H.B. 7250

Chairmen McCrory and Sanchez, Ranking Members Berthel and McCarty, and esteemed members of the Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to submit testimony on House Bill 7250 AN ACT CONCERNING THE IMPROVEMENT OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PLAY. I am in strong support of this bill.

My family moved from Palo Alto, CA four years ago to Connecticut. At the time my kids were 7, 9 and 11. My two younger children were in elementary school at the time and at their local public school, they had 3 recesses: 20 min in the mid morning, 20 min at lunch and a 10 min stretch run around in the afternoon, from grades K-3, and then in grades 4-5 they just had the 20 min in the mid morning and 20 min at lunch. When we moved to Connecticut, the school recess time was only 20 min after lunch. I really noticed the difference in their moods and behavior with my kids and they really missed the extra time to play with friends (although they did love the opportunity to play in the snow at recess, something that they could not do in California!).

For many species (not just humans) play is a way to ensure that children acquire the skills that they need to mature into adult, not only physically, but emotionally. Self directed (uncontrolled) play helps us learn important societal skills, mostly learning to cooperate with one another. Missing out on adequate play stifles children both socially and emotionally.

In my research on the topic, I have seen that with the decline of play we have also seen a rise in mental disorders and behavior issues including:

- Increase in depression and anxiety
- Rates of suicide doubling for ages 15 to 24
- Rise in narcissism and a decline in empathy
- Over diagnosis of ADD and other behavior issues

Please see attached to this testimony, two articles:
1. New York Times, 2/28/19 where I discuss this bill as well as experts talk about the benefits of unstructured play time
2. AZ Central 2/16/19 that discussed the results so far in Arizona’s new law that requires more recess.
In summary, unstructured playtime, especially with peers, enable children to learn with problem solving skills, develop empathy, conflict resolution and enhance creativity. With play, kids learn skill sets that will prepare them for being better members of society and develop creativity to help kids solve 21st century problems that we will rely on them to solve.

Thank you for the consideration of my testimony,

Lucy Dathan

Here are some links to some articles on the impact of play on Academic/social/emotional/physical

https://peacefulplaygrounds.com/recess-makes-kids-smarter-2/?fbclid=IwAR25nEobu8qQZT7x7Cd45R13G0P6vVuSjiHWMDNGdhYZx1ebm655UE66sOpU
https://www.today.com/parents/want-kids-listen-more-fidget-less-try-more-recess-school-t65536
http://healthland.time.com/2012/12/31/yay-for-recess-pediatricians-say-its-as-important-as-math-or-reading/
https://homegrownfriends.com/home/let-my-children-be-little/?fbclid=IwAR0luO8wKrqhd1HBc13hYoxfEEn4QnSzRjOUspL0ntwYzZBdrHscDx dl
(Behavior) https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19171606
http://www.jsams.org/article/S1440-2440%2816%2930238-9/fulltext
Four years ago, Lucy Dathan moved to New Canaan, Conn., where she enrolled her three children in public elementary school. They met new classmates. Their teachers were attentive. But something was amiss: Recess was limited to a 20-minute break after lunch, or about half the time as at their previous school, in California.

Ms. Dathan said a shift in her children’s mood was palpable. They found it difficult to focus on homework. They were restless and sometimes cranky after school, which she attributed to pent-up energy. With so little time for schoolyard play, she worried they were losing the ability to navigate personal relationships. “It was hard for them to adjust to only one recess,” she said in an interview.

So Ms. Dathan, who was elected to the Connecticut legislature in November, agreed to support a state bill that would require schools to provide at least 50 minutes of daily undirected play for students enrolled in preschool through fifth grade. “I haven’t had one person ask, ‘Why are you doing this?’” she said of parents, students and teachers who have contacted her. “I think playtime fosters the creativity that we need to solve crazy world problems, like global warming, or other issues we need to face as a planet.”

Ms. Dathan is not alone in her observation. Last April, Arizona legislators passed a law that provided two daily recesses for the state’s elementary school students. Teachers have already seen encouraging results, reporting fewer disciplinary
actions, enhanced test scores and improvement in children’s overall health. And just last week, youngsters from Arkansas, where a similar move is also being considered, sent letters to state legislators asking they be given a longer recess break.

The current discussion around playtime reflects an emerging body of thought about creativity and childhood. Neuroscientists and others say creative problem solving will be essential for the future as computers become more powerful and artificial intelligence commonplace. “Creativity in children involves the ability to make things up and generate ideas on their own,” said Sandra Russ, a professor in the department of psychological sciences at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

That includes group play, storytelling and building with blocks and other toys that stimulate, not inhibit, wonder and curiosity. Robert Bilder is a clinical neuropsychologist and a director of the Tennenbaum Center for the Biology of Creativity in Los Angeles who studies creativity and the brain. “What is valuable for children is freedom where they are solving problems with no predictable answer,” he said. “When it is open-ended, they retain the curiosity to learn more things. And that is going to be essential for their futures.”

Dr. Bilder headed the “Big C Project” at the University of California, Los Angeles, where researchers studied the brains of accomplished artists, scientists and others to understand how creative genius worked. “They showed a pattern of functional connectivity that was more random,” he said. “It’s not clear what promotes it. But it is established at an early age.”

One might surmise that highly creative people explore relationships that other people miss. Children who are given an open-ended problem are more apt to explore a variety of relationships and patterns, unlike when they are given a toy with preset instructions or uses. “The ‘thing’ should not be dictating the activity,” Dr. Bilder said of toys. “The person dictates the activity.”
Take, for instance, a cardboard fort made out of an old appliance box. Cardboard boxes were once so ubiquitous as play toys that in 2005 they were named to the National Toy Hall of Fame. Now, parents can buy a prefabricated cardboard kit on Amazon. Or their children can simulate building a fort in an online game.

“It is a shame that kids aren’t playing with cardboard boxes as much as they used to,” said Mark Runco, a researcher who studies creativity at Southern Oregon University and who is the founding editor of Creativity Research Journal. “Our whole world is changing now. There are people who think you can have digital or remote playtime. You experience it in different ways.”

There are trade-offs, of course, to replacing an outdoor playground with a digital one. “There is good and bad,” he said. “We now have a community all over the world. But there is a loss of face-to-face interactions.”

Dr. Runco, like Dr. Bilder, warned that more undirected free time at school does not guarantee that children will become more creative thinkers. What’s important is how they use the time they have. And home life and community play a part, too. “People are intrinsically creative,” Dr. Runco said. “But they need the environment. Creativity is most important when people are making choices. Getting dressed. Choosing alternative routes to work or school. Too often people align creative thinking with painting, writing or drawing.”

For Ms. Dathan, though, having Connecticut’s children spend 50 minutes on the playground every day is a good place to start. “It will be interesting to hear what people have to say in our upcoming public hearings,” she said. “Creativity does get stifled. You need to give kids an opportunity to learn social skills. It’s good for overall happiness. And playtime builds relationships.”

A version of this article appears in print on March 2, 2019, on Page A17 of the New York edition with the headline: Running, Jumping and Swinging Their Way to a Lifetime of Innovation
Arizona teachers, parents and legislators teamed up last year for the sake of children's health, pushing for legislation that would require more recess or unstructured playtime for elementary school children.

The early results of that effort are promising, educators say.

In April, Gov. Doug Ducey signed SB 1083 requiring schools to provide two recess periods for children in kindergarten through third grade this school year. The law adds fourth- and fifth-graders next school year. Some schools hit the playground running and are already seeing a positive impact.

Since implementing the added recess time at Stanfield Elementary, a small pre-kindergarten-through-eighth grade school in rural Pinal County near Casa Grande, Principal Chris Lineberry has seen improvement in the overall health of his students, but in other ways, too. He said test scores are up, discipline problems have decreased and attendance has increased.

“There’s information that does indicate that there is an improvement,” he said. “As a result, we have happier kids, happier staff and a more successful school.

“But it’s not just about recess. It's about movement. It's about health and wellness. It's about offering healthy alternatives and healthy meals in our cafeteria. It's about teaching kids how to be sustainable and garden. It's about mental wellness.”

Early track to a healthy lifestyle

It is all part of an effort to encourage healthy habits and battle childhood obesity.

In the most recent 2018 U.S. Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth, Arizona children scored slightly higher than the national average in multiple categories but fell behind in others, including overall physical health. Those national averages, however, are not extremely high to begin with. The national grades in each category hovered around low C's and D's.
Josh Meibos, a physical education teacher at Crockett Elementary School in east Phoenix and 2018 Arizona Teacher of the Year, takes his students’ health to heart. He was a key member of a group that approached the education committees of the Arizona Senate and House of Representatives in support of more recess time.

“When we went to the Senate and House committees, we were advocating, explaining and almost educating the committee of what type of continued learning happens on a playground,” Meibos said.

Some critics of recess say it’s a forum for bullying. A study by Johns Hopkins University’s Bloomberg School of Public Health found that 6.2 percent of middle-school bullying took place during recess.

And some of the pushback Meibos and the parents received focused on whether adding recess time would subtract from academic learning time. However, the group was able to make its case by stressing the “continued learning” aspect of recess.

“It wasn’t too difficult of a decision to realize that the continued learning happens on the playground just as much as in the classroom,” Meibos said, who said students develop social skills at recess while also receiving the physical fitness benefits.

It’s important to put children on an early track to a healthy lifestyle, Meibos said, and increased playtime is one way to do it.

“My philosophy has always been, the earlier the better,” he said. “The earlier we can get these children in some rotation or regimen or pattern of some sort of healthy food and exercise, the better.”

Lineberry also finds early development crucial. He wanted to get the school’s 550 children up and moving throughout the school day.

Lineberry believes the best way to combat America’s obesity epidemic among adults is by teaching children healthier habits while they’re in school.
Teachers at San Tan Charter School in Gilbert are allowed to schedule their students’ second period of recess as they see fit, rather than scheduling it every day at a specific time. (Photo: Micah Bledsoe/Cronkite News)

**Teaching empowerment**

Meibos and Lineberry have felt pushback in their pursuit of healthier students. There are those in education circles who worry that taking time away from academics can be detrimental to students, and schools are evaluated, in part, by standardized student testing.

“I think that there are many districts and administrators and leaders that come from a place of being fearful,” Lineberry said. “They want to improve test scores and are afraid if they don’t, they’ll lose their jobs, or that their school will have a bad review in the newspaper (or) community members will think poorly, etc.

“I think academic performance is important, but I think what's more important is that we address the needs of kids.”

Meibos, Lineberry and other educators are challenging the belief that test scores should be the highest priority. They believe the recess law is an important first step toward establishing that a child’s physical and mental health is as important as reading, writing and math.

Their hope is that the lessons will carry over from school to the lives of their student at home.

“I think what really works is empowerment,” Lineberry said. “We don’t talk to kids about being fat or being thin. We talk to kids about being healthy. No matter how small the choice is, if it's a healthy choice, it's a step in the right direction.”
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