

Researchers call for immediate end to corporal punishment in Florida schools

January 22 2015, by Stephen Kindland

A team of University of Florida researchers is calling for an immediate end to paddling students in all state public schools, citing its new study of classroom disciplinary trends that depicts corporal punishment as violent and outdated, and a source of complications such as increased dropout rates and lawsuits.

The team's 33-page research report shows corporal punishment persists in nearly half of Florida [school](#) districts, mostly in the state's rural northern counties, and "it's the youngest, most impressionable children – elementary school students – who most often are subjected" to paddling.

"Paddling is archaic," said Joseph Gagnon, a UF College of Education associate professor of special education and one of the report's three authors. "We need to spread awareness that scientific evidence increasingly justifies abolishing corporal punishment in favor of more effective, positive ways to manage classroom behavior."

Gagnon said most current research shows paddling has little or no positive long-term effect on students, can lower their self-esteem, and instill hostility and rage without curbing the undesired behavior, "yet there are still pockets of Florida and other states where corporal punishment continues to be used."

Paddling in schools has been banned in 31 states, and the UF report cites 16 national expert organizations that have categorically opposed and discredited corporal punishment. They include the National Education

Association, American Bar Association, American Psychological Association, American Medical Association, and national associations for both elementary and secondary school principals. The study report also lists nearly 100 published research citations and references.

The UF study was funded by the Southern Poverty Law Center, an internationally known civil rights and social justice activist organization based in Montgomery, Ala. The SPLC is pushing for the elimination of corporal punishment in school systems in Florida and across the nation.

Tania Galloni, an attorney with the SPLC's Miami office, said the emotional and psychological damage done to a child who has been paddled is reason enough to end corporal punishment.

"(Paddling) is a tightly controlled form of school-sponsored violence, and it undermines the notion that a school is supposed to be a place where children feel safe," Galloni said.

In Florida during the 2012-2013 school year, 28 of 67 school districts administered corporal punishment, according to the Florida Department of Education.

The UF report shows the Suwannee County district, with a student population of nearly 6,000 at the time of the survey, led the state with 359 paddling instances. Holmes County, with more than 3,300 students enrolled, was next with 306 instances.

Madison and Holmes counties also had the highest percentage of students experiencing corporal punishment during the 2010-2011 school year, according to the UF study. Each showed nearly 10 percent of its students being paddled. Washington County was third on the list with almost 9 percent of 3,485 students being paddled. The remaining 25 school districts using corporal punishment, on average, paddled less than

2 percent of their students, with eight districts reporting rates below 1 percent.

Gagnon and co-author Brianna L. Kennedy-Lewis, an assistant professor of curriculum, teaching and teacher education, have presented their research findings to Florida legislators and are working with the SPLC to target other education leaders, policymakers and the general public to raise awareness for the need to end paddling.

Gagnon, Kennedy-Lewis and Sungur Gurel, a doctoral student and statistician, spent eight months researching and writing their findings and recommendations. Gagnon evaluated public data on Florida schools' use of corporal punishment and similar approaches to discipline. He also surveyed Florida principals to identify the use of preventive strategies and other non-violent, research-proven approaches to student behavior management.

Kennedy-Lewis interviewed 36 school administrators representing 27 Florida [school districts](#) that allowed corporal punishment.

"We were trying to find out what drives the whole punitive approach," Kennedy-Lewis said. "As it turns out, many school administrators would just as soon do away with this type of punishment."

The researchers made six recommendations, including abolishing [corporal punishment](#) at the federal, state and local levels, and closely scrutinizing the disproportionate punishment of males, African American students, those with disabilities and other vulnerable student groups.

They also urged schools to implement or broaden proactive, research-proven strategies for handling discipline without punitive paddling, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS. The PBIS

approach involves tailored interventions for individuals and specific student groups that, in addition to social and emotional skills training, can include counseling programs and peer tutoring.

Provided by University of Florida

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