

## *Ban Corporal Punishment in Private Schools, New York Lawmakers Say*

The proposals from state legislators come in response to a New York Times investigation that reported the use of slaps and kicks to keep order in some Hasidic Jewish schools.



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New York State lawmakers have introduced several bills that would ban corporal punishment in private schools after The New York Times reported that students in some Hasidic Jewish religious schools have been regularly hit, slapped or kicked by their instructors.

Democrats and Republicans in both chambers have introduced at least four bills to outlaw the practice, which is prohibited in public schools but not explicitly barred in all private schools. Several lawmakers said they expect the measures to pass without opposition.

“No so-called educators or educational administrators have a right to put their hands on anyone’s kid,” said Charles Lavine, the Nassau Democrat who is chairman of the Assembly Judiciary Committee and sponsor of one of the bills. “It’s as simple as that.”

The legislation is part of a broader push by some state lawmakers to increase oversight of private schools, especially all-boys schools in the fervently religious Hasidic community, in response to the Times investigation, which revealed that those schools had received more than \$1 billion in taxpayer funding while providing only paltry instruction in English, math and other secular subjects.

The failings occurred despite a state law requiring private schools to provide an education that is substantially equivalent to the one offered in public schools. The Times report, drawing on 911 calls and interviews with dozens of recent students, also showed that teachers in many Hasidic schools made regular use of corporal punishment to keep students in line during hours of grueling religious lessons.

Representatives of the Hasidic schools say that their instructors do not use corporal punishment and that any isolated incidents occur less frequently than in other schools.

Last month, during a joint legislative budget hearing, lawmakers questioned a spokesman for Agudath Israel of America, an Orthodox Jewish group that advocates for Hasidic schools. The spokesman, Rabbi Yeruchim Silber, defended the schools and said they had no tolerance for corporal punishment.

“These schools produce citizens who are well-rounded in all areas,” Rabbi Silber said. “Businesspeople, professionals, every walk of life, family life, communities that are low in crime, low in drug use.”

This week, representatives of several Hasidic schools did not respond to requests for comment.

The bills aimed at raising educational standards in religious schools include proposals that build off the state Education Department’s new regulations for all private schools. The regulations, which officials had considered for years, were adopted days after The Times investigation was published in September. They offered a road map for holding private schools to minimum standards, requiring the schools to prove they are providing a basic education or risk losing funding.

One proposal, introduced by Assembly Democrats Kenneth Zebrowski and Deborah Glick, would clarify and strengthen the state's existing law. Another pair of bills, by Assemblywoman Linda Rosenthal, would require instruction in certain subjects, including prevention of child abuse. A third piece of legislation, from State Senator Robert Jackson, would cut off funding for any private schools that fail to certify that they are providing education in specific secular subjects like math, technology and geography.

Mr. Jackson, a Manhattan Democrat, said in an interview that he had unsuccessfully pushed the bill in previous years. He said he had long supported budget increases for public education but believed schools that accepted public dollars without providing basic instruction in reading or math were "committing a fraud."

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"If you're receiving the money, you need to do what you said you were going to do," Mr. Jackson said. "If not, you're going to be in trouble."

All the bills aimed at improving secular instruction in private religious schools face significant opposition.

In January, eight Republican members of Congress from New York State wrote a letter to Gov. Kathy Hochul asking that she not interfere with Jewish religious schools — known as yeshivas.

"We urge you to do all in your power to support and empower New York's yeshiva schools to teach their students on their own terms," wrote the lawmakers, including Representative Elise Stefanik.

State Senator John Liu, the Queens Democrat who is chairman of the Senate New York City Education Committee, said in an interview that he believed that further legislation was unnecessary because state officials had handled the issue last year when they adopted new regulations.

The proposal to ban corporal punishment in private schools, by contrast, has garnered considerably more support, including from Mr. Liu and many others.

At least four such bills have been introduced, but lawmakers appear to be coalescing around one filed by State Senator Julia Salazar and Assemblywoman Emily Gallagher, both Democrats who represent Williamsburg, Brooklyn, home to some of the most insular Hasidic communities in the state. At least six other senators have signed on as co-sponsors.



A bill to ban corporal punishment filed by Senator Julia Salazar, a Brooklyn Democrat, appears to have gained the most traction. Hans Pennink/Associated Press

The proposal defines corporal punishment as “any act of physical force upon a pupil, however light, for the purpose of punishing such pupil or modifying undesirable behavior.” It states that no teacher or school employee may use corporal punishment.

The bill is now pending in the Senate Children and Families Committee.

Another proposal, from Assemblyman David McDonough, a Republican from Long Island, defines corporal punishment to include the use of timeout rooms.

Aside from the Times articles, The Albany Times-Union reported last year on more than 1,000 instances of corporal punishment that have illegally occurred in public schools in recent years.

The Times articles sparked debate among officials over corporal punishment laws. While the law clearly says that corporal punishment is only barred in public schools and certain private schools that are registered with the state, some officials pointed out after the Times investigation that “child abuse” already was illegal under state law, and that corporal punishment could be considered abuse. The state Education Department even issued a formal opinion saying that was its interpretation of the law.

Still, several lawmakers said they believe more clarity is needed, especially as it relates to yeshivas.

State Senator Liz Krueger, a Democrat from Manhattan, said she hoped that any corporal punishment bill the Legislature passes would include clear enforcement measures and penalties for schools that break the law.

“Frankly, there have been some decent laws on the books,” Ms. Krueger said, “but they haven’t been enforced.”

***A correction was made on March 2, 2023: An earlier version of this article misidentified the committee led by State Senator John Liu. He is chairman of the Senate New York City Education Committee, not the Senate Education Committee.***

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