



Published: 02.21.2008

AZ House panel OKs PE and arts school bill

It would bar cutting electives to offer more math and science

By Howard Fischer

CAPITOL MEDIA SERVICES

PHOENIX — State lawmakers Wednesday moved to ensure schools don't cut electives like PE and the arts to offset increased math and science requirements.

With only a single dissenting vote, the House Committee on K-12 Education approved legislation to bar schools from cutting music, art and physical education programs as they're being forced to provide more academics. Rep. Sam Crump, R-Anthem, voted against the bill.

The committee's move came over the objection of several school officials and their representatives. Like Crump, they said these decisions are best left to locally elected school boards.

But state School Superintendent Tom Horne, who is pushing the measure, said there's nothing wrong with the state setting minimum standards.

HB 2557, however, does not set standards or even mandate schools that don't currently offer these programs add them to the curriculum. Instead, it simply ensures those that do have the programs don't drop them.

The move follows a vote last year by the state Board of Education to double the number of years of math required to get a high school diploma, from two to four, beginning with the Class of 2013. Graduates that year also will need a third year of science.

Rep. Mark Anderson, R-Mesa, said that if he had his way, he would mandate these elective courses for all students. Anderson is also the sponsor of a companion bill that would require all schools to have at least 150 minutes a week of physical exercise for their students. That bill is being revised for later consideration.

Anderson, the House committee's chairman, said HB 2557 isn't designed to penalize the schools now offering other programs.

"Let's at least protect the ones that we currently have," he said. "They're already in existence. It's not going to cost any money."

Not all school officials object.

Flowing Wells Unified School District doesn't feel any pressure to cut music, art and physical education programs because of a decision last year by the state Board of Education requiring students to take more math and science classes.

"Obviously I support the legislation," Flowing Wells Superintendent Nicholas Clement said. "In the 25 years I've been here, the only thing we've done is expand."

Clement said the district has expanded its dance and orchestra programs and also offers after-school mariachi and art classes.

"We've done it because it's the right thing for kids," he said.

Horne has been especially vocal in pushing physical-education programs, saying, "Students who sit around

and don't move all day don't do as well academically as students who exercise."

He said there are studies where parallel classes were taught in algebra and literature, with just the first group exercising before class. Horne said students in that group did better academically.

"It makes common sense," he said. "Sitting around all day isn't good for your brain."

Anderson agreed to allow schools to drop existing PE, arts and music courses if they can show the state Department of Education that there is a budget crunch, or that there just aren't enough students enrolling in specific programs to justify their existence.

But that didn't sway Janice Palmer, a lobbyist for the Arizona School Boards Association, who said lawmakers should not meddle.

"We do have a body in order to debate these issues, in order to prioritize what is necessary in the community," she told lawmakers. "That's the local governing board."

Palmer said most school board members do everything they can to avoid cutting programs that are popular with parents. But she said they need the flexibility to make these decisions as necessary.

Rep. David Schapira, D-Tempe, said the ability to drop programs with permission of the state Board of Education ensures that no district will be unnecessarily burdened.

And Gov. Janet Napolitano, who pushed for the additional math and science requirements, said she doesn't see a problem with the restriction. Some schools already are offering a number of math and science courses though they're not yet mandated, she said.

"And they offer music, and they offer arts," she said. "I think there are ways to accommodate these things."

When it comes to mandatory physical education, Anderson said he will rework that bill to spell out clearly it would not require schools to actually have 30 minutes a day of organized physical education classes.

Anderson said he just wants to ensure that students are participating in some level of moderate physical activity each week. And he said that could be satisfied if a parent certifies that a child is doing those things outside of school.

Read more health news and information at azstarnet.com/health.

● *Star reporter Andrea Rivera contributed to this story.*

All content copyright © 1999-2008 AzStarNet, Arizona Daily Star and its wire services and suppliers and may not be republished without permission. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the expressed written consent of Arizona Daily Star or AzStarNet is prohibited.