

Human Rights Watch

More than 200,000 US public school students were punished by beatings during the 2006-2007 school year, Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union said in a joint report released in August 2008.

In “A Violent Education: Corporal Punishment of Children in US Public Schools,” the ACLU and Human Rights Watch found that in Texas and Mississippi children ranging in age from 3 to 19 years old are routinely physically punished for minor infractions such as chewing gum, talking back to a teacher, or violating the dress code, as well as for more serious transgressions such as fighting. Corporal punishment, legal in 21 states, typically takes the form of "paddling," during which an administrator or teacher hits a child repeatedly on the buttocks with a long wooden board. The report shows that, as a result of paddling, many children are left injured, degraded, and disengaged from school.

“A Violent Education” documents how the United States is out of step with international practice and jurisprudence on the use of corporal punishment in schools, outlawed by 106 countries. Human rights bodies have consistently concluded that corporal punishment in schools violates government obligations to protect children from physical violence and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

The report is based on four weeks of on-the-ground research in Mississippi and Texas in late 2007 and early 2008, including more than 175 interviews with children, teachers, parents, administrators, superintendents, and school board members.

HRW/ACLU research found that corporal punishment is used at disproportionate rates against certain groups, including African-American students and special education students. For example, in the 13 states that physically punished more than 1,000 students per year, African-American girls are twice as likely to be beaten as their white counterparts. Students with mental and physical disabilities are also punished at disproportionate rates, with potentially serious consequences for their development. In Texas, for instance, 18.4 percent of the total number of students who were physically punished were special education students, even though they make up only 10.7 percent of the student population.

The report documents several cases in which children were beaten to the point of serious injury. Since educators who beat children have immunity under law from assault proceedings, parents who try to pursue justice for injured children encounter resistance from police, district attorneys, and courts. Parents also face enormous, sometimes insurmountable, obstacles in trying to prevent physical punishment of their children. While some school districts permit parents to sign forms opting out of corporal punishment for their children, the forms are often ignored, at which point families have few, if any, avenues for redress.

Human Rights Watch and the ACLU call upon the US government to prohibit corporal punishment in all public schools and urge state governments, school boards, superintendents and

administrators to eliminate physical punishment in their schools. To read the “A Violent Education: Corporal Punishment of Children in US Public Schools,” please visit: www.aclu.org/intlhumanrights/gen/36476res20080819.html or <http://hrw.org/reports/2008/us0808/>.

Map © 2008 Human Rights Watch