



I read recently that school paddling is still legal in 17 districts in Ohio, including a number of northeast Ohio school districts. This got me thinking back to my paddling years.

When I was a teenager, things were different. People drove giant cars that used a lot of gasoline. A Democratic president frequently fibbed to the public about an undeclared and seemingly endless war. And when students, especially boys, misbehaved in most public schools, they got paddled.

Things have really changed. Today that president is Republican, the gas-chuggers are SUVs, and when students, mostly boys, misbehave in some public schools, they get paddled.

I'm an expert on that last one. Why? Because my heinie was often redder than Bill Clinton's nose.

I got paddled for laughing in history class, walking through the halls when I was supposed to be outside at recess, and yakking when I should have been drilling in shop class. ("Thank you sir, may I have another!" was a funny line in *Animal House*, but somehow didn't seem funny in real life.)

My most memorable paddler was Mr. H, a diminutive English teacher with an otherwise mild bearing. Mr. H had a small but extremely effective instrument of enforcement, a paddle with holes drilled in it to better cut through wind resistance and give his stroke more oomph. I got paddled by Mr. H once, when I dropped a nickel and went to pick it up.

"Sit down, Mr. Lax," said Mr. H. I kept walking. A nickel was a lot of dough.



"I said, sit down, Lax."

I bent down to pick up the rolling Thomas Jefferson, which was my first mistake: Never show the opponent his target. It's too tempting.

Mr. H marched me up to the front of the class. I bent over, this time with my rear facing the room.

Whap! Whap! Whap! Tears sprang to my eyes. Humiliation momentarily masked the developing welts that would keep me wincing for two weeks.

I've been trying to remember how many times I got paddled, but I can't even remember all the teachers who paddled me over my illustrious school career, much less the number of whippings.

So what did I learn from all this?

I learned that paddling is a very bad idea. I learned that some adults – not my parents, thank God – believed that violence could solve life-threatening behavior issues like talking in class. I learned what it feels like to be bullied by people in authority. I learned to seriously dislike those teachers – at least for the time I was in school – rather than respect them.

I was fortunate in that I had outlets for my anger. I played drums (okay, I beat them); I wrote for a newspaper (granted, it was underground); I rejected social norms (by becoming a Buddhist); and I wrote some fiction. "The Coke Machine," my first story, was a dark satire about a kid who gets beaten for getting an unauthorized cola in the teachers' lounge. He ends up dying of internal injuries.

I'm not sure how fortunate those kids are in the 17 paddling districts in Ohio.

They may choose paddling over detention, but it's the wrong choice, because with every whack, they're getting the wrong message. They're being told that violence is an answer to things that can be solved without violence. They're learning that adults are so inept they can't figure out ways to deal with troublemakers, from the overly chatty and mobile ones (like I was) to the truly dangerous, like the students who injured art teacher Laura Frick as she attempted to break up a fight at Fulton School in Cleveland this January.

Those students, or any students who beat teachers or other students, should be dealt with harshly and swiftly, be it through suspensions, special schooling or the courts. Violence should never be accepted in schools, including hitting children with wooden clubs.

The good news is that there is a bill about to come up in the Ohio legislature that would ban this medieval form of discipline once and for all. But those legislators shouldn't listen to me. They should listen to a real expert: a real-life, nine-year-old boy named Angus, who is an excellent student in all ways.

"How would you feel if you were paddled in school for talking in class?" I asked Angus, who knew nothing of my paddle-ridden past.

"I'd be embarrassed. Lots of pain," he answered.

"Would you behave better?" I asked.

Angus' answer was as swift and sure as Mr. H's holy paddle.

"No," said Angus.

I couldn't have said it better myself. ■

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