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READY, SET... *recess!*

By Nancy Kirsch

When school starts, it'll be recess as usual for many public school elementary schoolchildren. Superintendents anticipate a straightforward transition to adhering to a new state law that requires all public or state-controlled schools with "elementary grades, kindergarten through 6" to provide at least 20 consecutive minutes of supervised, safe and unstructured free play recess daily; teachers must make a good faith effort to not withhold recess for disciplinary reasons. There has been some confusion about the law's applicability to fourth-, fifth-, or sixth-graders attending middle school.

"The recess law ... applies only to elementary school grades," said Elliot Krieger, spokesman for the state Department of Education. "If they're not an elementary school, the provision does not apply, regardless of grade."

Rep. Kathy Fogarty (D-Dist. 35) of South Kingstown, one of the bill's sponsors in the House, got involved in the issue after learning of significant discrepancies in recess time across the state; the state's Basic Education Program discusses recess, but not its duration, she said. (RIDE's website describes the Basic Education Program, in part, as "the basic standards to help ensure that high quality education is available to all public school students, regardless of where they live or go to school.") Data from Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and Parents Across Rhode Island, including an American Academy of Pediatrics study, reinforced recess' benefits, said Fogarty, who sits on the House Health, Education and Wel-

fare Committee. "At work, you can get up, walk around and get away from the office [to] give your brain a rest ... kids at their desks all day long ... become zombies; they need to walk away and get exercise."

Experts concur: Recess is serious business. Parents and teachers know that recess helps kids burn excess energy and

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stay focused; recess provides cognitive/academic, physical, social and emotional benefits, reports the AAP. Nevertheless, 21 states have no requirement for recess or general physical education, according to the most recent available data from the National Association of State Boards of Education's State School Health Policy Database. Connecticut's law is similar to Rhode Island's; Massachusetts does not require recess.

With no opposition, widespread support and no need to renegotiate union contracts, the legislation passed on the last day of the General Assembly's legislative session, in early June. Although parents prefer longer recesses, legislators considered 20 minutes a good starting point, Fogarty said. In the future, she said, the General Assembly might consider extending the requirement to middle schools, but scheduling conflicts might make that unfeasible.

"We are in very good shape in terms of compliance," said Jamestown School Department Superintendent Carol Blanchette. "At Melrose [Elementary School], lunch and recess [are] combined with at least 20 consecutive minutes devoted to recess for all grades K-4. Students have an additional 20-25 minutes for lunch during that block, as well." The Melrose principal will send a letter to parents before school begins

Sept. 6.

"It's very important for children to play and move around and get fresh air," said Colleen Burns Jermain, superintendent of Newport Public Schools, where school begins Sept. 7. "Play is a very important part of their learning experience, especially for young children." Claiborne Pell Elementary School's students already had 20-25 minutes of daily recess, Jermain said.

These superintendents agreed that students are rarely kept in from recess for disciplinary reasons. On occasion, if a child has been out ill, a parent and teacher may agree that the child would benefit from skipping recess to make up missed work, said Kristen Stringfellow, South Kingstown School District superintendent.

A 20-minute recess was the norm in South Kingstown's four elementary schools, where school begins Aug. 31. "When Rep. Fogarty authored the bill, our School Committee passed a resolution supporting the bill," Stringfellow said. Based on input from parents, teachers and community members, the school district developed some recess recommendations, with which the administration and elementary school principals concurred. "We agree that recess is extremely important," Stringfellow said in a letter to parents that summarized the recommendations. "We agree that, during indoor recess, children shall be provided a variety of free play activities from which to choose. We made a list of activities offered at each school site..." The U. S. Department of Health and Human Services' Child Care Weather Watch chart will guide each school nurse's decision regarding indoor or outdoor recess.

According to Phil Auger, superintendent of North Kings-

town schools, where school begins Sept. 6, its five elementary schools already provide a minimum of 25 minutes of daily recess. In 2014, North Kingstown's school district was one of two in Rhode Island — along with Pawtucket — commended by the President's Council on Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition at a Washington, D.C. ceremony, Auger said. "The award recognized a full package of health and fitness initiatives taking place in our districts [including recess]."

Ready, set ... play!

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COLLEEN BURNS JERMAIN

superintendent, Newport Public Schools





Children play on the playground at Stony Lane Elementary School in North Kingstown.

Independent file photo