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Whittier students' fitness scores up, but two-thirds still unfit

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WHITTIER - The percentage of physically fit students in fifth, seventh and ninth grades may be on the rise, but nearly two-thirds of Whittier-area students are still considered unfit by state guidelines, according to figures released Monday.

Photo Gallery: [Annual statewide Physical Fitness](#)

Among nine Whittier-area school districts, only about 32 percent of nearly 17,000 fifth-, seventh- and ninth-graders were able to meet the state's standards in six fitness areas during testing in the 2008-09 school year.

However, a large number - about 60 percent - were able to meet at least five of the six fitness standards, mirroring a statewide trend.

"With that said, students are making improvement," State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell said Monday. "But the percentage of students who are not even minimally fit remains unacceptably high.

"We have a long way to go to eradicate the epidemic of childhood obesity."

Locally, the state's Fitnessgram was administered to students in grades 5, 7 and 9 at the East Whittier City, El Rancho Unified, Little Lake City, Los Nietos, Lowell Joint, Norwalk-La Mirada Unified, South Whittier, Whittier City and Whittier Union High school districts.

It tests kids in six areas:

- Aerobic capacity;
- Body composition;
- Abdominal strength;
- Trunk extensor strength;
- Upper body strength; and
- Flexibility.

A number of test options are provided so most students can participate, officials said.

Locally, the highest percentage of physically fit kids were fifth-graders in the South Whittier district (33.5 percent); seventh-graders in the Little Lake district (48.1 percent); and ninth-graders at the Whittier Union High School District (42 percent).

Gail Baxter, director of special programs at the South Whittier district, said elementary school teachers have always been able to maintain the required 200 minutes of P.E. every 10 days, and a new wellness committee meets on an ongoing basis to review the district's health and welfare practices and policies.

But its THINK Together afterschool program, which serves about 100 kids at each site, also has an outdoor activity component to it - and likely contributed to the rise in fitness test scores this year. "So we have kids every day who, instead of going home and being inactive, stay at the school and participate in those programs," Baxter said.

The lowest percentage of fit students were fifth-graders (20.6 percent) and ninth-graders (27.2 percent) in the Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District, and seventh-graders (23.8 percent) at Los Nietos Middle School.

"The scores need significant improvement, and we have identified the area of cardiovascular fitness as the one where we probably need the most work," said Los Nietos Middle School Principal Olga Hofreiter.

"The students need more movement, endurance, running long distances or doing jumping jacks for a long time - that's where the scores are pointing us," Hofreiter said. "The kids are good in flexibility and individual skills. But in cardio, that's where they're lacking."

This year, the school offered an extra P.E. class to students and has a group of about 25 training to run the Los Angeles Marathon, Hofreiter said.

Coupled with efforts to incorporate more cardio into their P.E. classes, Hofreiter said she hopes they will "have a positive effect on test results next year."

O'Connell announced the annual fitness testing results at a school in Los Angeles with Jake Steinfeld, chairman of the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.

The pair debunked the so-called myth that academic excellence and physical fitness are mutually exclusive - that schools don't have the time for P.E. or aren't able to make the effort because there is such a strong focus on academics.

"I don't buy it," O'Connell said. "We know strong bodies and minds work together so they can succeed. We're in a no-excuse zone."

Full results can be viewed at www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/pf/pftresults.asp

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