



## **Serving All Students – Promoting a Healthier, More Supportive School Environment**

**Verbal Testimony Presented to the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee, February 16, 2022, by Morgan Craven, J.D., National Director of Policy, Advocacy, and Community Engagement, Intercultural Development Research Association**

Good afternoon Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens, Chairman Scott, and members of the Committee.

My name is Morgan Craven, I am the National Director of Policy, Advocacy, and Community Engagement at IDRA. In addition to research and advocacy, IDRA provides training and support to educators, schools, and education agencies in 11 southern states and Washington, D.C.

In my testimony I'd like to share information about corporal punishment, what it takes to foster safe, culturally-sustaining, and supportive schools for all students, and why it is past time for federal action to eliminate corporal punishment.

Corporal punishment is a particularly brutal form of punishment. It involves spanking, paddling, slapping, and hitting, or otherwise inflicting physical pain on children – some as young as preschool age – allegedly as a form of discipline.

I encounter many people who are shocked the practice still exists in schools. We should all be shocked. Not only is it baffling that anyone would be allowed to hit a single child in school, but the frequency with which corporal punishment is used is horrifying. In the 2017-18 school year, approximately 70,000 children were hit in their schools.

Corporal punishment is used disproportionately against Black children and other children of color. Though they are not more likely to break school rules, they *are* more likely to be hit in their schools – Black students received 37% of all corporal punishments in 2017-18, but only made up 15% of the public school population.

Children with disabilities, who should be receiving other supports in accordance with federal law, are also disproportionately hit in their schools.

This is happening even though the harms of corporal punishment are clear. Students suffer physical harm, including injuries that require medical attention like bruising and broken bones. They also suffer academically and socially, experience humiliation and anxiety, and feel disconnected from their teachers, schools and academic careers.

Corporal punishment also impacts the entire school, creating climates that center violence, rather than safety, which makes it difficult for everyone to learn and thrive. When an adult hits a student, it suggests to every child in the room that when they have conflict with someone, violence is an appropriate resolution, particularly violence against the students who are disproportionately hit. This is a dangerous model for students who are developing social skills

and learning about interpersonal relationships.

Corporal punishment persists even though we know what works to support children and create safe schools for them. IDRA works with schools and educators across the south, and the most common type of request for assistance we get is for help moving away from harmful exclusionary discipline and school policing. Educators desperately want to understand what they *should* do, what programs they *should* implement to support students. They do not want to hit children because it is ineffective, counter-productive, and not why they became educators.

We encourage these schools and educators to think about people – like having diverse and well-trained counselors, social workers, nurses, and teachers. We encourage them to think about policies – like ending corporal punishment. And we help them understand practices – adopting research-based strategies that change schoolwide cultures and focus on building strong and authentic relationships between everyone in a school community.

There is so much consensus around the harms of corporal punishment that hitting children, and adults for that matter, is banned in nearly every other context, and would in many cases be considered assault. Some states that allow corporal punishment in schools ban it in juvenile detention centers, foster care settings, jails, and prisons because of the harm it can cause.

Corporal punishment is also banned in federal programs, including Head Start and Department of Defense schools.

No school should be paddling, spanking, slapping, or hitting children. Full stop. Our nation has a problem of violence against children, perpetrated in schools and sanctioned by states.

It is past time for federal action on this issue because corporal punishment is a relic that 19 states just refuse to stop. Part of the reason for that is the issue is always framed as someone else's decision – a local school board, or a campus principal, or a parent who is asked to opt in or out of a corporal punishment policy.

But that cannot be the way we think about corporal punishment given what we know about the harm it causes to our students. There is no individual, parental, local, or state interest that should supersede the interest in protecting children from being hit in their schools.

The federal government has the responsibility to protect students, to step in when states fail to act, and to ensure oversight and accountability when it comes to the federal resources that are sent to public schools across the country.

You also have the opportunity to support school communities to make the right choices and pursue a vision of safe and supportive classrooms for all students. Corporal punishment, which is inherently about fear, violence, and trauma is antithetical to that vision.

I urge you to act immediately to eliminate corporal punishment through the Protecting our Students in Schools Act and support other bills that end harmful discipline and policing practices while investing in research-based methods to support schools and students.

*IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by providing dynamic training; useful research, evaluation, and frameworks for action; timely policy analyses; and innovative materials and programs.*