

Illinois Bill Would Mandate Moment of Silence in Schools

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Mar. 22--SPRINGFIELD -- Public school students would be required to observe a moment of silence under legislation the Senate passed Wednesday, giving lawmakers a chance to work around constitutional prohibitions against school prayer.

The action unfolded on a busy legislative day in which a House committee, for the first time, narrowly approved a bill that would give gay couples new rights through civil union rather than marriage.

The legislation would require schools to have a moment of silence at the beginning of every school day for kindergarten through high school students. The measure would change current law, which merely allows schools to have a moment of silence. That has created some schools in which some teachers allow the quiet period while others don't.

"It is a neutral act, which affords students the opportunity to reflect upon whatever they wish, whether religious or not," said Sen. Kimberly Lightford (D-Maywood), the sponsor.

Sen. Dan Cronin (R-Elmhurst) praised the bill for requiring "a moment of silent reflection" in light of specific constitutional prohibitions that prevent prayer in public schools. The moment would not be observed as a religious exercise but would provide an opportunity for silent prayer or reflection upon the day's activities, supporters said.

The Senate sent the bill to the House on a 58-1 vote.

Sen. Dan Rutherford (R-Chenoa), the lone opponent, said the legislation was unnecessary because schools already have a right to hold a moment of silence and schools don't need government telling them what to do.

Sen. James Meeks (D-Chicago), a minister, noted lawmakers in the state and U.S. Capitols pause before sessions for a prayer.

"Kids come into school, they're hyper ... They're running, they're pushing in the hallways," Meeks said. "They should take a moment before the day starts--and the teacher should require it--just to take a deep breath to reflect upon the things that are coming up throughout the day."

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