

FIT NOT FAT

Physical education is making a comeback. More states are requiring it for elementary, middle and high school students. Not enough states, however, are requiring kids to exercise for a specific amount of time, according to the American Heart Association and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. The groups recommend 150 minutes a week of instructed physical education for elementary school kids and 225 minutes a week for older students. Only a handful of states meet those goals, according to Education Week.

GET THE JOB DONE

Back in 1932, in the midst of the Great Depression, West Virginia delayed installing murals in the new Capitol Rotunda to keep construction costs down. Now, state officials are accepting bids from art studios to finish the job. “We want something that will stand out as a work of art, and not merely decoration,” General Services Division Architect/Engineer Bob Krause told the Charleston Gazette. “We want to come up with something that is a tribute to the state and carries on our heritage and belief systems.” Art studios from as far away as Oregon and Wisconsin are in the race. The selection committee’s goal is to choose a winning bidder by late August or early September.

BAG BAN

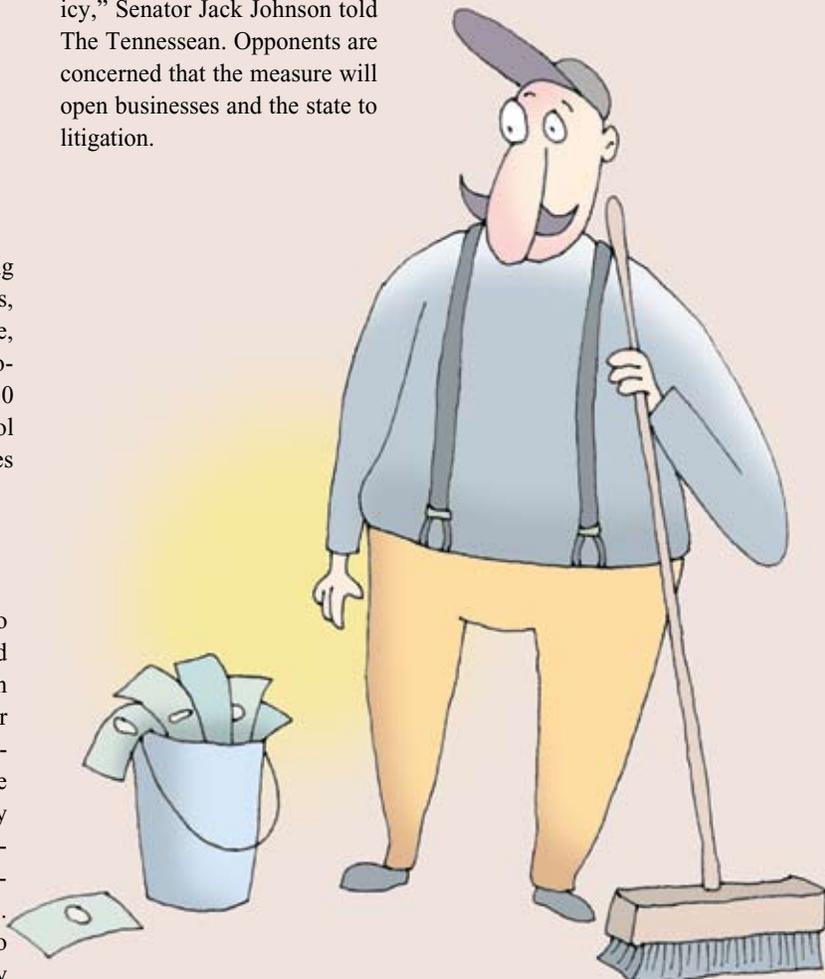
California is getting closer to approving a measure that would make it the first state to ban grocery, convenience and other stores from handing out single-use plastic and paper bags. The measure passed the Assembly in June and is now in the Senate. The law, a first for the country, would take effect in 2012. It would require shoppers who don’t bring their own bags to buy either paper bags made of at least 40 percent recycled material or reusable totes. Opponents argue that hundreds of bag manufacturing jobs will be lost. Currently, estimates indicate that 19 billion plastic bags are used each year in the state, creating 147,000 tons of waste. It takes somewhere between 500 and 1,000 years for a plastic bag to degrade.

SPEAKING OF WORK

Tennessee lawmakers have approved a bill that allows businesses to require their employees to speak English on the job whenever there is a “legitimate business necessity,” such as safety or efficiency. “I just wanted a general provision in state statute that said it’s permissible for an employer to have an English-in-the-workplace policy,” Senator Jack Johnson told The Tennessean. Opponents are concerned that the measure will open businesses and the state to litigation.

SCOTCH BROOM SWEEP

Oregon has outlawed the propagation, transport or sale of English Ivy, Scotch Broom and butterfly bushes. But those who already have the plants on their property can keep them. The state Department of Agriculture issued the ban in an effort to stop the spread of the invasive species in areas in Oregon where the plants have not yet spread.



HELP FOR THE HELP

New York’s Senate has passed a domestic workers’ bill of rights, a first in the country. It would require overtime wages, paid holidays, sick days and vacation time for nannies, housekeepers and caregivers for the elderly—estimated at 200,000 workers in the state. The bill gives employers and workers a baseline of fairness about pay, hours and benefits. It also gives the State Labor Department and attorney general the power to enforce its provisions. Opposition comes from lawmakers concerned about adding more costs to employers and giving protections to illegal immigrants. The next step is to reconcile the bill with a version already passed by the Assembly and send it on to the governor.



FINS WIN

Just say, “no, thanks” to shark-fin soup. Hawaii has banned the high-end Asian delicacy, the first state to do so. The new law prohibits the possession, sale and distribution of shark fins. Overfishing for the fins has decimated certain shark species, including the scalloped hammerhead and oceanic whitetip. Sharks have characteristics that make them more vulnerable to overfishing than most fish. Restaurants are allowed to finish their inventory, but after July 1, 2011, they will be fined \$5,000 for a first offense up to a high of \$50,000 and a year in jail for a third offense. Hawaii’s market for shark fin soup, however, is extremely small compared to China and Japan.

FAREWELL FURLONGS

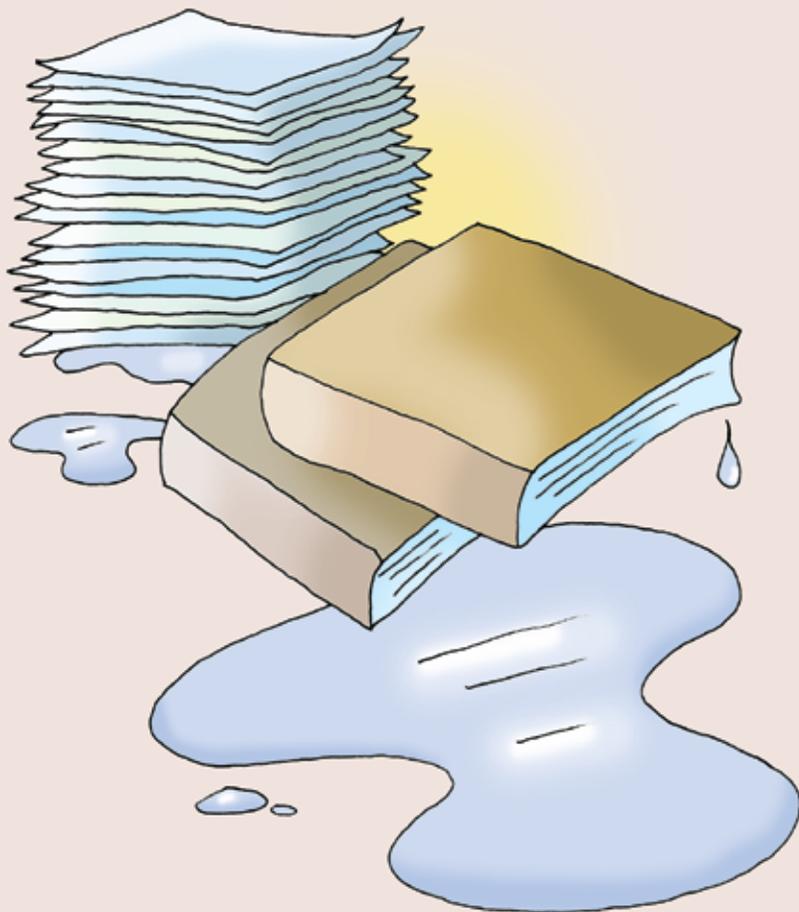
Hawaii has eliminated its controversial furlough Fridays for public school teachers by using \$57 million from the hurricane relief fund and a \$10 million, interest-free line of credit from local banks. Next year, teachers will be back to working five days a week. “Now I can give my students the full impact of physics,” teacher Bebi Davis told the Honolulu Advertiser. “It’s going to make a difference. They will have a lot more hands-on experience.” The 17 furlough days this year decreased Hawaii’s school calendar to the shortest in the nation.

YES, HOLDS BARRED

In an effort to reduce domestic violence, New Hampshire has joined Delaware, Illinois, Nevada and Wyoming in increasing penalties for choking, which is often a precursor to fatal abuse. Previously, choking had to be prosecuted under broader and often more-difficult-to-prove assault laws. The bill makes choking a felony punishable by three-and-a-half to seven years in prison. The ailing economy and high unemployment rates are causing more concern over domestic violence. There’s a strong correlation between a family’s economic stress and abuse, according to the National Institute of Justice.

TEST PRIVACY

Maryland has passed a first-in-the-nation law barring public high schools from automatically sending student scores on a military aptitude test to recruiters. School districts have the choice of whether to give the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery; about 650,000 students take it each year. The legislation was supported by members of the Maryland Coalition to Protect Student Privacy who were concerned that students were being unduly recruited. Students will now have the option whether to give the information to the military. “For me, it wasn’t the military piece, it was the parental permission,” Delegate Sheila Hixson told USA Today. “Parents didn’t know what was going on, and children didn’t realize what was going on.”



RAIN, RAIN GO AWAY

A downpour in Springfield, Ill., caused a flash flood that damaged state documents. Sewers couldn’t handle the 4.5 inches of rain that came down in 90 minutes, sending water pouring into the basement of a building a few blocks from the Capitol. That’s where the state stores child support and Internal Revenue Service documents that are to be kept for 99 years. The documents were sent to a facility in Michigan where they were freeze dried in hopes of salvaging them. (The rain-storm also delayed the start of the Senate by two hours because of high water on the highways.)