

HAVE YOU

WHACKED

YOUR KID TODAY?

California Assemblyman Mickey Conroy

carries a big stick and he wants to use

it on your kids. But is his plan to bring

corporal punishment back into

public schools a remedy for children

out of control, or does it fuel the argument

that violence begets violence?

BY JOSEPH F. DUFFY

by snow-white hair that mirrors the mid-January peaks of the San Bernardinios. • But when Conroy cradles his spanking paddle, nicknamed the "Board of Education," he appears more mountain than hill. The bark seems somehow more fitting. • Last year, the Republican from Orange grabbed international headlines when he followed the well-publicized Singapore caning of Michael Fay with legislation to paddle California's convicted graffiti vandals. That bill, AB7, died its first death last year. This year, the tenacious Conroy's commitment to drub derrières continues. Along with the reintroduction of AB7, Conroy has boldly proposed "The School Discipline Act of 1995," known as AB101. That bill, if passed, would give public school districts' governing boards the opportunity to institute corporal punishment without parental permission. California law allows corporal punishment in private and

CALIFORNIA ASSEMBLYMAN MICKEY CONROY'S voice is the unmistakable bark of a 21-year Marine Corps veteran. His words—any words—penetrate, dropping like bombs greased with authority. Physically, he doesn't quite live up to the voice's promise. He stands average height, and his stocky frame is topped

MICKY CONROY

parochial schools. Recent crime statistics from the California Attorney General suggest why Conroy cries for control: the number of violent crimes committed per 100,000 Californians has increased in Orange County (423.8 per 100,000 in 1984; 522.4 in 1993) and statewide (764.6 per 100,000 in 1984; 1,058.8 in 1994). As the media turn these statistics into ubiquitous bloody news blurbs, they become a call to action.

Although the Fay incident sparked some interest in rekindling physical punishment, Conroy's bill proceeds on a sparsely traveled road. Corporal punishment has been disappearing sharply since 1988. At last count 27 states have banned it, and fewer and fewer students are getting their rumps rapped, according to statistics from the U.S. Department of Education. In 1982, 1,415,540 students were struck in school. In 1992, the latest available figures, 555,531 students were hit, including 38,428 disabled students.

Yet, at press time, both AB7 and AB101 are waiting to be heard in the Education Committee. While California waits and debates, many parents, teachers and students are wondering why Conroy is so eager to rehang the paddle on the classroom wall.

CONROY, VOTED INTO office in a special election in September 1991, comes from a broken home in Western Pennsylvania. He was raised by his mother and grandmother, who, along with eight uncles and aunts, shared in disciplining him. They never abused him, he says, but he adds that he learned from them not to make the same blunder twice.

Today, Conroy's no-nonsense parenting philosophy reflects an upbringing he says molded him into a well-disci-

plined child and then into a Marine Corps major. Along the way, he and his wife, Ann, adopted two children whom he feels are the products of good parenting because they never crossed the line of consequence that Conroy firmly established.

"Good parenting is when a threat can be made to a child," explains Conroy, in-

of teachers far removed from the paddle, his own statements could defeat him.

For example, when asked what he would do if the system erred and his own kids were wrongfully paddled for an offense they did not commit, Conroy responded, "Wrongful paddling will not hurt them. They will have learned something. Wrongful paddling is a cop-out because you've got to have been doing *something* in order to have been wrongfully paddled. And if it's wrongful paddling, hey, so what? I got wrongfully paddled, but it didn't kill me."

But even when the paddle's threat swayed the tempo of learning

and behavior, teachers and principals guarded against an undeserved buttocks beating. One such educator was Gary Gard, recently retired after 30 years as a teacher and administrator. The majority of his career was spent in Orange County school districts.

Gard says he swatted a few dozen students while it was legal. He was a supporter of Conroy's bill until he discovered that parental permission wouldn't be sought before paddling. "I think you have

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which meant that the strap was coming out,' Conroy says.

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sisting he never hit his kids. "Like, 'If you do that, I'm going to do this.' All I had to do was reach for the doorknob, which meant that the strap was coming out. That was the end of it. That's discipline."

It will take a lot more than the threat of the strap to convince members of the California Assembly, and beyond them the school districts' governing boards, that this disciplinary tool belongs in the California school systems. Can Conroy pull it off? As he faces a new generation

THE RUMP-ROASTER'S RULE BOOK

If passed, Mickey Conroy's corporal punishment bill will call for at least three procedures to be followed when a teacher feels punishment is necessary:

"(1) The use of corporal punishment shall be approved in principle by the principal before it is used, but approval is not necessary for each specific instance in which it is used. The principal shall prepare guidelines for administering punishment that identify the types of punishable offenses, the conditions under which the punishment shall be administered, and the specific personnel on the school staff authorized to administer the punishment.

"(2) A teacher or principal may administer corporal punishment only in the presence of another adult who is informed beforehand and, in the pupil's presence, of the reason for the punishment.

"(3) A teacher or principal who has administered corporal punishment shall, upon request, provide the pupil's parent or guardian with a written explanation of the reason for the punishment and the name of the other adult who was present."

Although Conroy said that a Supreme Court ruling already backs his legislation, his bill provides school personnel with added protection from litigation: "Except in the case of excessive force or cruel and unusual punishment, a teacher or other member of the instructional staff, a principal or the principal's designated representative, or a bus driver shall not be civilly or criminally liable for any action carried out in conformity with the rules adopted by the governing board of the school district regarding control and discipline of pupils."

Judges could order a paddling for juvenile graffiti vandals "no less than 72 hours nor more than 14 days after the minor is adjudged a ward of the court for an act of graffiti." Conroy's bill hands the paddle to the parent, who will deliver a judge-determined number of blows—no more than 10—to the juvenile's buttocks on the outside of normal apparel. If the parent declines to spank or delivers unsatisfactory blows, a bailiff will administer the punishment.

—J.F.D.