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LD 156

Dear Committee Members,

Today, I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 156 "An Act to Require Outdoor Recess Time For Students From Grade 6 To Grade 8". As a mom of a middle schooler, this bill is incredibly important to me and to the kids in our community. I witnessed our older son go through the same middle school (Lincoln Middle School in Portland) without recess and it was incredibly difficult for him. He is someone who thrives when he has enough movement during the school day and spending an entire day indoors sitting was extremely challenging for him. He dreaded school and struggled to make it through. Now he is at Casco Bay High School, where he has plenty of movement opportunities and he is loving school! Academically, he is also thriving - which is new for him. Now that his physical need for movement is being met, he is able to attend to learning. It is a drastic difference from his middle school experience. I truly believe if he'd had recess and more time to move, he would have been much more successful in middle school. Our younger son is now in 6th grade and I am hopeful that this bill, if passed, will give him the time outdoors that he also needs to thrive.

In addition to being a parent, I have also led outdoor programs for kids for many years through my business, Outdoor Movement Project. I have read and studied the research about movement and middle schoolers and the evidence is clear: Recess is imperative for their success at school. Here are some of the reasons why.

Reason #1: Connection.

Recess allows middle schoolers time to connect in a way that is not possible in the typical classroom. Research strongly suggests that close relationships with peers contribute to both social and cognitive development. Let them connect through unstructured free time. Recess is the perfect opportunity to nurture this connection.

Reason #2: Play.

All work and no play is not good for anyone, especially 11-13 year olds. Free play helps to develop problem solving, imagination and critical thinking skills. In addition, recess gives kids the opportunity to exercise leadership, take turns and learn to resolve conflicts. Of most importance, recess is a break from the rigors of the classroom. It allows kids the space to just have fun, which ultimately leads to a more positive school experience. And isn't that the goal? Don't we want to create learning environments that kids actually want to be a part of?

Reason #3: Focus.

Does a short bout of exercise make kids more attentive? The studies have clearly shown that the answer is YES! And what about ADHD? When researchers tested the effects of short-term exercise on kids diagnosed with ADHD, they found that aerobic activity gave these kids a special boost, altering their brain activity in ways that might enhance self-discipline (Pontifex et al 2013).

Reason #4: Mental health.

Recent studies build on what we already know - regular exercise lowers your risk of developing depression. This includes adolescents, a group that currently has a high risk of depression, anxiety and suicide. A study published in The Lancet Psychiatry found that even light activity (which decreases the time that kids are sedentary) was linked to better mental health as they get older. The study found that physical activity drops in kids ages 12 to 16 and that the activity levels when kids were younger were linked to their mental health later on. The depression scores at 18 were lower for every additional 60 minutes per day of light activity at 12, 14 and 16. Depression scores were higher for every sedentary hour.

Time at school has become increasingly sedentary and kids are spending most of their time on screens. According to the Child Mind Institute, "The average American child spends about 4 to 7 minutes a day playing outside and over 7 hours a day in front of a screen". This is confirmed by the CDC's website, "Kids ages 8-18 now spend, on average, a whopping 7.5 hours in front of a screen for entertainment each day."

Recess may be the only time some kids are getting outdoors for the entire day. Including outdoor time during the school day will also help them attend to their learning, in addition to all of the mental health benefits I've mentioned. The research is clear - adding recess will result in lower levels of depression and anxiety in our students...and consequently, in our adults.

I am urging the committee to support this bill, to protect the health and well being of

our middle school students. Thank you all for your time and commitment to Maine's children. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Jill McMahon
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