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Senators lift exercise rule from obesity bill

Phys-ed mandate costly, would take away class time, educators say

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By Jim Siegel

The fight against childhood obesity in Ohio will go on without a requirement that students get at least 30 minutes of exercise per day while in school.

Last week, a Senate committee approved a bill backed by a powerful coalition of businesses and health-care advocates that would increase nutrition standards for a la carte food and beverages served in schools and require students to get body-mass-index screenings.

After hearing strong pleas from public-education officials, sponsors removed a requirement that schools provide students with at least 30 minutes of exercise per day outside of recess, and that high schools add a half-unit of physical education to state graduation requirements.

Jeff McCuen, treasurer of Worthington City Schools, told the committee that while he shares the concern about obesity, the 30-minute requirement would cost the district \$4 million and take time away from core classes.

Groups representing teachers, school boards and treasurers told lawmakers that it would be impossible to implement without money to pay for it. Most schools will see state funding cuts or freezes next year.

"We can't solve every social problem at the school door," said Darold Johnson of the Ohio Federation of Teachers. "We need to do what we do well, and that's educate."

Johnson stressed that nutrition and exercise are personal

responsibilities, noting that the gains of 30 minutes of exercise are significantly diluted if a student then goes home and eats 3,000 calories.

Sen. Kevin J. Coughlin, R-Cuyahoga Falls, agreed to take the requirement out of his bill and instead allow districts to obtain a waiver for the exercise requirement. But he added that society rightfully asks a lot of public schools.

"While I share the view that parents have responsibilities on all these things, I can also have the view that our schools should be doing the right stuff while our students are in there nine months a year, seven hours a day," he said.

The bill is getting a rare amount of cooperation between Senate Republicans and House Democrats, who are trying to pass it cleanly through both chambers.

Rep. John Patrick Carney, D-Columbus, who is sponsoring the identical bill in the House, was not eager to remove the exercise requirement but said he understands the concerns from education groups about cost and time.

"I want these groups to come on board and be supporters because they are going to be implementing it, and I want them to be enthusiastic about implementing it," he said.

Supporters point to alarming statistics, such as a study by the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease that found that Ohio's obesity rates could pass 50 percent by 2018, with associated health-care costs surpassing \$16 billion.

First lady Michelle Obama has made childhood obesity a signature issue, convening a task force that recently made 70 recommendations, including more body-mass measurements by doctors, and replacing junk food and sugary drinks in schools.