

THE BRIGHT SIDE

Williamsville student, 8, lobbies for right to play



JOED VIERA, BUFFALO NEWS

Kiran Sastry takes a break from tossing his football at Glen Park in Williamsville on Wednesday. The Maple East student has been lobbying for a chance to play outside, and now a bill to provide a 30-minute recess in elementary schools has been introduced at the State Capitol.

*Boy's persistence pays off
with a recess bill in Albany*

BY ROBERT GAVIN
Albany Bureau Chief

Kiran Sastry, 8, wanted to bring a breath of fresh air to his elementary school class in Williamsville.

So, he lobbied his principal, classmates, school officials and, eventually, his local state representative to achieve his goal. And now, more than two years after the student at Maple East Elementary School and his mom started the ball rolling for his proposal, a bill is circulating in the State Capitol with the support of Assembly Member Karen McMahon, D-Williamsville.

The legislation would provide 30-minute daily recess in elementary schools, and would also prohibit withholding it for disciplinary reasons.

When the quest for recess started in January 2024, Kiran's mother, Amber Sastry, suggested to the school principal that the school allow an outdoor winter play day. It received support, but the event did not take place, she said. The next year, Kiran wrote a letter to his principal – and got all of his classmates to sign it – seeking a single day to go outside.

“My idea was that, after we did it once, people would notice how easy this is and how much fun the kids were having, but since we didn't even go out once, they never got to figure that

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out,” Kiran told The Buffalo News in a phone interview Thursday.

“Even if I don't get to experience it, I want other people to be able to experience it,” he said. “I'm not asking for much. I want to go outside once.”

In December, after all his advocacy and still without his goal, Kiran reminded his mother about his hope to get the request fulfilled. Kiran's parents reached out to the principal, teachers and a social-emotional wellness team to raise the proposal. Kiran asked for support from the student council, the Parent Teacher Association, the Williamsville Central School District superintendent, the School Board president and McMahon.

“When I talked to Karen McMahon, I started actually thinking that this was actually going to make a big impact,” Kiran said.

“I have great admiration for Kiran – his passion on this issue and his willingness to step forward and engage, especially when many children his age are still finding their voices,” McMahon said.

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Recess

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"His effort sets an example for others and shows that civic engagement isn't limited by one's age. By requiring at least 30 minutes of daily recess for elementary students, this legislation recognizes that physical activity and play are essential to children's overall health, social development and academic success."

On March 24, Kiran spoke at a School Board meeting.

"I just wanted to say that I am sad because we have never got outside once in the winter, and all I'm asking is for there to be one snow day outside. One day everybody brought in their winter gear, please!" he said.

In a statement, Williamsville Central School District spokesperson Nicholas Filipowski said students from kindergarten through fourth grade participate in recess daily for around 20 minutes. School policy, he said, dictates that recess will not be withheld for disciplinary reasons unless a student is a danger to themselves or others.

"Student safety is a priority when considering outdoor recess," Filipowski said. "Weather during the spring, summer, and winter may impact the ability to go outside. The decision-making process also takes into account whether students are properly prepared,



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Amber Sastry and her son, Kiran, enjoy the sunshine Wednesday at Glen Park in Williamsville. "I'm not asking for much," he said. "I want to go outside once."

especially during the cold, icy, and snowy winter months."

A memo of justification for the bill, prime-sponsored by Assembly Member Carrie Woerner, D-Round Lake, and Sen. Rachel May, D-Syracuse, noted that according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, recess helps

children focus in class, improves their memory, reduces disruptive behavior, builds social, cognitive and physical skills and reduces stress. The memo said that since adults determine the activities in class, it was imperative to allow students to use their skills outside.

"We just need to all recognize as

the adults that going outside to play and having recess at school is good for our kids - period," Amber Sastry said. "I think we all know that, but we really need to lift that up and say this is good for our kids, and it is our responsibility to do what's good for our kids. We're the ones with the power. Kiran has a voice. He's using

it, but he doesn't control the levers that will allow kids to go outside for recess and do it regularly."

And how does one of the state's youngest lobbyists feel about seeing government in action?

"It feels exciting," Kiran said. "I'm going to keep on doing it until we at least get one day!"