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Students cheer House vote on bus idling ban

By Nancy Remsen
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MONTPELIER -- Five seventh-graders from Browns River Middle School in Jericho were back at the Statehouse on Thursday to see if lawmakers had gotten the message about the need to ban idling by buses on school grounds.

They had come before to testify, and their school group -- Sustainability is our Mission -- penned 150 letters to House members asking for support for legislation banning idling buses.

The five students had front-row seats, and other classmates tuned in back in Jericho via Internet streaming, as the House debated and then voted 96-46 to support a bill that would do just what the students wanted: set a statewide policy of no idling with limited exceptions for weather and student safety.

"I didn't see any reason for them to say 'no,' commented Dakotah Patnode, 13, after the vote. "We spent six months researching it," she said. The case in support of the ban, Patnode said, "is bulletproof."

Some lawmakers didn't see it that way.

"Why are we getting involved when this could be handled at the local level?" said Rep. David Sunderland, R-Rutland. He called the bill another example of the heavy hand of the Legislature usurping the authority and autonomy of local school boards.

"Let's value local control," he said. "Let's take these arguments and debates to the school board."

Rep. Carol Hosford, D-Waitsfield, a former school principal, made the case for the ban. "It protects children's health. It protects the environment. It saves money."

Hosford said years of efforts to persuade individual school boards to set policies on idling hadn't been successful.

Rep. Loren Shaw, R-Derby, worried that banning idling would create safety hazards such as fogged-up windows. "It is one of the most serious problems they have -- trying to keep those windows clear on a cold day."

"As someone who has driven buses," Rep. Mike Mrowicki, D-Putney, argued that banning idling "is no big deal."

Mrowicki credited the students with pushing the Legislature to act. "I'm really impressed with the leadership they have provided," he said. "They are asking us to provide a better world for them."

The five students scribbled in notebooks during the debate. "We have new arguments we can counter," said Adam Martin, 13.

The students know this isn't the end of the legislative process for this bill. Thursday's House vote was preliminary approval. The House votes again today.

The Senate passed a bill that would require schools to have a policy on idling by Jan. 1 but wouldn't ban buses parked with motors running. Unless the Senate agreed to the House version, the two chambers would have to negotiate a compromise.

The students said they planned to keep tabs. They might even write more letters.

"We can't just stop," said Jimmy Lynn Mead, 12.

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