

Critics inflexible on school yoga

By Adam Preskill
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Three hours of intense public debate over a yoga program poised for implementation at the Aspen elementary school ended Wednesday night with the school board in a state of paralysis.

Dozens of concerned parents, teachers and citizens gathered in a seminar room at Aspen High School to discuss the potential merits and dangers of the proposed program in a special meeting called by the board.

While supporters of the program claim it will provide invaluable tools to calm hyperactive kids, improve concentration and maintain physical health, opponents believe the physical elements of yoga are inseparable from the religious and spiritual history of the practice.

More than 200 students in the first through fourth grades were poised to begin the program Sept. 3 as a part of the Children's Health Initiative, a physical and mental health education program sponsored by Aspen Center for New Medicine.

But during the regular school board meeting Aug. 26, several par-

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Yoga deemed religious by some

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ents voiced their concern that incorporating yoga into a public school curriculum might violate their constitutional right to separation of church and state, so the board scheduled an additional meeting to consider public comment on the issue.

The discussion began with a presentation by Betsy Fifield, a staff member at Aspen Center for New Medicine.

"Yoga has evolved in the 21st century to become quite different from how it began. There are no theological lessons involved in this program. This program is completely religion-neutral, and that is precisely one of its greatest strengths," Fifield said.

Tara Guber, founder of the program, followed with an explanation of the secular nature of yoga practice.

"Yoga is a system, a physical exercise that studies and integrates mind, body and breath. It provides enhanced physical and emotional health, and lays a foundation for a lifetime of health and wellness," Guber said.

The curriculum she designed uses those principals to improve the overall education experience for young children, and religious practices do not enter into the process, Guber claimed.

"Yoga Ed is an education program that uses the exercise of yoga to support and enhance learning, health and personal responsibility. It is fitness- and science-based. It is separate and apart from any doctrine, dogma or faith. We do not chant or recite any specific principles or philosophies," she stated.

Guber said her trademarked program is a blend of stretching, breathing and concentration exercises designed to improve students' focus and provide an alternate form of exercise.

Yoga Ed is currently in use at the Accelerated School in Los Angeles, where Guber said it has dramatically improved the learning environment for students in an impoverished school district.

But while no one in the crowd disputed the calming effects and other general benefits of yoga, many disputed Guber's claim that the physical act of doing yoga could be separated from the religious connotations of the practice.

"The number of benefits that come from yoga do not make it a non-spiritual activity," said Meshell Woodrow.

"You cannot separate the religious and spiritual aspects of yoga from the physical aspects. Something doesn't have to be organized religion to be religious and spiritual. It's a major church-and-state issue," echoed her husband, Steve Woodrow, who is also the pastor at the Baptist church in Aspen.

One woman cited the work of a well-known yoga master, or yogi.

"He says, 'All systems of yoga are designed to bring about psychic changes. You're altering (the kids') breathing patterns to alter their thinking patterns. It's one thing for parents to choose this, but another thing

for you to impose this on tiny children. It is illegal and you should not be doing it in the school," said Connie Huntington.

Although there are now almost countless forms of yoga, traditionally it was used by Hindu practitioners as a way to prepare for or recover from long bouts of transcendental meditation.

But due to a recent surge of popularity in the United States, yoga has increasingly become thought of as a secular activity, commonly practiced in gyms, YMCAs and other public venues.

The Aspen Skiing Co. even sponsored a yoga program this summer at the top of Aspen Mountain.

Several longtime practitioners testified to the notion of yoga as non-religious activity.

"I incorporate what I believe into it, but it's not about anything that someone tells you," said Allison Daily, who claimed to be a former missionary for a group called Campus Crusade for Christ.

Some suggested simply taking out the word "yoga" from the program curriculum, along with any other objectionable terms.

"Maybe we just shouldn't call it yoga. It's just stretching and movement and breathing. Maybe we could just keep that part," said Jill Greenwald, a fourth-grade teacher at the school.

But opponents of the program didn't seem placated by semantic adjustments.

"I have a daughter, and I don't want her to have anything to do with this. I don't want her to have anything to do with yoga. If this is brought into the school, I will take my daughter out. How many kids are you willing to lose?" asked one mother.

Another woman in attendance viewed yoga in schools as analogous to foul language and bad behavior.

"I really object to the kinds of things that are seeping into our schools these days—like cussing. It's garbage, it's just going to be one thing after the next, and it's going to be a mess," she said.

Many also objected to the inclusion of what they feel to be an Eastern religious doctrine in the school curriculum, when Western religious practices, like Christian prayer, are strictly excluded.

"What I'm concerned about is a double standard. All Judeo-Christian elements have been taken out of our curriculum, but now the door seems to be open to things from Eastern religions," one man commented.

"What about having a Bible class? If you want to calm kids down, why not try prayer?" said another.

But supporters of the program maintained that yoga, in its modern form, is simply a secular, physical practice.

"I'm so concerned that a few people are taking things out of context and making it work for them. This is not about the type of yoga this lady is teaching. It's breathing and stretching yoga," one woman stated.

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One man sarcastically recommended the discontinuation of anything once related to religion in public schools.

"There are so many things in our education that have religious roots way back. Maybe we shouldn't have athletics, because the very first athletic competition was done to please the gods on Mount Olympus," he said.

While most refrained from disparaging remarks, some yoga supporters accused program opponents of narrow-mindedness.

"Fundamentalism and fear are all around us. Intolerance is something that we all have to deal with every day, and it's very hard to deal with," said a school district coach.

Three hours after the debate began, the school board, citing sensory overload and general exhaustion, postponed their decision on the program until their next meeting on Sept. 9.

Neither Aspen School District Superintendent Tom Farrell nor Aspen Elementary School Principal Barb Pitchford were able to provide a clear recommendation, and three of the four board members said they would be unable to come to a decision that night.

Despite the deluge of criticism, Guber seemed willing to compromise, and remained hopeful that the project could still be implemented.

"What I hear is a lot of fear at losing control of what you think is right for your children. I truly pray we can create something as profound and good as this process represents," Guber said.

While the fate of the Aspen program remains in jeopardy, Yoga Ed will likely be implemented somewhere in the valley.

The Aspen Country Day School may begin the program as early as Friday, and other valley school districts have enthusiastically inquired about the program, Fifield said.