

Bayberry parents call for recess, playground solutions

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EDITOR

WATCHUNG - A number of Bayberry School parents are concerned their children aren't getting enough

time outdoors during the school day.

Too often, students have recess in their classrooms, even on sunny days after storms

when the school field and playground are wet, parents said at a Wednesday, Oct. 17, Board of Education meeting. Recess is held indoors when the grounds are wet as a safety precaution.

"The fact that roughly 330 children are being kept inside on perfectly fine days when their peers in surrounding towns are outside is a disgrace," said Woodledge Road resident Jen Scharf, who is a teacher in another school district.

She said the practice is unhealthy for children and challenging for teachers who have to manage children who have not been given an opportunity to run around in the fresh air.

"We have been told this is due to safety concerns; we have not been offered any solutions," she said. "Keeping children indoors unless there are perfect conditions is not a solution."

Other parents raised concerns about recess not coming until 3 p.m., just before the end of the school day, for some third and fourth grade classes.

Edgemont Road resident Tanisha Sims said when those late recess periods are held outdoors at all, they are often cut short, as students must soon be back inside for announcements and dismissal.

Parents also questioned when the district would address safety issues on the school's blacktop, which students are now barred from playing on regardless of the weather.

The district had known of parent concerns for years, long before a student sustained a serious injury on the blacktop in May, said Jessica Ingrassia, who is running for school board in the November election. She, Scharf and others questioned why nothing was done to fix the problem over the summer, if not years ago.

When posed that question in a phone interview Friday, Board of Education President Margo Langer said the board is working with school administrators and architects on both long-term and short-term solutions to improve the infrastructure at the school.

The lack of an-

swers over the past five months, Scharf said, leaves parents to assume the board has not conducted a thoughtful evaluation of the situation. Valley Road resident Tanya Villagomez and Glen Eagle Drive resident Elizabeth Bonawitz said the board has not been transparent in the process.

"That's a problem," said Bonawitz, who said the board needs to do a better job of responding to parent concerns. "That's poor leadership, that's poor organization, and that's not good transparency - and it should be easy. It's Management 101."

Ingrassia said the district was being reactive rather than proactive.

"We have certainly heard your comments about recess and we will have answers soon," Langer told the crowd.

'Pavlovian Lunch Periods'

Parents also took issue with how the school is handling the other break during the school day: lunch period.

Scharf noted lunch periods are 40 minutes long at Bayberry.

"This is too long a time to be without an outlet for socializing or coordinated physical play," she said. "Instead,

they are left with even more time in front of a screen, watching a movie or using GoNoodle in a loud, crowded, enclosed room."

GoNoodle is a computer program through which students do group exercises.

Scharf and Johnston Drive resident Michelle Posehn were also concerned with aides blowing whistles during lunch to direct students. Scharf said the use of whistles is "wildly inappropriate in that setting and shows a lack of control and respect for our children."

Posehn brought a whistle to the meeting. She blew on it several times to illustrate how disruptive it could be.

She said her 7-year-old child, who has ADHD and auditory sensitivity, has described lunch period as "stressful" as a result.

"How would you like your break from your busy day to be marred by that noise?" she asked. "Do we want our schools to be known for their Pavlovian lunch periods where our children are herded around the lunch room that way?"

Mary Nunn, the principal at Valley View Middle School, said Friday the district discontinued the practice last week after hearing parents' concerns.