



Parents, staff debate recess in District 15

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In the wake of alarming childhood obesity rates nationwide, some parents at Virginia Lake School in Palatine are speaking out against a decision to shorten recess time by half.

At last week's Palatine Township Elementary District 15 board meeting, several parents argued against the new 20-minute recess and presented a petition signed by nearly 300 parents from various schools opposing the policy.

The group polled neighboring elementary districts and found Virginia Lake students average far less physical activity than their peers. With 20-minute daily recess and two 30-minute sessions of gym class each week, it totals 160 minutes of activity.

Mount Prospect Elementary District 57 students, for example, have 40-minute recesses and take P.E. for 50 minutes twice a week for an average of 300 minutes. Elementary schools in Barrington Area Unit District 220, which have 25 minutes of both recess and P.E. every day, average 250 minutes.

District 15 doesn't have the space to offer daily P.E. as required by the state, so it applies for a waiver each year.

"If this policy is allowed to continue, our kids miss out on over 3,500 minutes this year alone," Virginia Lake parent Gina Kowalski said. "That's an astounding 58 hours of lost physical activity and socialization."

However, even more parents and teachers attended the meeting to show their support for Virginia Lake Principal Faith Rivera, saying they were confident the decisions were made in the best interest of the children's education, safety and well-being.

Rivera said kids have at least 20 minutes of recess and can be outside for up to 30 minutes. Enrollment fell slightly from last year, allowing more students to eat lunch together and decreasing the overall time and resources needed to supervise and clean the cafeteria.

"I think it's working out well and we're certainly keeping a very close eye on how it goes this year," Rivera said. "This is a better usage of staff time and the time kids are away from instruction is smaller."

Rivera has also cited a smoother transition back to class as a reason for the change.

The explanations don't placate Stephanie McVeigh, another Virginia Lake parent who said the school is setting itself up to fail meeting No Child Left Behind guidelines for a third straight year, citing research that says recess leads to physiological and psychological benefits and improved academic performance.

Superintendent Dan Lukich said that while both sides off the issue present a good case, he's seen the Virginia Lake lunch hour in action and is inclined to wait out the year before re-evaluating the policy.

"I think we need to give (Rivera) some room, let this take its course and continue to study it," Lukich said. "This is a debate that goes back many, many years."