

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

Issue at a Glance

Corporal punishment is a discipline method in which a supervising adult deliberately inflicts pain upon a student (typically using a paddle) in response to a student's unacceptable behavior and/or inappropriate language. One hundred years after its abolition in most industrialized countries, corporal punishment is still used in many U.S. schools as a disciplinary method against disobedient or noncompliant students. Although corporal punishment is no longer tolerated in the military, prisons, or mental institutions, 17 states still allow corporal punishment in full or in part, according to the National Education Association (2024). In March 2023, former U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona issued a letter to governors and chief state school officers calling on them to "move swiftly toward condemning [corporal punishment] and eliminating it."

Every year, approximately 70,000 students are subjected to this type of punishment in public schools. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Ingraham v. Wright* (1977) that school corporal punishment is constitutional, leaving the decision to ban or permit it up to individual states. Since then, most states have abolished the practice, but as of 2024, it remains legal in the 19 states.

It is also legal in private schools in 48 states. However, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights does not collect discipline data from private schools. Of the public-school population, 40,000—or more than one-third—of those students who were subjected to corporal punishment were Black. However, Black students represent only 16% of the total student population.

In 2023, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) conducted an analysis on corporal punishment in schools. The AAP and numerous other medical and psychological organizations strongly recommend against all forms of physical punishment due to links with negative outcomes like increased aggression, mental health problems, and strained parent-child relationships.

Research also indicates that corporal punishment may adversely affect a student's self-image and his or her school achievement (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003). Research has also shown a correlation between the use of corporal punishment and unintended negative consequences for children such as poor mental health, lower cognitive ability and academic achievement, and higher risk for physical abuse (Society for Research in Child Development, 2016).

The practice of corporal punishment is inconsistent with legislative policies on child abuse and on racial, economic, and gender equity. It increases liability for school administrators and school boards who are sometimes sued when corporal punishment is used in their schools.

National Principals Association Position

- National Principals Association is opposed to the practice of corporal punishment in schools and supports alternative forms of discipline.
- National Principals Association supports that every school in the United States should be free of any form of violence.
- National Principals Association promotes that students have the right to learn in a safe and secure environment. Schools have a responsibility to model and teach methods of exerting authority and modifying behavior that are constructive, humane, and provide opportunities for growth.
- National Principals Association supports alternative proven means of discipline to encourage and develop self-control and appropriate socially adaptive behaviors in constructive, unharmful ways.
- National Principals Association believes that discipline should be reasonable, timely, fair, age-appropriate, and an appropriate response to a student's violation of a code of conduct.
- National Principals Association encourages districts to focus on prevention and effective interventions as responses to disciplinary issues, including positive behavioral interventions and supports, social and emotional learning, peer juries, restorative justice processes, diversion, mentoring, mental health counseling, restitution, and community service programs.

Recommendations for Policymakers

- The U.S. Department of Education should consistently reject corporal punishment in guidance provided to states and school districts and offer guidance for evidence-based alternative discipline practices.
- Congress should fund the Student Support and Academic Enrichment grant program (Title IV, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act), which schools can use to provide comprehensive mental and behavioral health services for students.
- State lawmakers should enact legislation to prohibit the use of corporal punishment in schools and provide funding to assist schools in recruiting and retaining school counselors, social workers, and psychologists to support school-based interventions and the coordination of services.

Recommendations for District Leaders

- Prohibit the use of corporal punishment as a form of discipline if it is still legally permitted in the state.
- Focus on prevention and effective interventions as responses to disciplinary issues, including positive behavioral interventions and supports, social and emotional learning, peer juries, restorative justice processes, diversion, mentoring, mental health counseling, restitution, and community service programs.
- Provide principals and teachers with ongoing, job-embedded professional development on child and adolescent development, culturally responsive classroom management, conflict resolution, restorative justice, and de-escalation approaches that decrease classroom disruptions and the need for disciplinary sanctions.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Prohibit the use of corporal punishment as a form of discipline if it is still legally permitted in the state and district.
- Engage teachers and other school personnel in professional development programs to address the following alternatives:
 - Help students achieve academic success through the identification of academic and behavioral deficiencies and strengths for appropriate instruction.
 - Adopt behavioral contracts among students, teachers and parents.
 - Encourage positive reinforcement of appropriate behavior.
 - Use individual and group counseling.
 - Encourage disciplinary consequences that are meaningful to students and have an instructional or reflective component such as restorative justice.
 - Provide social skills training.
 - Encourage programs that emphasize early diagnosis and intervention for school problems for both students and staff members.
 - Encourage programs that emphasize values, citizenship, school pride, and personal responsibility and support the mental health needs of children.
 - Encourage development of fair, reasonable, and consistent rules.
 - Support strong parent/school and community/school communications and ties.