

ContraCosta Times

State school fitness tests show less than 40 percent of students 'healthy,' despite progress

By Theresa Harrington
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Less than 40 percent of students in grades five, seven and nine achieved "healthy" levels in each of six fitness tests last year, according to results released Monday, but overall scores improved slightly.

"The percentage of students who are in the healthy fitness zone is increasing," Jack O'Connell, state superintendent of public instruction, said in a news release. "However, as a state we must continue to improve."

He cited national statistics showing that today's younger children are twice as likely as students in the 1980s to be overweight and that teens are three times as likely. The results for students tested last spring for aerobic capacity, body composition, flexibility and strength showed a 0.6 percent increase in fifth-grade students' scores, a 1.2 percent increase in seventh-grade students' scores, and a 2.3 percent gain in ninth-grade students' scores when compared with the previous year's results.

Older students scored better than younger children statewide, with about 38 percent of ninth-graders reported as healthy in all six areas. That compares with 34 percent of seventh-graders and 29 percent of fifth-graders.

At one East Bay school that made a point of fitness, students scored a little better than the statewide averages.

Scores at Foothill Middle School in Walnut Creek showed nearly half of seventh-graders testing healthy in all six areas.

"We made it a focus last spring and this year to make fitness one of our biggest priorities, because obesity is a huge problem (nationwide)," said Chris deClercq, Foothill's physical education department chairman. "We want to make sure our kids get the base they need for lifelong fitness, and we know that starts right now."

Students participate in physical-education classes daily. They run a mile on Wednesdays and have fitness activities such as push-ups and other calisthenics on Thursdays.

More than 1,165 schools participate in the Governor's Fitness Challenge, which was developed four years ago to promote healthy lifestyles among students. The program gives awards to schools with large percentages of students who participate in fitness activities at least 30 minutes a day, three days a week, for one month. The FAME public

charter school in Fremont won \$1,000 for outshining other schools in Alameda County last year and, so far this year, is ranked No. 2 in the Bay Area.

"We traditionally have students from an immigrant background and physical fitness isn't something promoted in their cultures, so we've been able to introduce them to health and fitness," said site director Iyad Wazwaz. "In general, our students are very excited to be part of it."

Students have begun exercising with their families by joining gyms or going for walks, he said. Of the six tests administered statewide at each school, the aerobics test is considered the best indicator of overall fitness. More than 65 percent of fifth- and seventh-grade students attained healthy aerobics scores statewide last year, along with about 63 percent of ninth-graders.

Oakland's students fared worse than their counterparts statewide in both aerobics and body weight. About 60 percent of fifth-graders, 51 percent of seventh-graders and 38 percent of ninth-graders tested aerobically fit.

Approximately 65 percent in the fifth grade and 64 percent in the seventh and ninth grades had healthy body weights.

Statewide, students fared a bit better statewide in body weight, with about 68 percent of fifth- and seventh-graders rated healthy, along with nearly 70 percent of ninth-graders.

Clark Messman, an eighth-grader at Foothill, said he has been on a swim team since he was 5 and enjoys P.E. class every day.

"I think it's important for people to learn to be healthy and to stay healthy," said the 14-year-old, "especially later in life."

California schools with students who are physically active tend to do better academically, said Jake Steinfeld, chairman of the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.

"Our findings are consistent with a growing body of evidence that cannot be denied: academics and fitness definitely go hand-in-hand."