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Bill requires schools to fight obesity But last-minute lobbying drops daily exercise requirement

BY CLIFF PEALE • CPEALE@ENQUIRER.COM • MAY 18, 2010

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Schools in Ohio soon will be required to offer more nutritious food and track every student's weight.

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The Ohio Senate Tuesday approved a childhood obesity bill that also included a requirement for 30 minutes of physical activity every day. But after last-minute lobbying by schools, they won the ability to apply for a waiver from that requirement.

Ohio House members could vote on a companion bill as soon as next week, and Gov. Ted Strickland is expected to sign it.

Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, business groups and others have pushed the physical-activity requirement, arguing that Ohio needs to catch up to battle the nationwide epidemic of childhood obesity that

adds health-care costs, particularly for low-income children.

"This bill is a great start for Ohio," said Eric Kearney, D-Cincinnati. "Is everything I wanted in the bill? No. But we should be proud of it."

The Child Policy Research Center at Children's says 19 states mandate nutritional standards for school meals and snacks that are more stringent than current regulations, and 21 states require collection of weight and other health information from students.

About one-third of Ohio children are considered either overweight or obese, the center said.

"Measuring children helps parents get information about how healthy they are," said Lisa Simpson, director of the center.

The bill mandates specific food choices. For example, public schools and charter schools will be able to offer only low-fat or fat-free milk, fruit juice or water, once the bill takes full effect in 2014. And each food item must be rated by a special software program and contain specific portions of the recommended daily allowance of certain nutrients.

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Physical education teachers also must be licensed, according to the bill.

An amendment Tuesday softened the requirement that schools measure body-mass index, a ratio of weight and height, upon school entry and in grades three, five and nine. School districts can apply for waivers from that mandate as well.

Proponents call the BMI measurement crucial because it is the only way to chart progress.

School groups said they support healthier habits for students but are wary of any new law that would force them to hire more people as they are struggling to balance their own budgets. Requiring 30 minutes of exercise every day, they said, could mandate hiring more physical education teachers.

"Anything that costs additional money is a problem for any district in Ohio," Cincinnati Public Schools Superintendent Mary Ronan said. "We're all struggling."

CPS, which comprises 58 schools and 34,000 students, already measures body-mass index for all kindergarten students through a partnership with the Cincinnati Health Department, Ronan said. It has changed some of its menus - including making chocolate chip cookies with applesauce instead of sugar - and will start each day during a summer-school program with 15 minutes of physical activity.

Simpson said the bill will work because it addresses eating habits and exercise, then measures results.

Exercise "is a critical life skill, and we're learning through research that physically fit kids perform better in the classroom and have fewer behavioral problems," she said.

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