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Contact:
Rebecca Sturtevant
rebecca.sturtevant@splcenter.org
(802) 598-6445

Southern Poverty Law Center Report: Corporal Punishment Ineffective, Should be Eliminated from Florida Schools

MIAMI – As more Florida school districts stop using corporal punishment this school year, a new report published by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) today shows that paddling is a punitive and counterproductive form of student discipline that should be eliminated.

The report – Corporal Punishment in Florida Schools – describes how the use of corporal punishment is an ineffective form of punishment driven more by tradition than results.

“Let’s be clear: The pressure to paddle is simply the pull of tradition,” said Tania Galloni, managing attorney for the SPLC’s Miami office. “There are better ways – evidence- and research-based methods that improve student behavior. More school districts are recognizing that they must eliminate corporal punishment if they want educators to fully embrace discipline methods that actually work.”

Corporal Punishment in Florida Schools examines the practice through three original studies that show a more effective approach is needed to address student misbehavior. The first study sought to better understand where corporal punishment is used and the students most affected by it. The second study examined school administrators’ perspectives on why and how they use discipline. The third study explored the use of positive and proactive approaches to student discipline.

The report was written by University of Florida researchers Joseph Calvin Gagnon, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Special Education; Brianna L. Kennedy-Lewis, Ph.D., assistant professor in the School of Teaching and Learning; and Sungur Gurel, M.A.

The findings come as at least three Florida school districts – DeSoto, Walton and Santa Rosa – began the school year for the first time without corporal punishment in their student codes of conduct. A fourth district – Marion – this year abolished the practice for a second time, after briefly reinstating it three years ago.

The report notes that despite a reduction in its use, corporal punishment was used 3,146 times in Florida schools during the 2010-11 school year. This translates to a child being hit by an adult about every 20 minutes of the school day. The youngest, most impressionable children – elementary students – are most often subjected to corporal punishment.
“It’s awkward because they’re already crying before you hit them – I hate to use that word – before you administer licks,” one K-8 administrator told researchers. “But you have to go through with it.”

The pressure to paddle often comes from the appeal of a practice rooted in seemingly simpler times. Administrators interviewed for the report described supporting corporal punishment out of a belief that “sparing the rod can spoil the child.” Even administrators who disagreed with corporal punishment reported feeling pressure to use it. As the report notes, there are some parents who encourage administrators to “tear my kid’s tail up” if they misbehave.

Corporal punishment persists in some Florida school districts despite the National Education Association (NEA) categorically opposing it, noting that it “is more than ineffective – it is harmful.” The NEA is not alone in its condemnation of paddling, according to the report. Expert organizations in the fields of law, medicine and human rights have opposed and discredited it as well. The American Bar Association says it “should be considered a form of child abuse.”

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*The Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Montgomery, Alabama, is a nonprofit civil rights organization that combats bigotry and discrimination through litigation, advocacy and education. For more information, visit [www.splcenter.org](http://www.splcenter.org).*