looking to expand and is seeking certification for three proposed schools whose locations were not identified – A&T Preschool Academy, KT Academy and DVT Academy.

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► **Rosella A. Alm-Ahearn** 4 days ago

I hoped that this ancient ogre died years ago. I am sorry that he is still living. He is no doubt afraid of dying and seeing the Gates of Hell open up for him. (I wish it was true, but as a non-believer, I'm sorry to say I don't think so.) My son brushed against the fringe of this kind of "behavior control" many years ago with a study by Ivar ... [Read More](#)

► **Dave Jersey**  5 days ago

Dear Jane, You have written a tremendously fine investigative report on the Israels. For your information, and as a request, please add to your short list of their offical supporters, the entire body of the 12,000 member Applied Behavior Analysis network, the Association for Behavior Analysis International which "approves" the Judge Rotenberg Center school of shoch "torture," Matthew Israel's baby, as "aligned" with the association's "mission." Please see the source documentation and description of the horrifically ... [Read More](#)

Gilda 6 days ago

Stephanie, it breaks my heart that this happened to you. You are correct; he is a sociopath. I am the mother of a young adult with Down syndrome and autism, and I would want to hurt someone who did this to him. This man should be in prison.

► **Stephanie**  1 week ago

Doesn't this sociopath who found a niche in the behavioral psychology field ever worry that one of his ex-student/patients will track him one day and stuck a knife in his back or shoot him. Just wondering because as an autistic adult who suffered abuse as a kid I can tell you we never, never forget who hurt us. He may of made these kids and teens submit through tasering and beating and they may of ... [Read More](#)

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