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Bill would make school recess mandatory

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PHOENIX — State lawmakers are weighing whether to elevate recess to the same level as readin', writin' and 'rithmetic as required subjects.

Legislation awaiting state House action this week would require schools to provide at least 30 minutes of recess each day for students in grades one through six on top of the minimum 20 minutes they now get for lunch.

But the fate of the measure is uncertain. It has drawn objections from some school officials who insist there isn't enough time in a day to teach kids what they need, without adding a mandatory recess.

HB 2037 cleared the Senate last week. But the 17-10 vote showed several senators are siding with the districts.

One of those is Sen. Tom O'Halleran, R-Sedona.

"Our schools are for academic purposes," he said.

"While I understand the need for physical education and a period of time out from the school day to relax, our students need to be challenged in this day and age," O'Halleran continued. "I don't see where this is going to do it."

But Rep. Mark Anderson, R-Mesa, who crafted the proposal, said objections are based on the assumption education and playtime are mutually exclusive.

"There are some districts that struggle with the concept of letting children be children," he said. "They think they can drill them for 15 more minutes and that's going to improve their academic scores."

Anderson said there are school districts that manage to work in a full hour of physical education, not just the unstructured playtime HB 2037 would mandate.

"They still manage to teach kids how to read and do math as well," he said, adding that he has no sympathy for officials who say they would be trading test scores for tetherball.

"The fact that your particular district can't get its act together to figure out how to do this is really a problem you should be researching," he said. "There's obviously districts that can do this."

Anderson is also sponsoring HB 2557, a companion law to bar school districts from dropping existing programs in physical education, music, arts, and technical or vocational education without first conducting a public hearing. That bill has passed the House and awaits a final vote in the Senate.

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