

***INGRAHAM v. WRIGHT***  
430 U.S. 651 (1977)

**Cruel and Unusual Punishment**

**Facts**

James Ingraham, an eighth grader, after being paddled for misbehavior in school, sued his school principal, Willie J. Wright.

Previously, the authorized punishment had consisted of paddling the student on the buttocks with a flat wooden paddle measuring less than two feet long, three to four inches wide, and about one-half inch thick. The normal punishment was limited to one to five “licks” or blows with the paddle and was intended to result in no apparent physical injury to the student.

Ingraham was subjected to more than 20 licks with a paddle while being held over a table in the principal’s office. The paddling was so severe that he suffered a hematoma, i.e., a blood clot, missed school for 11 days, and required medical attention.

Ingraham’s parents sued, claiming that their son’s due process rights, as guaranteed under the Fourteenth Amendment, were violated in that they were not notified of the infraction or afforded the opportunity to present a defense at any kind of hearing with the principal, counselors, parents, and/or child prior to the paddling. Further, they declared that their son’s Eighth Amendment rights had been violated in that cruel and unusual punishment had been inflicted upon him.

The Dade County school officials countered with the fact that schools had traditionally used corporal punishment as a means of maintaining discipline. Further, paddling was permitted by the laws of Florida, and the local school board had passed similar regulations.

**Decision of the Court**

In *Ingraham v. Wright*, the United States Supreme Court held that the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment did not apply to disciplinary paddling of public school children. According to the five-justice majority, the Eighth Amendment historically applied only to those facing criminal punishment. Moreover, the “openness of the public school and its supervision by the community afford [school children] significant safeguards against the kinds of abuses from which the Eighth Amendment protects prisoners.” The four dissenting Justices felt that corporal punishment in public schools, if severe enough to be inhumane, should be limited by the Eighth Amendment. The Court concluded that the Ingrahams would have to rely on the existing system of state remedies to sue school officials after-the-fact for administering excessive punishment.