

# Spare the Rod...?

Peter Werbe  
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“It is a general policy to expect that teachers will maintain discipline by means other than the use of corporal punishment.”

—Detroit Public Schools TEACHERS’ BULLETIN

“The Detroit Board of Education policy limited the use of corporal punishment is in reality one big fiction.”

This is what one irate Detroit substitute teacher said after witnessing two instances of excessive brutality against elementary school students during one afternoon.

He was teaching at the ungraded section in Ellis Elementary school.

He said that on Dec. 15 a teacher stopped a student who was running in his classroom and punched him in the chest knocking him to the ground.

An hour later a large burly teacher entered his room and grabbed a child’s wrists and fingers. He twisted them causing the child to scream with pain.

“All the while this 6’ 2” teacher was shouting, “gimme those gloves,” related the substitute teacher.

The child, who was about 14 years-old, gave him the gloves. But the big teacher grabbed the student’s head in such a way as to make the child bleed from the mouth. The substitute said his colleague then stalked out of the room.

The child just stood there and cried. “Does this happen often,” the substitute said he asked one nearby Negro student who was about 13.

“He (the teacher) does people like that all the time,” the student replied.

An isolated incident?

William Wattenberg, assistant superintendent of Detroit Public Schools told the FIFTH ESTATE that he feels there is no pattern of misuse of corporal punishment in the Detroit School system.

Wattenberg outlined the state law covering the use of corporal punishment. He said the teacher may employ the same just punishment that a parent would use.

When asked whether paddles, rulers, pointers or other instruments were used by teachers to discipline children, he said, “The form corporal punishment should take is determined by what individual school principals feel to be appropriate after discussions with staff teachers.”

He added that the form it takes would be made known to the principal of each school.

Mary Ellen Reardon, president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, said she had a serious question as to the fact that widespread brutality does exist in Detroit Public schools.

She added that she does not approve of regular and sustained use of corporal punishment. She feels that it should be used only as provided by the Teachers Bulletin—that the punishment should be consistent with the size, age and offenses of the student.

The American Civil Liberties Union has had reports of widespread instances of teacher brutality.

Art Antisdal, faculty advisor to Wayne graduate students working on the ACLU sub committee on schools, said, "We have found that a pattern of brutality in the Detroit Public Schools does exist. It is mainly centered in the elementary and junior high schools.

"When you get to the high school level, the students will start hitting back," he added.

Sam Clark, a graduate student working with Antisdal, spoke of one instance where a teacher employed a wooden paddle to punish an entire class for the actions of two students.

Because it was Wednesday the teacher administered double whacks, the teacher tagged Wednesday "double whacks day," said Clark.

He said two students who were not involved in the original actions refused to submit to the beating.

They were taken to the principal and given the choice of the thrashing or expulsion. One student accepted the punishment, but the other took a three-day suspension.

Most teachers interviewed agreed with the Antisdal opinion that instances of teacher brutality are fairly widespread.

One teacher at Samson Elementary school related an instance of an assistant principal acting as a substitute teacher, who kicked a student with sufficient force so as to cause the student to have an epileptic fit.

Teachers told of witnessing teacher brutality at Hampton, Custer, Samson, St. Claire Annex and Ellis Elementary Schools as well as Barbour, Pelham and Miller Junior High Schools.

Most of these schools are in the inner city and all have a predominantly Negro population.

A teacher at St. Clair Annex said her colleagues patrolled the halls armed with rulers.

A teacher at Pelham Jr. High said he does not himself employ corporal punishment. But he said the use of it is so widespread that students expect it.

He feels they have come to identify it so closely with authority that perhaps students don't respect him because of his failure to use it.

The substitute teacher quoted earlier in the article said that he taught shop in a class of ungraded and socially maladjusted students.

He said he didn't feel a need to hit any of the students and that he was having no problems with them.

But he said the regular teacher kept a large paddle in his desk. The substitute said it was obviously fashioned with great care and craftsmanship with finger grips carved into the handle. On the handle was inscribed "MISTER BLISTER FIVE."

The children in the class said their teacher often wielded the paddle against them. The majority of them felt that he used it unfairly and excessively.

"He kicks ass," one student told the substitute.

Mr. William McNair, the principal of Ellis Elementary school said that he disapproved of the use of corporal punishment.

He said that the use of it at Ellis's graded section is rare, but acknowledged that corporal punishment is commonly applied in the ungraded section.

He expressed a disapproval with "Mr. Blister" but said that this kind of thing is symptomatic of a greater problem.

He said "Mr. Blister" is a shop teacher and that it is difficult to find shop teachers who are willing to teach the problem children in the ungraded schools.

He added that in the ungraded school the teachers are just holding on, that the greater part of their concern is simply the maintenance of order.

But he said many of these teachers have often exhausted every other means of discipline.

"They're frustrated," said McNair, "there should be other channels for the teachers to resort to. But there are no psychiatric, psychological, clinical or visiting teacher services for us to refer the children to."

Instead of increasing services the Board of Education has been cutting services for the ungraded schools, he added.

McNair sees no easy remedy for the use of corporal punishment until the Board of Education begins taking steps towards making a learning situation possible in the ungraded schools.

David Wineman, Wayne University professor of social work and co-author of the book CHILDREN WHO HATE, said that learning suffers as a result of corporal punishment. The child comes to associate violence with the entire learning process.

He said that the fact that there is an official policy permitting the use of violence serves to instigate its use.

“It serves to narrow the kinds of techniques a teacher will employ in dealing with his students,” said Wineman.

He called corporal punishment anti-child.

Rather than having to deal imaginatively with children who have behavioral problems, Wineman said the teacher immediately uses the simplest method—violence.

Wattenberg and Mrs. Reardon both are interested in knowing of incidents of wanton use of corporal punishment so they can take steps to remedy the situation.

It appears that there is sufficient evidence of teacher brutality to warrant a full scale investigation by both the Board of Education and the Detroit Federation of Teachers.

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See letter response in FE #22, January 15–30, 1967.

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