

# Message to school board members in a district that allows paddling

By Jordan Riak

There is one universal rule that applies to all well-managed schools: interaction between teachers and students is governed by principles of mutual respect. Non-violence is the rule. Physical punishments play no part. In most advanced industrial democracies, corporal punishment of students is not only viewed as unprofessional and unethical, it's illegal.

It's also educationally counterproductive.

Children learn their social skills, and especially their problem-solving skills, by imitation. Getting hit mainly teaches them to become hitters, and they are likely to put that lesson into practice sooner or later, to a larger or lesser degree. The behavior of playground bullies is an obvious example. It's no mystery where, and from whom, little bullies learned their social skills.

I am aware that the standard I am attempting to promote is not well-received in this school district. Some teachers here are deep into the hitting habit. And the more they indulge that habit, the deeper they sink. They persist in doing things the way they were taught. They just don't have other tools. And when challenged, they take refuge in the company of others who have the same problem. They soothe themselves and each other by reciting those familiar old fairy tales about discipline that we have all heard countless times. "I'm grateful for the paddlings I got at school... I never got one I didn't deserve... They never did me any harm... They straightened me out... They taught me right from wrong, and I'm a better person today."

The truth, though, is very different. The memory of what it really felt like as a child to be beaten by a grown-up is just too painful and frightening for most people to deal with. So they avoid thinking about it, and some are destined to repeat the cycle. They urgently need help. They need help in the same way drunk drivers need help. Somebody in a position of authority needs to step in and take their keys.

It's time for this school district to set a higher standard for employee behavior. If my arguments about violence and nonviolence haven't persuaded you, then just look at the results. School districts with the high rates of corporal punishment also have poor graduation rates. And with that, comes a host of social problems. You can make your own list. Were this not the case... if corporal punishment played a useful role, then teachers' colleges would teach it. But they don't.

We have been unable to find one institution of higher learning in your state, or anywhere else, that includes such instruction in its teacher training curriculum.

Two weeks ago, an 11-year-old girl in this district was taken to an office by two big male school staff members. They closed the door behind them and forced the girl to submit to being beaten on her buttocks. She left the office crying, and when she got home, and her mom asked her what's wrong, she showed her the injuries.

What was that child's crime? She irritated her teacher by saying, "something stinks in here." She was also paddled during the previous week for equally trivial infractions. Twice she forgot to bring papers to school signed by her mother, and once for tardiness.

The example I've just given is not an isolated event. It's routine. And I doubt that anyone has ever bothered to keep a record. The only thing that's different now is somebody's complaining.

It seems to me that school districts where corporal punishment is still allowed have arrived at a point in time when they must choose between one of two courses of action.

The first option is to ban corporal punishment immediately; disarm the paddlers today and convert their weapons into kindling wood. Any teacher who can't teach without hitting, can't teach, and therefore shouldn't teach.

Choice number two: take the coward's route. Deny, evade, obstruct, do nothing, weasel out of the problem, then pass it on to your successors.

Inevitably, they will deal with it. Ask anyone who knows anything about the history of this issue, and they will tell you that of all the places that have banned corporal punishment in their schools, none has ever reversed the decision. Well, in fact there was one. I almost forgot. After abolishing corporal punishment in their schools, Germany temporarily reinstated it during the Nazi era.

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