REGARDING YOGA EDUCATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS IN THE SOUTH

BACKGROUND

In 1993, the State of Alabama prohibited the teaching and participation of yoga in public schools. As a result, the Alabama Board of Education adopted the ban on yoga due to the fear of students converting to Hinduism. In addition to the ban on yoga, there also were bans on meditation, chanting, and salutations. The ban on yoga began from the push of certain groups insisting that yoga encourages "hypnosis and meditation" practices that could harm the students' mental state.

An attempt to repeal this ban, House Bill 449, was introduced in 2019 but did not make it to the House floor. During the 2020 session, the bill's sponsor - Representative Jeremy Gray - successfully guided the measure through both chambers to the governor's desk. This second attempt, House Bill 246, was officially signed on Thursday, May 20, 2021. With its enactment, the yoga prohibition was lifted after nearly three decades. Now yoga can be taught in K-12 public schools, as local school boards have the option to implement yoga into the curriculum of public schools across the state of Alabama.

The sponsor of the repeal effort, Representative Gray, is an advocate for yoga in public schools as a means to better students mentally and physically. He continues to stress the benefits of the exercise instead of the origin of the practice. Yoga is beneficial to all body types, ages, and ethnicities. It improves flexibility, reduces stress and anxiety, improves posture and body awareness, and increases overall mental health. For decades during Alabama's yoga ban, yoga has been taught in colleges and universities across the state. Unfortunately, many prohibitions regarding yoga practice have been due to negative perceptions caused by miscommunication and misunderstanding. However, as a form of physical exercise and mental preparation, yoga may prove beneficial to many K-12 students across the South, particularly those recovering from nearly two years of physical and social isolation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Council of State Governments Southern Office encourages its member states to examine the feasibility of introducing similar legislation to introduce or promote yoga for K-12 public school systems or its inclusion in curriculums. The practice of yoga in public schools across the South may be appropriate for use in counseling sessions, physical education classes, athletic programs, and other parts of the curriculum as appropriate. This exercise is beginner-friendly and welcomes all those who would like to try and gain the different benefits that yoga may offer, including, but not limited to:

- Improving student behavior and allowing participants to be mindful and connect with their inner selves;
- Lowering student stress, anxiety, and depression;
- Serving athletic programs as an exercise for recovery and strength building; and
- Calming kindergarten and other young students after returning to the classroom from the excitement and activity of physical education classes or recess.
The Council of State Governments Southern Office requests that a copy of this policy position be forwarded to its member states' governors, lieutenant governors, secretaries or commissioners of education, legislative presiding officers, and relevant education and youth legislative committee officers.