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Schools ruling out fun on playground, critics say

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By Maria Sacchetti, Globe Staff | October 21, 2006

Don't take the play out of playground.

Attleboro school officials received that message this week when one elementary school's ban on tag ballooned into national news. CNN broadcast the story. Jay Leno cracked jokes about it. And the superintendent received a concerned letter from a group in California fighting childhood obesity.

The episode prompted the 6,000-student district about 40 miles south of Boston to clarify that only one school, Willett Elementary, has banned tag because the playground is too small, not because school officials are against exercise or fun. The ban happened at least five years ago, but hit the spotlight this week after it was reported in a local newspaper.

"It was so blown out of proportion; it's so ridiculous," said School Committee member Jackie Romaniacki. "I just don't want to see a kid getting seriously hurt."

The uproar in Attleboro reflects the passionate feelings about child's play.

In the past 20 years, school systems in the Bay State and around the nation have increasingly imposed restrictions on play, determined to prevent serious injury and lawsuits that can follow an accident. Several Massachusetts schools have been sued by parents whose children were injured at school in recent years.

What schools keep off the playground varies.

One Boston school prohibits handstands. A Needham school rules out hanging upside down on the monkey bars.

And, at Hanlon Elementary School in Westwood, two pages in the handbook list 29 playground rules: No kneeling or standing on the swings. No jumping off the slide. And only fourth- and fifth- graders can sit on top of the Moon Climber, a jungle gym.

"It's a shame that we've come to the point where you have to put all these rules down when kids play," said John Cummings, Hanlon's parent-teacher organization president. "I think they should let kids fall down . . . get up, dust themselves off, and get right back on."

Hanlon principal Jeanne Papa said the expanded rules took effect last year after a boy jumped off a jungle gym and broke his arm. The school wrote the rules so that students would know how to use the equipment, she said.

"The children are still happy and having a great time at recess," Papa said. "But we're also showing them that you can have fun, but . . . you can't be reckless. You have to do it in a safe way."

Common Good, a national legal advocacy group based in New York and Washington, said that schools' regulation of play have become too strict over the past two decades. Gone from many schools are steep slides and high-flying swings, said Common Good executive director Franklin Stone.

"I'll even defend the see-saw," she said. "I'll tell you what you learn from the see-saw. You learn about working with other people. You learn some life lessons from that."

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