

Important Facts about the Use of Corporal Punishment in Schools

by Dan Perez

1. Corporal punishment is defined as “the intentional infliction of pain or discomfort and/or use of physical force upon a student in order to stop or change behavior.” (National Association of School Psychologists) Corporal punishment in schools does not refer to the occasional need of a school official to restrain a dangerous student or use physical force as a means of protecting members of a school community from imminent harm.
2. In the 2004-2005 school year, at least 272,000 – and possibly as many as 1.5 million – American schoolchildren were physically hit in school by a principal, teacher or other education official. (The lower number is according to the U.S. Department of Education; the higher number is according to the National Association of School Psychologists.)
3. Countries that still allow teachers to hit students include North Korea, Cuba, Malaysia, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, Botswana, Somalia, about a dozen other sub-Saharan African countries... and the United States.
4. Over 100 nations have banned the practice. That list is rapidly growing. In the first three months of this year alone, India, the Czech Republic and Sierra Leone have banned corporal punishment from schools. In 2001, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights announced, “No form of violence, including physical, sexual or psychological, can ever be justified as being in the best interests of the child,” and declared corporal punishment of a child to be a human rights violation.
5. Thirty years ago, corporal punishment in schools was the norm in the U.S., being permitted in 45 states. Since then its use has rapidly declined, although 21 states still practice it, led by Texas, with the highest number of reported cases, followed by Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama and Tennessee.
6. This downward trend is also the case in Kentucky. The Kentucky Center for School Safety reports that over the past five years, corporal punishments have decreased 26.8%, from 3,888 in 2002-2003 to 2,847 in 2006-2007.
7. A massive body of scientific and medical literature on the use of corporal punishment has been created over the past 20 years. According to a review of 88 such studies conducted by the National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, corporal punishment is associated with ten undesirable behaviors including increased childhood aggression, child delinquency, child anti-social behavior, adult aggression,

adult criminal and anti-social behavior, and risk of hitting own child or spouse; and decreased moral internalization, child mental health, and adult mental health.

8. On the other hand, not one scientific or medical study has shown that corporal punishment causes children to be more responsible adults, engenders respect for authority, or leads to better control of the classroom.

9. Non-paddling states have higher high school graduation rates than paddling states. According to graduation data maintained by the National Association of Educational Progress, better known as The Nation's Report Card, non-paddling states graduated 74.4% of their students from high school, while paddling states graduated 66.7% of their students from high school. Of the states with the ten lowest graduation rates, eight permit corporal punishment in schools. Of the states with the top ten graduation rates, not one of them permits corporal punishment in schools.

10. Students who live in non-paddling states have higher ACT scores than those who live in paddling states. A survey of ACT data maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics (the federal government) determined that 89% of non-paddling states had a state composite average score above the national mean, while only 36% of paddling states scored above the mean. Likewise, while 11% of non-paddling states scored below the national ACT average, 64% of paddling states scored below average.

11. Dozens of organizations have issued public pronouncements against the use of corporal punishment in schools. They include the National Education Association, National PTA, American Medical Association, American Bar Association, National Association of School Principals, Save the Children, NAACP, and the American Academy of Pediatrics. An ABC News poll found that 72% of American adults believe corporal punishment should not be permitted in schools.

12. In Kentucky, there is randomness to the administration of corporal punishment that amounts to unequal treatment of the Commonwealth's schoolchildren. Out of 172 school districts in the Commonwealth, 129 had no reported incidents of corporal punishment in the 2006-2007 school year. Thirty-eight districts reported between zero and 5% of students being subjected to corporal punishment. Five districts reported between 5% and 10% of students being paddled. In two districts, more than 10% of students were paddled. In other words, in 74% of the school districts of the Commonwealth, a student had virtually no chance of being paddled. But in the other 26%, a student could be paddled.

13. Schools are the only American institutions where physical punishment remains permissible. If a 12 year old misbehaves in a foster home, it is illegal for a foster parent to paddle that child. If that same 12 year old misbehaves in a juvenile detention facility, it is illegal for a Juvenile Services Worker to paddle that child. If that same 12 year old misbehaves in one of the 129 school districts of this Commonwealth that have rejected

corporal punishment, it is illegal for the principal to paddle that child. Only if that 12 year old misbehaves in a school in one of the 45 districts that permit corporal punishment can a principal paddle that child.

Frequently Asked Questions

About Corporal Punishment in Schools

- Q. Hasn't taking paddling out of schools led to more violent and aggressive students?
- A. No. In fact, as the use of corporal punishment has fallen throughout the U.S., the incidence of threats and the use of physical force by students against teachers also has fallen. Between 1994 and 2004 according to the U.S. Department of Education, the total number of paddlings in the U.S. fell from 471,000 students to 272,000 students – a drop of 42%. In the same ten years, the Department of Education reported that the number of public school teachers who were threatened by students fell by 41%, and the number of teachers who were physically injured by students fell by 16%.
- Q. If kids were paddled more, wouldn't fewer of them end up in jail as adults?
- A. No. In fact, of the ten states with the lowest percentage of adult population in prison, educators do not paddle students in any of them. Of the states with the ten lowest murder rates in the nation, educators paddle students in only one of them (Idaho).
- Q. But aren't there procedures in place for children? For instance, don't parents sign forms allowing school officials to hit their children?
- A. In some cases, parents do not object to corporal punishment until their children come home with welts or bruises on their bodies. The common reaction is, "I didn't mean that they could do that to my child." Such incidents illustrate another example of the unequal administration of corporal punishment: What is "reasonable" force? There is no definition. How hard is too hard? How many times is too many? A parent might see "corporal punishment" on a form and think one or two "spanks," with a hand. They might not realize that a school administers corporal punishment with a wooden paddle, or a baseball bat, or a size 10 boot, or a switch or cane – all of which have been reported. In short, parents may give consent, but their consent can be misinformed.
- Q. Aren't these types of decisions best left to local school districts?
- A. Corporal punishment of students has been classified as a human rights violation by the United Nations. It has been discredited as an effective method of behavior modification by nearly a hundred scientific and medical reports and linked to ten undesirable behaviors including increased child and adult aggression and mental health problems. When local officials engage in a

practice injurious to the health and welfare of youth, it is the duty of the commonwealth to intervene.

Q. What are the alternatives?

A. Fortunately, there are many behavior modification techniques available to educators. There are tried and true punishments such as detentions, suspensions and expulsions. Privileges can be suspended. Service work can be mandated. There are character education, student recognition, classroom management and peer mediation programs. Restorative justice conferences teach students accountability for their actions and are attended by offenders, people affected by the offenders, parents and educators. In Kentucky, the Kentucky Center for Instructional Discipline has provided training – free – to faculty and staff members of over 200 schools, teaching them about “School-Wide Positive Behavior Support.”