



Protect Children, End Corporal Punishment in US Schools

Meaghan Mingo, University of Notre Dame

In March 2025, a third grade student at The New William J. Berry Elementary School in Heidelberg, MS left school with a broken arm. Was this injury the result of a tumble off a playground slide or tackle during a spirited football game at recess? No. The ten year old's broken arm was the result of a school employee striking him with a paddle – a form of school discipline still used in the United States today.

What is school corporal punishment, and where is it used?

The U.S. Department of Education defines corporal punishment as “paddling, spanking, or other forms of physical punishment imposed on a child.” In U.S. public schools, this most often comes in the form of strikes to a child's buttocks with a wooden paddle.

As of 2026, corporal punishment is still legal in private schools in 45 states and in public schools in 18 states (15 explicitly permit it, while 3 do not have a state law banning it). The majority of public schools that use corporal punishment are located in the Deep South, with rates highest in Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Oklahoma, and Texas. Children attending rural schools and schools in the South are more likely to attend a school that uses corporal punishment.

Who is subjected to corporal punishment in schools?

All children are not equally likely to be physically punished in schools. Data from the 2020-21 National Civil Rights Data Collection show that boys are more than 4 times as likely to receive corporal punishment than girls. Black students and American Indian/Alaska Native students received corporal punishment at more than 1.5 times their rate of enrollment, mirroring disproportionality seen in other forms of school discipline.

Students with disabilities are consistently overrepresented among those receiving corporal punishment. Since 2017, multiple states (Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Tennessee) have enacted legislation or regulations that ban the use of corporal punishment on students with certain types of disabilities. Evidence from Louisiana suggests this has helped reduce the disproportionate use of corporal punishment on students with disabilities.

How does corporal punishment affect children?

Each year, school-based corporal punishment causes injuries requiring medical attention, including bruises, nerve and muscle damage, cuts, and broken bones. And even when it doesn't cause physical injuries that severe, it still harms. Organizations like the American Association of Pediatrics oppose corporal punishment both at home and at school, pointing to research that consistently demonstrates that it results in poorer

mental health and higher risk of physical injury and abuse.

Use of corporal punishment by parents and schools alike continues despite the overwhelming evidence that it is both harmful and ineffective. In fact, long-term studies looking at its effects find that it increases **aggressive and antisocial behaviors and conduct-related problems** – that is, instead of solving behavioral issues, it creates more. Research also finds effects on learning, cognition, and self-concept, with school corporal punishment associated with **reduced academic achievement**, poorer **verbal skills and executive functioning**, less **self esteem and self efficacy**, and lower levels of **school belonging**.

Children subjected to corporal punishment in US schools **express** that it is experienced as humiliating and painful, creates an environment of fear, and negatively impacts their relationships with educators and schools. On top of that, they're often faced with a coercive choice; both **parents** and **children themselves** report being forced to pick between being hit or other disciplinary measures (like suspension), which often come with immediate negative impacts on academic, athletic, and social life.

Ending corporal punishment in schools

Corporal punishment is **banned in schools in more than 130 countries**. The U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child considers it **violence against children** and a violation of their human rights. Despite all of this, thousands of U.S. children are physically punished in schools each year, often struck for minor infractions such as tardiness, dress code violations, having a cell phone, speaking too loudly or out of turn, or disrespect.

But there are policy solutions. At the federal level, policymakers must continue to push for legislation like the **Protecting our Students in Schools Act of 2023** to enact a nationwide ban on school corporal punishment. Until that is accomplished, state-level legislators must continue to enact legislation to ban corporal punishment in public schools (as Idaho and Colorado did most recently) *and* private schools in their states. And where federal- and state-level action fails, leaders at the local level must take charge. School boards, district leaders, and school administrators must update their policies to ban this practice within their district or school, even if it is not prohibited in state law. State- and federal- officials must also appropriate funding to assist state and local education agencies in implementing non-punitive approaches to managing student behavior, such as trauma informed, restorative justice, and multi-tiered system of supports interventions.