

Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Day: Sunday

Date: 10/27/2013

Section: News

Section Letter: A

Page Number: 1

Paddling common outside metro Atlanta

Reporter: Karishma Mehrotra, Ty Tagami, Shannon McCaffrey

Body Text: Corporal punishment is still going strong in some rural Georgia schools, where educators paddled students more than 16,000 times last year.

No traditional public school in Atlanta and nine nearby school districts has paddled a child since at least 2007, but corporal punishment is used in more than half of the state's 180 school districts, according to discipline data analyzed by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Corporal punishment makes up only a fraction of other disciplinary measures used, such as in-school and out-of-school suspension.

Atlantans may consider thick wooden paddles wielded by educators to be an anachronism, but numbers obtained from the Georgia Department of Education show that 97 school districts last year adhered to that axiom about sparing the rod and spoiling the child.

The conflicting views about paddling would seem to highlight opposing notions of child-rearing and discipline: On one side are those who believe it's important to show kids who's boss; on the other are parents who prefer to talk it out.

However, interviews by the AJC indicate another factor in the acceptance, or rejection, of corporal punishment in schools: Some parents who said they oppose paddling in school are fine with spanking their own children at home. They just don't want a stranger doing it. In some parts of the state, teachers and principals are not considered strangers.

"They can't abuse your child because you're going to see them at Wal-Mart," said Chantelle Pace, a parent in Coffee County. Her child's school, Westside Elementary, reported 53 paddlings last year. Pace moved from Washington, D.C., several years ago and said she would have opted out of corporal punishment in that big-city school system. She said she's OK with paddling in Coffee County, though, because of the close communication between teachers and parents.

A 2007 poll by ABC News found similar nuanced views toward physical punishment. Respondents, by a 2-1 margin, approved of spanking children, but 72 percent disapproved of corporal punishment

in schools.

A growing body of research suggests hitting kids is ineffective and even counterproductive.

Katherine Raczynski, the director of the Safe and Welcoming Schools project at the University of Georgia, said the literature indicates that corporal punishment is no more effective than other forms of discipline yet detracts from learning. It is associated with aggression, depression and lower cognitive performance, she said.

Most of the country has banned corporal punishment in schools. Georgia is among 19 states, most of them in the South, that still allow it, according to the Center for Effective Discipline in Ohio. The organization promotes alternatives to paddling, and maintains that corporal punishment contradicts classroom lessons about nonviolence. Program director Deborah Sendek said she also worries about the risk of physical harm to children.

"How do you know how to paddle?" Sendek said. "How hard do you hit? How far back do you bring the paddle? How do you make sure you get it on the bottom? Do you know about your weight and strength? That's a lot of risk to take."

Proponents, though, say paddling is essential for discipline and order in the classroom.

Jim Buntin, a former superintendent of the Muscogee County School District, in the Columbus area south of Atlanta, said he saw the benefits of paddling during his three-decade education career. It changed behavior faster than any other punishment, he said.

"People say you're abusing children. That's not the case," Buntin said. "I am not here to abuse you. I am here to educate you."

Muscogee County was, until recently, one of the last places an unruly kid would want to attend school: Since 2011, the district has had the second-highest incidence of paddling in Georgia, outranked only by Laurens County, also south of Atlanta. (Grady County ranked third, just ahead of Coffee County.)

But the tide overtaking the country swept over Muscogee earlier this year, when the district banned corporal punishment.

The prohibition came after a parent complained to police about bruising suffered by her daughter, allegedly due to paddling by a school administrator.

The district has not said the change was in reaction to that widely publicized incident, but Tremaine Reese, who works for a group that pushed for an end to paddling in Muscogee, said it might have been a catalyst. He said the reasons behind the about-face were manifold.

Reese, who is a deputy director with Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, an advocacy group for low-income Georgians, said the school administration seemed to be influenced by the national trend away from corporal punishment, by research presented by groups like his and by "an outcry from the public."

Interviews with parents in Muscogee showed a mix of opinions about corporal punishment. Some, such as Kemescha Carter, were fine with it. She said she spanked her son and warned his friends' parents

that she'd spank their kids, too, if they misbehaved in her home. She said the alternative to corporal punishment was chaos.

"It causes a disruption in the classroom, and everybody else can't learn," she said. "My mom spanked me. I came out all right."

Others, though, adamantly opposed corporal punishment.

Haley Hays said she was paddled in school and it didn't change her behavior.

"Let the parent handle it. There are other ways," Hays said. "As they're getting older, you can hurt them worse by taking the computer."

That hands-off approach is gradually winning out in Georgia, with schools turning to other disciplinary methods. (One near downtown Atlanta relies on breathing techniques to calm misbehaving children.) The incidence of corporal punishment has dropped more than 50 percent since 2007, when there were more than 37,000 cases, according to the state numbers.

Georgia law leaves it up to school boards to prohibit or allow corporal punishment, though it imposes requirements, like an official witness and transparency with parents. Students must be informed in advance that specific actions can lead to paddling, or they have to have done something "so antisocial or disruptive in nature as to shock the conscience." Also, it's illegal to paddle a child who goes to school with a doctor's statement that corporal punishment would be "detrimental to the child's mental or emotional stability."

One clause in the law may explain the gradual decline of paddling in Georgia schools: Principals and teachers are protected from criminal and civil liability only if the blows they administer are not deemed "excessive or unduly severe."

Educators fear lawsuits over corporal punishment, and for good reason. Earlier this year, the parents of a Tennessee boy who was paddled eight times for throwing crayons and rocks filed a lawsuit seeking \$1.7 million. The parents of the boy, 5 at the time, say that the paddling was excessive and that he sustained bruises.

Such lessons aren't lost on districts such as DeKalb County. The state discipline data show no incidents of paddling there in the last seven years, yet Ron Ramsey, the school district's chief legal officer, said the school board didn't ban corporal punishment until about a year ago.

"We now no longer allow it, but for years we never used it because of concern for litigation," Ramsey said. "Some parents just don't want anyone to touch their kids."

Parents like Keith Miller.

He grew up in the 1970s, and still remembers the wooden paddle that connected with his buttocks: it was thick, with drilled holes. Miller said he has spanked his son but prefers other forms of punishment, like taking away freedoms. "I like being able to talk with him and have a relationship with him," he said.

Like other parents who were waiting to pick up their kids at Henderson Middle School in DeKalb on a recent afternoon, Miller was surprised to learn that paddling is still legal --- and widely

practiced --- in Georgia.

It shouldn't be, he said. That kind of discipline "worked for us, but in this day and time it would probably be seen as abuse." He thought about it a second, then added: "It was probably abuse back then."

Reporters Karishma Mehrotra, Ty Tagami and Shannon McCaffrey can be reached at the respective email addresses: karishma.mehrotra@ajc.com, ttagami@ajc.com and smcaffrey@ajc.com

Discipline at school

In 1980, 45 states allowed corporal punishment. Today, 19 states do. In Georgia, students were paddled 16,433 times in 97 of the state's 180 school districts last school year, according to the state Department of Education.

4 counties have 25% of incidents

School districts in Georgia reported more than 16,000 incidents of paddling last year. More than a quarter of the incidents occurred in four school districts, with Laurens County topping the list at about 1,500 and Coffee County fourth with about 800 incidents. The districts were:

1. Laurens County Schools, Dublin area
2. Muscogee County School District, Columbus area
3. Grady County Schools, Cairo area
4. Coffee County School District, Douglas area

How do you feel about spanking in schools? Join the discussion on our Get Schooled blog at www.myajc.com/weblogs/get-schooled.

Caption:

Keywords: