

Recess bill passes Illinois House

"It's time for the children of Chicago to play!

By Sharon Schmidt

A bill introduced to the Illinois General Assembly by Representative Mary E. Flowers, requiring the Chicago Board of Education to provide recess for elementary students, passed the House of Representatives 111 to 5 on May 1.

"It's about time for the children in the Chicago public schools to go out and play," Rep. Flowers told Substance. "We expect so much of our children. Too much. We ask them to sit still all day without a break. Ask adults to do that. They would fail every day."

Flowers said that the bill, which now needs to pass through the Illinois State Senate before Governor Rod Blagojevich signs it, has widespread support. She said it will have "lots of sponsors" in the Senate.

State Representative Mary Flowers (above, center, in white) surrounded by lobbyists who supported her bill requiring recess in Chicago public schools. Her bill passed the House on May 1. Substance photo by Sharon Schmidt.

Blagojevich pledged his support of the bill in conversation with Chicagoans who traveled to Springfield, on April 24 to lobby for the bill.

Most Chicago schools do not have recess. School administrators usually cite two reasons for denying recess to the students in their school: ensuring student safety and providing the maximum number of instructional minutes.

However, most parents want recess for their children. They argue that the benefits to school safety, academics and the social, emotional and physical health of children outweigh the risks.

While Chicago schools CEO Arne Duncan has spoken in favor of recess at the Chicago Board of Education monthly meetings and to the media, and the board adopted a "Local School Wellness" policy in August 2006, addressing nutrition and physical activity in schools that suggests daily recess, the decision to have recess is left up to the local school.

Recess curbs discipline problems

Lynn Morton, co-chair of POWER-PAC (Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew - Policy Action Council) said that their campaign for recess grew out of POWER-PAC's "Elementary Justice Campaign." The parents were searching for ways to help curb discipline problems in the schools.

"The fight for recess grew out of that and took a life all its own," said Morton. For example, she told Substance about seeing a child in the first grade at Brunson school disrupt class every time she was in the school as a parent volunteer. She said she told the teacher that if only the student could get outside for just ten minutes his classroom behavior would change.

The American Association for the Child's Right to Play notes that recess can serve as an outlet for reducing child's anxiety. "The elementary school age child has very few coping strategies, and as a result sometimes resorts to inappropriate outbursts. Recess provides a means for the child to reduce stress."

Chicago parents and children meet with Representative Mary E. Flowers (D) 31st (center, dressed in white) on April 27 in the Illinois Capital Building in Springfield. The group, Parents United for Healthy School, met with more than 20 state representatives (and many state senators) to lobby for Flowers' House Bill 1335, which would require that all Chicago public schools provide a daily 10-minute recess. The bill passed in the House 111 to 5 on May 1. Organized by the Healthy Schools Campaign, the Parents United for Healthy Schools is a coalition of many Chicago groups lobbying for recess including the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, COFI (Community Organizing and Family Issues), COFI's parent organizing group POWER-PAC, Caza Aztlan and the Coalition for Children's Health. Substance photo, Sharon Schmidt.

Recess contributes to academic success

Chicago parent Amy Lux, founder of the Coalition for Children's Health, has testified to the board on several occasions about the need for her boys, and all children, to have recess in order to concentrate on academics.

"Students who do not participate in recess have difficulty concentrating on specific tasks in the classroom, are restless and may be easily distracted," Lux states in a position paper. "Recess facilitates improved attention and focus on learning in the academic program. One study found that 4th graders were more on-task and less fidgety in the classroom on days when they had recess, with hyperactive children those who benefited most."

Children learn more quickly and better when they are given breaks during an assignment, the POWER-PAC fact sheet "The Importance and Benefits of Reinstating Recess in the Chicago Public Schools" states.

"This especially applies to native and foreign language recall, mathematical facts and text recall. Students pay better attention to tasks when they are given breaks. Children become temporarily bored with the stimulus in their environment. During recess, children experience the novelty of a new environment. After recess the classroom is a new stimulus again and children can pay better attention to the task they are concentrating on."

Parents see that eliminating recess is academically counter productive.

POWER-PAC co-chair Nelly Torres, her son Xavier (a sixth-grader at Von Humboldt school), Sally Filan and her daughter Julia (a first-grader at Jackson Language Academy) lobby for recess in Springfield on April 27. The Filans and others from the Parents United for Healthy Schools spoke with Governor Rod Blagojevich about Flowers' recess bill. Blagojevich promised to sign the bill after it passes through the House and the Senate. On a previous visit to the capital on March 7, 2007, 12-year-old Xavier Torres testified to the importance of recess to the Education Committee of the Illinois House of Representatives. After his and Rep. Mary Flowers' testimony, the committee voted in favor of HB 1335, requiring recess in Chicago elementary schools. On April 27, while speaking with Illinois representatives, Xavier was made a page by Rep. Kenneth Dunkin (D) 5th. Substance photo, Sharon Schmidt.

Recess to fight obesity

POWER-PAC states that children will be healthier if given time during the day for recess. "Since 1980, the number of overweight children (ages 6 to 11 years) has doubled and since 1970 it has tripled. Daily physical activity helps children control weight gain and augments the development of muscles and the growth of the heart and lungs in 4 to 12 year olds. It also has been correlated with higher self-esteem in adolescents. Recess has additional benefits, as children that are more physically active at school are more physically active at home after school."

The Healthy Schools Campaign, a Chicago organization advocating for healthy school environments, states in its April press release that "recess has emerged as an important tool in combating childhood obesity."

Recess helps fight childhood obesity and is linked to increased academic success and decreased discipline problems, the press release states.

"In the Latino neighborhood in which I live, I see the number of kids who are obese increasing dramatically," said Jovita Flores of the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization. "I realized that we don't have much physical activity in our schools, even though schools in other neighborhoods have recess and PE. [House Bill 1335] will give our children the chance to be healthy and active during the school day, something that children in many other schools are able to take for granted. When I recognized the disparities our children face, I knew I had to get involved."

While nearly 90 percent of Chicago schools do not have recess, most of the neighborhood and magnet schools on the north side, serving whiter and wealthier families, have recess, a Substance survey found.

POWER-PAC reports that nationally African-American students have less time for recess than their white counterparts. "Across the country, one out of every three African-American students in elementary school doesn't have recess, whereas one out of every six white students doesn't have recess."

Social, emotional health

"Recess is not just about play," Rep. Flowers told Substance. "It's about talking, interacting, sharing, learning about your fellow man."

POWER-PAC states that recess gives children the opportunity to develop socially and emotionally. "A child's behavior on the playground is preparation for adulthood. They learn to make decisions, resolve conflict, respect rules, be self-disciplined, control aggression, solve problems and develop leadership skills. The relationships students create on the playground enhance and foster learning inside the classroom."

Balance in education

"We're suffering," two Chicago kindergartens, in school for five and a half hours without recess, told Substance. "All we do is work."

The American Association for the Child's Right to Play notes that for many children, the opportunity to play with friends is an important reason for coming to school.