NEW STRAITS TIMES

Student's eye injury sparks debate on corporal punishment in Malaysian schools

By Mandy Leong - September 20, 2023 @ 9:00am



The Parent Action Group for Education chairman, Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim, slammed the school for not complying with the Education Rules 1959 circular, which has restricted light canning to just palms and clothed buttocks. - NSTP file pic

KUALA LUMPUR: The Parent Action Group for Education (PAGE) has called upon the authorities to take swift and decisive action against the teacher accused of allegedly subjecting a student to caning, which resulted in an eye injury.

Its chairman, Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim, slammed the school for not complying with the Education Rules 1959 circular, which has restricted light canning to just palms and clothed buttocks.

"In this case, if the school complied with guidelines, it would have been contained and not led to such a situation.

"Physical punishment is now limited within specific conditions which must be complied with. We have zero tolerance. Page does not advocate the use of physical punishment," said Noor Azimah.

A Form 5 student in Penang was hospitalised with an injury to his right eye, allegedly after the teacher canned him for vaping in class.

According to a Malay daily, the student's father, Mazni Mohamad, claimed the assistant discipline teacher mistakenly hit his son's eye, causing noticeable bruising, and the boy was rushed to the hospital.

"I know my son is naughty, but this is not the way to teach a lesson. Luckily, he did not go blind," the father told the media on Thursday.

The parent said to lodge a police report over the matter while requesting an explanation from the school.

Section 5 of the Education Rules and Regulation (School Discipline) 1959 circular stipulated only the principal or authorised personnel by the headmaster could carry out light caning on students, while girls are exempted from this practice.

New Straits Times has reached out to the Penang State Education Department director, but he refused to comment on the issue.

Malaysia Educational Psychology Society (Meps) president Teow Chean Khai echoed Page's stand, calling for urgent action to review corporal punishment in school settings.

"There is a pressing need to examine the authority given to school personnel to administer physical punishment to any student.

"We need to consider the immediate impact on the student, shaped by corporal punishment with their role and effect on society in the future," he explained.

Teow condemned the practice of resorting to corporal punishment to address misbehaviour, characterising it as an endorsement of violence as an acceptable course of action.

"By responding to inappropriate behaviour through violence, we teach students that violence and aggression are valid forms of communication.

"It might seem like a quick fix to stop a student from misbehaving. Eventually, we need to figure out why they're acting that way," said Teow.

Teow commented that corporal punishment would just reduce the student's willingness to engage in school while missing out on the focus on addressing the main issue behind the incident.

"Caning might have stopped the vaping behaviour this time, but does that serve the purpose of urging the students to maintain healthy habits in the long run?

"Corporal punishment has been practised for a large part of human history. If simple caning stops delinquent behaviour, we will not have societal and crime issues.

"This practice will only perpetuate the cycle of violence, which could lead to abuse cases in other contexts," he added.

Sharing similar sentiments with Teow, University of Malaya Department of Educational Psychology and Counselling Professor Dr Loh Sau Cheong said self-reflection is much needed in this case over corporal punishment.

"Teachers should communicate with the student to guide and let them realise the consequences of such misbehaviour. The self-reflection process would also help the student to achieve self-realisation," she said.

Dr Loh suggested there were better alternatives that serve the function of disciplining students.

"Schools and educators could opt for 'negative punishment', such as confiscating the device," she said.

However, she emphasised the importance of coupling discipline with positive reinforcement, underlining the need to consistently acknowledge and praise students for their good behaviour.

She mentioned studies that had proven students who underwent corporal punishment scored lower in academic performance, showed lower psychological well-being, higher current depressive symptoms, and a greater likelihood of spanking their children in the future.

"Schools are not supposed to practice corporal punishment on the students, as this will create negative psychological well-being," she said.