

Should Public Schools Spare the Rod?

The use of corporal punishment on disobedient students—commonly known as paddling—will be banned this coming school year in three counties in Florida and two in North Carolina.

That still leaves hundreds of school districts in the 19 states where the practice is still legal.

As the number of studies showing the negative effects that corporal punishment can have on children has increased, the number of students paddled in public schools nationally has decreased—going from 342,038 in 2000 to 217,814 in 2009-10, according to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights.

Studies have shown that in states where paddling is allowed, it's used disproportionately on minority students and those with mental, physical and emotional disabilities.

A 2008 Human Rights Watch report found that although African-American students made up 17.1 percent of the student population nationwide, they comprised 35.6 percent of those paddled. The report also notes that children with disabilities in Texas made up 10.7 percent of the student population in the 2006-07 school year but accounted for 18.4 percent of those paddled.

Efforts to ban paddling at the state and national levels have made little progress.

"Most people don't even know that corporal punishment is still going on in this country," said Rep. Carolyn McCarthy, D-N.Y., who has introduced a bill in Congress to ban the practice in public schools each year since 2010. "It's not just harmful

physically but also psychologically. There are so many other ways of handling discipline.”

Although McCarthy’s legislation has repeatedly stalled, policies are changing at the district level. Superintendent Mark Garrett said McDowell County, in North Carolina’s southern Appalachian Mountains region, banned corporal punishment this spring to protect students.

“As we learned more about the effect corporal punishment has on kids, we knew we had to change our policies,” Garrett said. “It’s always better to be on the proactive side.”

Paddling still goes on in too many areas, most of them rural, said James McNulty, founder of Floridians Against Corporal Punishment in Public School.

“In the places where it goes on, it’s out of control,” McNulty said.

In southeast Georgia’s Coffee County, Superintendent Morris Leis said his school district allows paddling because it’s an effective form of punishment.

“We won’t paddle a student if a parent doesn’t want us to, but we don’t get a lot of complaints,” he said.

Tim Wyrosdick, the superintendent in Santa Rosa County, Fla., said paddling was “very popular” among the majority of parents there. But the county banned the practice in June after parents accused three teachers who had administered corporal punishment of mistreating their children.

“We made the decision to protect the teachers,” Wyrosdick said. “Parents would agree to the paddling and then change their minds. It was putting the teachers in an unfair position.”

Mississippi, Texas and Alabama are among the states with the most students being paddled in school—with more than 100,000

incidents reported in the three states in 2009-10, according to the Office of Civil Rights.

George Holden, a psychology professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, said those numbers are mostly coming from smaller, rural districts. He said the practice is banned in Texas' largest cities: Houston, San Antonio and Dallas.

Holden described paddling as counterproductive, saying it doesn't lead to students' changing their behavior in the long term.

"It makes students angry, less likely to communicate with teachers and less motivated to succeed," he said.

Julie Worley, a parent of three in Houston County, Tennessee, west of Nashville, agrees. She said she's been fighting corporal punishment in her district since 2008, when her seventh-grade son was threatened with paddling.

"This is about our children's basic human rights," Worley said. "Study after study has shown the mental trauma that paddling causes. There needs to be federal legislation."

Deborah Sendek, program director of the Center for Effective Discipline, which seeks to abolish corporal punishment in U.S. schools, said the potential for injury shouldn't be downplayed.

"We teach educators how to manage a playground, oversee a cafeteria and teach a curriculum," Sendek said. "But there's no one teaching you the 'right' way to hit a kid."

Anti-paddling activists say that even if parents object, teachers who use corporal punishment often have immunity from legal prosecution.

The parents of Trey Clayton sought legal help when their son fainted and fell—fracturing his jaw and five teeth—after being paddled by the assistant principal of his Mississippi high

school in March 2011.

“If the parents had done this, they would be behind bars and probably never see him again,” said Joseph Murray, an attorney who represents Clayton’s family.

But Murray said that both the district-level court and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit have rejected the argument that Clayton’s constitutional rights were violated.□

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