



North Carolina

EDUCATION
ISSUE BRIEF

2010

**CORPORAL PUNISHMENT:
ALIVE, *BUT NOT WELL*,
IN NORTH CAROLINA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

The data are in— during 2008-2009, children in North Carolina's public schools were hit more than 1,400 times, most commonly with thick wood paddles. (1) Even worse, when their parents became aware that their child had been struck, they could not press charges against the assailants, because a state law gives school personnel immunity from prosecution. In fact, this is the only case when an adult can strike a child he/she doesn't know without fear of prosecution.

This description of the practice of corporal punishment in North Carolina's public schools may sound like hyperbole. Of course, it is not hyperbole to a 70-pound second-grader when she is hit by a 210-pound school administrator. To a child who cannot yet spell "corporal punishment," being hit several times makes school an uncomfortable and unsafe place to be.

North Carolina remains one of the decreasing number of places in the world where this sort of scenario can take place. This issue brief is intended to shed light on the extent to which corporal punishment is still being used in our public schools, with recommendations for the State Board of Education to become involved in the regulation of this practice.

The Background

It is recognized that schools need a system of discipline to modify behavior and maximize learning. Decades of research, however, have uncovered no evidence that hitting students is an effective form of discipline: long-term behavior is not modified and - most importantly - there is no correlation with improved educational performance. (2, 3) Rather, a growing body of research indicates that hitting students negatively affects their social, psychological, and educational development, promotes pro-violence attitudes in youth, and may contribute to the cycle of child abuse.

This growing evidence has not gone unnoticed— the United States and (one province of) Australia are the only developed countries that still allow corporal punishment. And much of the developing world – from Malawi to Mongolia, from Angola to Iraq, from Turkey to Turkmenistan – has banned corporal punishment.

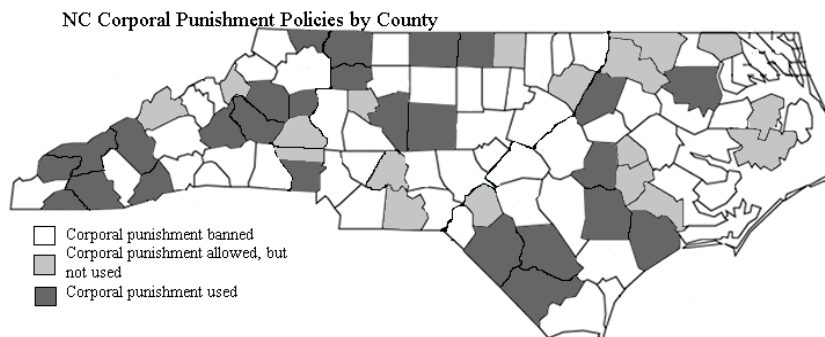
Nor has this evidence escaped the attention of education leaders across our country. Thirty states now ban corporal punishment. Regrettably, North Carolina is not among them. State statutes allow local school boards to adopt policies with regard to corporal punishment.

The State Board of Education has endorsed just one system of discipline – Positive Behavioral Support – which involves both students and parents in setting goals for positive behavior. This system has been implemented voluntarily in over 800 schools across North Carolina, (4) and evaluations indicate that this system results in improvement in academic performance while reducing behavioral problems in the schools.

Despite the evidence against corporal punishment and the success of Positive Behavioral Support, however, the State Board has declined to take a position on hitting students in the public schools. It collects neither policies nor data on the administration of corporal punishment.

The Current Status

The task of keeping tabs on how often school personnel are hitting students has thus fallen to the advocacy community. The October 2009-January 2010 Action for Children survey of local school districts in this regard has been completed. The results, listed and mapped below, are both a comfort and a concern.



Map data from Action for Children North Carolina survey of school districts, October 2009-January 2010.

Corporal Punishment is Not Allowed in:

Alamance, Ashe, Asheboro, Asheville, Beaufort, Brunswick, Buncombe, Cabarrus, Camden, Carteret, Chapel Hill-Carborro, Chatham, Cherokee, Chowan, Cleveland, Clinton, Craven, Cumberland, Currituck, Dare, Durham, Edgecombe, Elkin, Forsyth, Granville, Guilford, Harnett, Henderson, Hertford, Hickory, Iredell, Jackson, Johnston, Kannapolis, Lee, Lexington, Martin, Mecklenburg, Mitchell, Montgomery, Moore, Mooresville, Mt. Airy, New Hanover, Newton Conover, Orange, Pamlico, Pasquotank, Pender, Perquimans, Pitt, Polk, Richmond, Rowan, Rutherford, Sampson, Scotland, Stokes, Union, Vance, Wake, Warren, Washington, Watauga, Weldon, Whiteville, Wilkes, Wilson and Yancey.

Corporal Punishment is Allowed but not Administered in:

Anson, Avery, Catawba, Davie, Franklin, Gates, Greene, Halifax, Hoke, Hyde, Jones, Lenoir, Lincoln, Madison, Northampton, Person, Roanoke Rapids, Stanly, Thomasville and Tyrrell.

Corporal Punishment Done in:

Alexander (3) , Allegheny (n/a) , Bertie (18), Bladen (56), Burke (325), Caldwell (41), Caswell (1), Clay (3), Columbus (87), Davidson (20), Duplin (7), Gaston (62), Graham (61), Haywood (8), Macon (70), McDowell (93), Nash (296), Onslow (2), Randolph (1), Robeson (167), Rockingham (2), Surry (7), Swain (19), Transylvania (n/a), Wayne (11), and Yadkin (52). Numbers in parentheses indicate instances of corporal punishment.

Despite the lack of leadership from the State Board of Education, 69 of the 115 local school districts have banned corporal punishment, including 14 in the past three years. Another 20 districts allow corporal punishment, but report hitting no students in the entire 2008-2009 school year. (In some of these districts, it would appear that the unwritten policy is to stop hitting students.)

Twenty-six local districts report that students are still being hit. It is noteworthy that more than half of these districts hit students relatively rarely. In fact, 90 percent of the hitting takes place in just 10 districts, which are arrayed in two lists below—one by the number of times hitting took place, and the other based on a student’s risk of being hit, when enrollment size is taken into account. (Despite the N.C. Public Records statute, two districts declined to respond to the survey.)

It is also noteworthy that, based on a review of data issued by the N.C. Department of Public Instruction, there is no discernable correlation between corporal punishment and short-term suspensions, long-term suspensions, or drop-outs. The practice of corporal punishment does not appear to improve student behavior or keep students in school. In fact, Nash-Rocky Mount and Robeson, two primary proponents of corporal punishment, are among the districts with the highest dropout rates.

The Ten School Districts Administering the Most Corporal Punishment:

(Data from Action for Children North Carolina survey of school districts, October 2009-January 2010)

By Occurrence

Burke
Nash-Rocky Mount
Robeson
McDowell
Columbus
Macon
Gaston
Graham
Bladen
Yadkin

By Risk of Getting Hit

Graham
Burke
Nash-Rocky Mount
Macon
McDowell
Columbus
Bladen
Swain
Yadkin
Robeson

A Special Case: Students with Disabilities

Many people think that students with disabilities are exempted from corporal punishment by federal and state laws and regulations. Regrettably, this is not the case. Neither the federal government nor North Carolina offer such protection to special education students. In fact, a survey performed by the Office of Civil Rights in the federal Department of Education indicates that students with disabilities in North Carolina received corporal punishment 290 times in 2006. (5)

A 2009 national survey report on corporal punishment issued by the American Civil Liberties Union and Human Rights Watch indicates that students with disabilities are not only hit, but are hit at a rate twice that of the general student population. (6) Thus, the students who may least understand why they are being hit are subject to higher rates of corporal punishment. While the 2006 data appear to provide confirmation, in North Carolina this startling accusation can neither be confirmed nor denied because, as noted earlier, the State Board of Education and the Department of Public Instruction have not monitored corporal punishment.

Recommendations

On many issues in North Carolina, “local determination” is given paramount importance. Indeed, state statutes give local school districts the authority to determine whether hitting students helps improve educational outcomes. There is no reason, however, for the State Board of Education, on whom we rely for educational expertise and leadership, to remain silent on the issue of corporal punishment.

There is no research that documents that hitting students is a measurably-effective strategy to improve educational outcomes. The State Board should clearly state why corporal punishment is allowed. Here are some actions for the State Board to consider:

- ✔ **Recommend that local school boards implement Positive Behavioral Support in all schools as soon as possible.**
- ✔ **Recommend that local school boards (that currently allow corporal punishment) ban the practice.**
- ✔ **Request local school boards (that currently allow corporal punishment) to immediately prohibit the administration of corporal punishment on students with disabilities.**
- ✔ **Require that incidents of corporal punishment be reported to the State Board at least annually, with delineations by student age, gender, race/ethnicity, and special education status.**

Endnotes:

1 Action for Children North Carolina survey of school districts regarding corporal punishment, October 2009-January 2010. Fifty-six districts were known to have banned corporal punishment. The other fifty-nine were surveyed. Two school districts did not respond to the survey.

2 Gershoff, E. (2002) Corporal Punishment and Associated Child Behaviors and Experiences. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128, 539-579

3 Hyman, I.A. & Perrone, D.C. (1998) The Other Side of School Violence: Educator Policies and Practices that May Contribute to Student Misbehavior. *Journal of School Psychology*, 36, 7-27.

4 See website of the N.C. Department of Public Instruction.

5 Office of Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education. (2006) Survey of School Discipline.

6 American Civil Liberties Union & Human Rights Watch. (2009) Impairing Education: Corporal Punishment of Students with Disabilities in U.S. Public Schools.

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1300 St. Mary’s Street, Suite 500
Raleigh, N.C. 27605
919.834.6623
www.ncchild.org

