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OC kids: Fitness level 'unacceptable'

State schools chief decries results showing that just a third of O.C. students are fit by state norms.

By **FERMIN LEAL** and **ELEEZA V. AGOPIAN**
The Orange County Register



IN THE MINORITY:
Fitness may be fun for second-grader Jared Milkes, doing push-ups Monday in PE class at Red Hill Elementary School in Santa Ana, but most students across the county didn't meet state standards for physical fitness, according to new results.

**EUGENE GARCIA,
THE ORANGE
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Multimedia

Results for Orange
County schools

PFT Overview Packet

For Gloria Rivas, a junior at Santa Ana High, daily exercise consists of about 30 minutes of light running and stretching in physical fitness class.

"I really don't like running too much because I get too sweaty and tired," Rivas said. "If it were up to me, we wouldn't have PE. If people want to exercise more, they should join the football or volleyball team."

A healthy lunch for Rivas, who considers herself in good shape, involves replacing her regular soda with a diet Coke and skipping the bag of chips that accompanies her slice of pizza.

So when Rivas took the state-mandated physical fitness test, she failed – just like most students in Orange County.

Only one in three students in the county, or 34 percent, passed the annual state test that measures upper-body strength, flexibility, body fat percentage and endurance, according to results released Monday.

The test, administered last spring to California's fifth-, seventh- and ninth-graders, shows that many can stretch and do sit-ups, but they often falter when asked to run or walk a mile.

Statewide, it was worse. Only 27 percent of students passed the test, given to almost 1.4 million students. Local and statewide figures were about the same as last year's.

"We have an unacceptable amount of children who are not physically fit," state Superintendent Jack O'Connell said. "These results show we have a lot of work ahead."

Educators and health officials said the results show that many students are obese and out of shape, putting them at risk for Type 2 diabetes and other illnesses.

Dr. Naomi Neufeld, founder of KidShape, a statewide program aimed at pediatric weight management, said she isn't surprised by the results.

"Kids can't pull up their own weight doing a chin-up, and that in part is because so many of them are overweight," Neufeld said from Los Angeles.

WHAT'S BEING DONE

Fitness can be a tough sell in Orange County schools, where nachos and soft drinks are in demand, and apples and salads are decidedly not.

High schools in particular have a hard time changing students' eating habits. Some have tried to sell salads and sandwiches, but kids still line up to buy french fries and chips.

New state laws prohibit the sale of sodas and some junk food in elementary schools. Educators say it's too early to tell if the ban, which went into effect last year, has made an impact.

But some districts like Laguna Beach Unified and Capistrano Unified have banned soft drinks at high school campuses.

Capistrano Unified is in the third year of its soda ban, and officials partially credit their policy for the district's 44 percent passing rate, one of the highest in the county.

How to encourage good health

- **Limit children** to no more than one hour of television and video games daily.
- **Involve children** in physical activities from an early age. Make them simple activities in which the whole family can participate.
- **Take your child** for a walk or go on family camping or hiking trips.
- **Children would rather** spend time with parents than have the latest expensive gadget, even if it doesn't seem that way.
- **Don't press your children** to exercise too much before age 6. Basic motor and tumbling skills should be encouraged, but heavy running or other physical activity can do more harm than good.

Source: Dr. Naomi Neufeld, founder of KidShape

The highlights

Countywide, 30.1 percent of fifth-graders, 36.6 percent of seventh-graders and 35.7 percent of ninth-graders passed the state fitness test.

- O.C.'s highest results: Seventh-graders, Irvine Unified district; 58 percent passed
- O.C.'s lowest results: Fifth-graders, Buena Park Elementary district; 18 percent passed
- Most difficult exercise: Running a mile and sprinting; 34 percent failed
- Easiest exercise: Push-ups; 91 percent passed

At Tesoro High, John Gipe said the goal for his 2-year-old Improving Your Body Composition class is to teach students to work out regularly and lead healthy lives.

"I'm trying to teach them to be able to do it on their own," Gipe said. "Know what exercises to do and why."

The percent of students passing the physical fitness test at Tesoro rose to 38 percent from 32 percent last year.

PTA parents at Red Hill Elementary raised \$25,000 last year to pay for a full-time physical education instructor, to lessen the burden on classroom teachers. The number of students at Red Hill passing the test also improved this year to 37 percent, an increase of 5 points.

"You teach everything in moderation," Principal Wendy Hudson said. "Sure it's OK to have candy, it's OK to have pizza. But you make sure that you still get plenty of exercise and do all those things that keep (them) healthy."

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