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## Band leaders, PE advocates clash

Proposal would exempt marching band students from physical education

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Band directors in the state are trying to drum up support for legislation that would grant physical education credits to high school students for participating in marching band.

They say the physical activity involved in marching band fulfills the state's criteria for effective PE instruction.

But physical education experts scoff at the idea of exempting some 10,000 to 15,000 marching band students from PE classes at the same time that the state is focusing on improving physical fitness in adolescents. The state requires students to take at least one physical education class before graduating.

The S.C. Band Directors' Association and the bill's sponsor hope they can persuade legislators to take up the issue in the midst of tough budget issues.

The association last presented the idea to the General Assembly four years ago, during the 1997-98 session. The bill never left committee, but supporters believe they will be successful this time.

Proponents of the change say the issue is simple.

"You put on a 40-pound tuba and walk around at 120 beats a minute, and tell me that your heartbeat's not quicker," said Tom Finigan, chairman of legislative affairs for the band directors' group and assistant band director at Colleton County High School. "You're definitely doing aerobic exercise."

They also say students learn multiple movements and coordination by practicing varied marching styles while playing an instrument.

"We think that our students are probably more physically active and getting more physical training doing this activity than in a semester of PE," said Connie Grantham, president of the band directors group and a Fort Mill Middle School director.

WRONG TIME FOR MESSAGE?

Physical education experts are not convinced.

Judy Rink, a USC professor of physical education, helped draft the state PE standards.

Rink said the state is working hard to improve PE classes with the goals of getting students into shape and promoting healthy lifestyles.

"It's the wrong time to say kids don't have to do it," she said.

Band directors say that allowing the exemption will free up room in their students' schedules for other classes like band. In most cases, marching band participation requires students to take a band class during the school day.

But band directors say that block scheduling makes it difficult for many students to enroll in band every semester while still completing all the requirements for graduation. As a result, some students have to give up band for a semester.

Rink said that trying to remove PE from students' schedules to make room for band class is "unprofessional."

"The notion that someone needs four years of marching band rather than even one year of physical education, and eliminating that, makes no sense to me whatsoever," she said.

Currently, the only students exempt from physical education classes are members of the Reserve Officer Training Corps, or ROTC.

Band directors say that shows the state is willing to consider the idea. But their opponents say the physical requirements of ROTC are more rigorous than PE.

Students at Lexington High School had mixed reactions to the idea.

"I don't think it's fair," said Katie Gerth, a junior who isn't in the band. "That would be like saying if you play a sport, you don't have to take PE. I think that if one person has to take it, then everyone should."

Student athletes, many of whom are required to use elective credits to work with their teams, still must take a basic physical education course.

"I don't think they should get it, unless we get it," said Kendal Forrester, a senior member of Lexington's cross country and track teams.

'BAND IS A LOT MORE PHYSICAL' THAN PE

That is precisely the can of worms state officials are worried about opening. It would be difficult, they say, to justify exempting band students and not athletes and others.

Molly Spearman, the S.C. Department of Education's governmental liaison, said marching rehearsal is usually after school, whereas the in-class portion is focused on music without much physical activity.

Grantham, of the band directors' group, said marching band programs can meet all the criteria and assess students' physical fitness along the way.

"I don't think that there will be anyone in this activity unwilling to do that," she said. "We're doing that kind of stuff anyway."

"A PE teacher may require that her class do 50 jumping jacks and run two laps, but there are band directors who do the same thing."

A handful of states, including California and Texas, allow students to receive PE credit for marching band participation.

Rink, who monitors high school PE programs to make sure they meet state standards, rejects using those states as models.

S.C. public schools, she said, have made a commitment to physical education that other states have not matched.

Band directors say they have several issues working in their favor. The group has hired a lobbyist and enlisted the help of band parents, inserting fliers into programs at several state marching band competitions this year.

"Your help needed now!" declares the flier, which includes a two-page position statement on the issue. The group

encourages parents to write their local state representatives.

Most band students favor the proposal.

"I'm in PE now, and marching band is a lot more physical than a PE class," said Lexington band drum major Kevin Shealy.

Lexington High School's band director, Jerry Gatch, is conditioning his students to perform in January's Rose Bowl Parade by having them walk and march increasingly longer distances as the parade date nears. That type of physical conditioning is not uncommon in marching band preparation, he said.

But at least one band student at the school is not convinced that the physical activity in marching band equals a semester of PE.

"I really don't think it's right," said sophomore flute player Phyllis Goins. "At the end of a run, I'm tired and stuff, but I really don't think it's enough."

#### STATE OFFICIALS DUBIOUS

State Rep. Becky D. Richardson, R-York, herself a band parent, plans to sponsor the bill in the state House.

"My son was in the Fort Mill band, and I saw the strenuous routines and exercises these kids do," Richardson said.

Rep. Bob Walker, R-Spartanburg, chairman of the House primary and secondary education subcommittee, said he is willing to give the group a fair hearing, but the issue is not a high priority.

"It's not a new issue," Walker said, "and I don't know that there's anything that has been or will be presented that changes the situation.

"There's got to be a recommendation from the Department of Education that this is what we want to do."

State education officials are not formally endorsing or opposing the measure. But they're not enthusiastic about it either.

"We told them that they would have to show us that in a band class they were meeting the required standards for the music course, and, if they are meeting the standards for a PE course, than we could consider this idea," Spearman said. "Unless the requirements are being met, we cannot support it."