Florida Association of School Psychologists

FASP Position Paper on Ending Corporal Punishment in Florida Schools

"No school can be considered safe or supportive if its students are fearful of being physically punished."
– John B. King, U.S. Education Secretary 2016

Definition and Prevalence Rate of Corporal Punishment

Corporal punishment is defined by Florida Statutes as the moderate use of physical force or physical contact by a teacher or principal to maintain discipline or to enforce school rules (Fla. Stat. § 1003.01, 2025). Around the world, school corporal punishment is increasingly recognized as detrimental to students' physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing, with the practice fully prohibited in 137 countries (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Despite global trends, the United States remains one of the few industrialized countries that still permits corporal punishment in schools. In the U.S., the most typical form of school corporal punishment is the striking of the student's buttocks with a wooden paddle by a school authority (National Association of School Psychologists, 2021). According to Greene-Santos (2024), corporal punishment remains legal in 17 states, many of which are concentrated in the southern region of the country, including Florida. Florida statutes allow individual districts to determine if it will permit principals and/or teachers to use corporal punishment as a means of controlling students' conduct (End Corporal Punishment, 2020). In Florida, 19 public school districts still permit corporal punishment as a disciplinary action (Bernstein et al., 2025).

Although the overall use of corporal punishment in Florida schools has declined in recent years, data from the 2023–2024 academic school year indicate a slight increase, raising concerns regarding the persistence of the practice. In the 2023–2024 academic year, 17 of Florida's 67 school districts (25%) reported using corporal punishment, accounting for a total of 516 student incidents – a slight increase from the 509 reported incidents in the 2022–2023 school year. The

counties with the highest reported use were Suwannee (74), Holmes (65), Calhoun (59), and Columbia (50).

Adverse Outcomes and Long-Term Consequences of Corporal Punishment in Educational Settings

Corporal punishment in school settings is associated with long-term harm; increased risk of anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems; and poorer academic outcomes (Allison et al., 2023). Research consistently demonstrates that corporal punishment is harmful to students' physical and psychological well-being and disproportionately impacts elementary-aged children, children living in poverty, Black and Bi- or Multi-racial children, and students with disabilities.

Schools are the only institutions in America in which striking another person is legally sanctioned. It is not allowed in prisons, in the military, or in mental hospitals. It is even prohibited as a sentence for crime. In a society that is already marred by appalling rates of physical violence, schools should not be condoning a practice that contributes to the cycle of child abuse, trauma, bullying and the pro-violence attitudes of American youth. Corporal punishment in schools is associated with a multitude of adverse psychological, behavioral, and academic consequences for students. Research demonstrates that physically punitive discipline practices may precipitate fear, humiliation, anxiety, and diminished self-worth, and critically, there is no evidence that these practices improve behavior, self-discipline, or respect for authority (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Despite its continued use in several U.S. states, empirical research has not demonstrated that corporal punishment enhances classroom conduct, promotes long-term behavioral change, or fosters prosocial skills (Regev et al., 2012). The Society for Adolescent Medicine (2003) explicitly warns that corporal punishment is "ineffective, dangerous, and unacceptable," further cautioning that its use promotes violence by teaching children that physical force is an appropriate method for conflict resolution and behavior control. The practice has been repeatedly linked to heightened aggression, antisocial behavior, school avoidance, and negative attitudes toward teachers and learning environments (Gershoff, 2010). Students exposed to corporal punishment frequently demonstrate academic disengagement, concentration difficulties, and declining performance due to elevated stress responses and emotional dysregulation tied to fear-based discipline. Moreover, the

normalization of physical force as a behavioral intervention communicates that violence is acceptable as a means of problem solving, perpetuating cycles of violent attitudes and increasing vulnerability to trauma and physical abuse (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Collectively, the research base concludes that corporal punishment is not only ineffective as a corrective tool but is profoundly detrimental to student well-being, academic achievement, and a healthy school climate.

Every child has the right to learn in an environment free from violence. When medical, psychological, and educational bodies unanimously identify a practice as harmful, it becomes not a matter of preference but a matter of public responsibility. To protect children, improve academic outcomes, and uphold trauma-informed educational standards (Wycoff & Franzese, 2019), Florida must eliminate corporal punishment from its schools. Doing so will protect our children. This fact is especially noteworthy because we currently have significant pro-social violence-prevention alternatives that are supported by decades of empirical evidence and worthy of immediate legislative attention and implementation.

Liability and Legal Concerns from Corporal Punishment Policies

Corporal punishment not only harms students but also exposes school districts to significant legal and liability risks. Although state law defers to local policies regarding corporal punishment practices, incidents continue to occur despite district-level bans. As demonstrated by a 2021 case in Hendry County School District, a principal administered corporal punishment to a first-grade student in violation of district policies (Pratt, 2024). The subsequent administrative consequences and civil suit that followed the Hendry County case illustrate how districts remain vulnerable to legal exposure, even when corporal punishment is prohibited at a local level. In the Hendry County case, the family sued the school district and board, citing tort claims including battery and negligent hiring, resulting in a financial settlement. Districts risk reputational and financial cost when utilizing corporal punishment as a disciplinary action.

A 2023 incident of corporal punishment in Liberty County further demonstrates the legal vulnerability that districts face when corporal punishment is administered, when a student was paddled without her parents' consent (Fegley, 2024). District-level liability concerns have arisen

regarding whether Liberty County complied with the statutory requirement to review its corporal punishment policy every three years with the opportunity for public testimony (Fegley, 2024). While the investigation remains ongoing, the case underscores how unevenly executed corporal punishment policies can contribute to legal concerns regarding district negligence.

Incidents in which students were paddled without parental consent played a role in shifting public opinion on corporal punishment, as illustrated by the recent passage of House Bill 1255. This bill requires districts to obtain parental consent prior to usage of corporal punishment. However, even with the requirement of parental consent, incomplete documentation or inconsistent application, common procedural errors, would still place districts at legal risk. Ultimately, parents should retain authority in both the application and implementation of physical disciplinary actions rather than schools. That is, it should not be the role of schools to administer physical discipline. Implementing a statewide ban can mitigate these risks by enforcing a clear, consistent standard to safeguard students, staff, and school districts across the state. With limited district budgets, why should schools have policies that unnecessarily open them up to substantial financial judgments?

Alternatives to Corporal Punishment

The Florida Association of School Psychologists (FASP) remains firmly opposed to the use of corporal punishment in schools. This opposing position aligns with more than 60 organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Bar Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, the American Psychological Association, and the National Association of State Boards of Education (US Alliance to End the Hitting of Children, 2020). While FASP recognizes that effective discipline is essential for maintaining safe and productive learning environments, research strongly supports the use of constructive, evidence-based approaches to teach and reinforce desired behavior (Sege & Siegel, 2018). Therefore, FASP encourages schools and teachers to adopt any combination of the empirically-supported alternatives to corporal punishment, including:

- Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS)
- Social Emotional Learning (SEL) initiatives
- Student praise and recognition programs

- Parent training and informational sessions on effective discipline
- Collaborative problem-solving approaches
- Check-in/Check-out systems for ongoing behavioral monitoring
- Peer mediation
- Social skills training and behavioral contracting
- Restorative practices (often interchangeably referred to as restorative justice)
- Instructional or reflective disciplinary consequences (e.g., reflective writing)
- Initiation of Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs)
- Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) emphasizing early intervention

School psychologists play a critical role in implementing many direct and indirect services to improve the discipline of individual children as well as implementing the services necessary to improve classroom and schoolwide discipline. They can also help to establish frameworks for trauma-informed schools. FASP supports legislation that abolishes corporal punishment in Florida schools, and encourages legislators, parents, teachers, and school administrators to adopt and to enforce more effective and constructive alternatives to school discipline that promote personal safety, fair and equitable practices, and positive well-being for our children and youth.

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For further information on corporal punishment in Florida, please contact:

Amy Clark, FASP President (aclark@fasp.org)
Dr. Joseph Latimer, FASP Immediate Past President (jlatimer@fasp.org)
Dr. Jamie Donnelly, FASP President-Elect (jdonnelly@fasp.org)
Dr. Austin Cole, FASP Public Policy and Professional Relations Chair (acole@fasp.org)
Bob and John Cerra, FASP Lobbyists (bobcerra@comcast.net / cerraj@comcast.net)

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