

**Testimony of Wynell Gilbert,
Teacher
Erwin High School
Center Point, Ala.
Before the U.S. House of Representatives
Education and Labor Subcommittee on
Healthy Families and Communities**

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Chairwoman McCarthy, Ranking Member Platts, and subcommittee members, I am Wynell Gilbert, a secondary school science teacher at Erwin High School in Center Point, Ala. I am testifying today on behalf of the Jefferson County Federation of Teachers. I am also a member of the American Federation of Teachers, which for many years has been training teachers in how to run effective, orderly, safe and respectful classrooms without the use of corporal punishment.

I am here today because I know firsthand the difference a teacher can make in the classroom without having to resort to the use of corporal punishment. Even though corporal punishment is allowed in many Southern states, has it truly made a difference in student behavior? Based on my experiences as a teacher in a high school that was once known for its discipline problems, using corporal punishment is comparable to sweeping dirt under the rug: The problem still exists; it's just being covered up. Typically, the students who caused the most problems in my classroom were the ones who were seeking attention and/or in search of acceptance. A paddle may teach a child to be fearful, but what happens when the child is no longer afraid?

I have been in public education for approximately 12 years. Six of these years have been spent at Erwin High School, near Birmingham, Ala. In terms of demographics, we are a school that is 93.1 percent African-American, 0.8 percent Asian, 3.06 percent Hispanic, and 3.31 percent Caucasian. Our school has a highly transient student population. Many of my students are raised in single-parent homes, primarily by their mothers and/or grandparents. Most of the

parents are relatively young. The majority of male students are raised in homes without their fathers, and sometimes there is little or no interaction between fathers and sons. Some of our students are affiliated with gangs and often engage in illegal activities. We have had to deal with a lot of discipline problems in the school and, unfortunately, some of these discipline problems were handled by the use of corporal punishment. The problems were not solved, because the same behaviors continued, often with even more hostility.

In my classroom, I have dealt with different types of misbehaviors. I can honestly say that I have never had to administer corporal punishment nor had the desire to use it on any of my students. However, as a result of their misbehavior, some of my students did receive corporal punishment from the school administration. Unfortunately, when the students, came back to my classroom, they were often hostile, and after a while, the misbehavior resumed. As a result, I became proactive as opposed to reactive. I started this process by implementing strategies that I learned through ER&D (Educational Research and Dissemination) training, a professional development program developed by the American Federation of Teachers, which my local union provides. From this, I found that the most effective strategy was setting the tone in my own classroom.

From day one, I set high behavioral expectations for my students; I empower them by giving them an opportunity to establish their own classroom rules as long as they comply with the school's Student Code of Conduct. I make a conscious effort to get to know my students; this enables me to target the ones who may develop behavioral problems. Typically, these are the students who I want to “empower” by giving them certain responsibilities. For example, I had a young lady in my class who was always tardy; when she came to class, she always caused problems. Whenever I addressed the issue with her, she would become hostile and shut down. Of course, when she did this, it interrupted the learning process. One day, I decided to take a different approach. That day when she came in late, I asked her to file papers for me. She worked quietly in a corner. The next day, I saw her in the hall and I commented on how well she filed the papers and how she helped me out tremendously. The look on her face made me realize that this may have been the only compliment this young lady had ever received. So, she and I began to talk more, and she offered to be my student helper. This gave me an opportunity to see what she

was interested in, while being able to hold some type of leverage on her. My response to her was, “You can’t be my helper if you continue to come to my class late and misbehave. You have to set an example for other students.” After having this conversation with her, she was the first person to arrive in my class every day. In fact, she became one of my best students. In situations like this, oftentimes the student is referred to the office for disciplinary action, which may or may not result in corporal punishment. Would corporal punishment have benefited this young lady? Positive reinforcement got the results I wanted without the use of corporal punishment.

I work really hard at getting to know my students, thus learning their “likes” and “dislikes,” and I try to find the things that motivate them. As simple as this may seem, these are the strategies that have cut down on misbehavior in my classroom, without the use of corporal punishment. For example, as an incentive, I give extra credit/bonus points to students who go the extra mile in class; we may do special projects as a class; I may have guest speakers come in to talk to the students; and if the opportunity presents itself, we may do outside experiments. These are the things that I find help motivate my students. These incentives give them a reason to come to my class and participate. In essence, these extras give students a sense of ownership and acceptance. Even though these strategies have been successful in my classroom, there are always a few students who still may act out. However, because of the tone I have set and the expectations that have been established, these misbehaviors often are minor and can be handled in the classroom. I know that I have been successful in managing my classroom because I am consistent; I provide a structured environment for my students; and I try to address any problems in the beginning before they fester.

As I recall, during my first year of teaching at this school, many of the students had very little pride, and school morale was very low. We had a lot of discipline problems, and many of our students received corporal punishment. Even though corporal punishment was administered, the discipline problems continued.

Unlike most schools in our school district, we have a full-time social worker on our campus. This individual has played a tremendous role in working with the students who are most likely to misbehave. Oftentimes, teachers are asked to refer students with repetitive misbehaviors

to the social worker. These students typically are dealt with by using the Strength-Based Perspective program, which highlights the students' strengths (something positive) as opposed to their weaknesses. By using this approach, he is able to build a relationship with the student, which in turn builds trust and gives the student an opportunity to be a part of the process. The social worker's role in the school has had a very positive impact, particularly on our male students. It is very helpful that he is an African-American, so most of the students can identify with him; he has taught a lot of these young men what it means to be a man and how to avoid conflict in a positive way (whether the conflict is in the classroom or at home).

I can recall a situation in which one of my female students would come to class with the worst attitude ever; she constantly caused problems in the class. Before sending her to the office, I spoke with the social worker. I later found out that this young lady had very little respect for women because she was habitually abused by her mother and eventually was removed from her home and placed in foster care. When I realized this, I knew that a harsh punishment would not solve the problem with this young girl. I learned that she was a very good artist, so the next day in class, we did an assignment in which students had to illustrate what they had learned by drawing a picture. Each person in the class was assigned a role. Of course, I assigned this young lady to be the illustrator (giving her an opportunity to showcase her artwork). At the end of class, I commented on her drawing, and she was thrilled to know that I liked the picture. We engaged in conversation about other things that interested her, but everything circled back to art. Without going into detail about her past, she told me that drawing gave her an opportunity to escape. Seeing that this was her greatest strength, I suggested the following: I told her that when she came to class she had to act like a young lady, to do all that was required for the class period. Then, if time allowed, I would let her draw for the last five to ten 10 minutes of class. I didn't let her down, I kept my promise and I maintained consistency with her. As a result, she didn't let me down and became one of my better students. In this situation, corporal punishment would not have been a solution.

In addition to the things I have done in my classroom to maintain discipline through positive reinforcement, our school has been proactive with this approach as well. Among the things that have been put in place is a program called "Caught Doing Something Good," which

recognizes students for doing something good in the school. For example, if a student turns in a lost wallet, the student's name is announced over the PA system at the end of the day. Students are so excited to hear their names announced that they work extra hard to be recognized for their positive behaviors. Even though this approach has not eliminated all discipline problems, it has given students the opportunity to build character and integrity. Three years ago, a mentoring program titled G.U.M.B.O.S. (Greater Understanding of Multiple Blends of Students) was established. G.U.M.B.O.S. is a service organization with a very diverse group of students ranging from star athletes and scholars to students who have exhibited behavioral problems. Members of this organization are matched with students in the elementary and junior high schools to serve as mentors. Ironically, the students who caused the most behavioral problems often made the best mentors. Their behavior changed as a result of being a part of a respectable group, which gave them a sense of ownership and acceptance, and made them feel important.

I could go on and on about the different programs we offer our students to reinforce positive behavior, but I realize that time is limited. However, I can say that having these programs in place has been far more effective in maintaining discipline than using corporal punishment or other negative alternatives.

My job as a teacher is to provide my students with the necessary skills they need to be productive citizens. In most cases, these skills go beyond what is found in the textbooks. What makes me feel good about what I do day to day are the ways in which my students are able to resolve their own conflicts without the use of physical force. Most of my students come from homes in which they are used to having pain inflicted upon them to get desired results. As a result, that behavior trickles into the classroom, and they in turn begin to practice violent acts to get the results they want, which creates a bigger problem in the classroom. Taking a different approach by using other methods to show students how they can resolve conflict in a positive manner is more effective, because these are long-term life skills that everyone needs to know. More importantly, these skills build character and integrity, which is something that corporal punishment fails to do.

In sum, corporal punishment does not work and in my opinion should be banned. In each of the examples provided, it was positive reinforcement, building on student strengths, and fostering nurturing relationships between teachers and students that extinguished unwanted behaviors. Administration of corporal punishment perpetuates unnecessary reassertions of adult power and control, it humiliates students, and it results in little or no change in student behavior.

Fortunately, the principal of my school has moved away from corporal punishment. Yes, we still have discipline problems, but our principal works really hard with our social worker to ensure that students have an opportunity to improve their behavior by using positive reinforcement before other steps are taken.

As I close, I am proud to say that in 2011 we will be moving into a brand-new high school. For the first time, I will have a true science lab. I am excited and the students are excited. Moving from an antiquated building into a modern building is going to mean a lot for these students. Most importantly, they can walk into a new school with a sense of dignity and pride.