

# **JACK O'CONNELL AND JAKE STEINFELD: Fitness: Missing ingredient to our kids' success**

Wednesday, Dec. 31, 2008

By Jack O'Connell and Jake Steinfeld

Recently, we released the results of the 2008 California Physical Fitness Test that is given annually to California's fifth-, seventh- and ninth-grade students. As part of this test, students must run or walk one mile, have their body composition measured and perform push-ups and stretches to prove they are in good shape.

The results show between a 1% and 5% improvement in overall fitness levels depending on grade. While we applaud this improvement, the results also show that more than 60% of students aren't meeting the state's physical fitness standard.

This is a sobering reminder that we as elected officials, teachers, administrators, parents and other concerned citizens need to do more to help our children reach the level of health and fitness they deserve.

Helping children become healthy and fit is a moral, economic and academic imperative. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 125 million children and adolescents are overweight or obese, more than triple the number since the 1980s.

Hospital costs for adolescents have also more than tripled. It was reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association that chronic conditions such as obesity have resulted in 66 million restricted-activity days and 27 million days lost from school. Couple this with the fact that one-third of our children eat fast food every day, and the result is a disaster of epic proportions.

The California Department of Health Services has estimated the costs of physical inactivity, obesity and overweight in the state at well over \$20 billion per year -- more than 10 times the annual costs of California's fires and earthquakes, including the terrible fires earlier this year.

## **Fitness, learning tied**

Some might ask why should schools bear any responsibility for addressing this crisis. Aren't academics and fitness two different things? In fact, academics and fitness go hand-in-hand.

In his 2008 book, "Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain," Dr. John J. Ratey of Harvard Medical School writes, "cannot underestimate how important regular exercise is in improving the function and performance of the brain. Exercise stimulates our gray matter to produce Miracle-Gro for the brain."

Dr. Ratey's research echoes findings from a 2001 study conducted by the California Department of Education that showed a direct correlation between higher academic test scores and higher levels of fitness.

The Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports was revived three years ago to help increase physical fitness among school children. During its first year, 10,000 students participated in the Governor's Challenge Competition, a contest among K-12 schools to encourage students to become active 30-60 minutes a day, three days a week for a month.

This past year, more than 150,000 students from more than 1,200 schools increased their level of physical activity by taking the Governor's Challenge, and for their efforts, schools were rewarded with hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of fitness equipment.

Administrators from schools participating in the Governor's Challenge Competition report that participating students are healthier, have increased confidence and improved self-esteem.

Interestingly, these schools are reaping academic rewards as well. The average Academic Performance Index score of the 40 highest performing schools in the 2008 Governor's Challenge Competition was 835 compared to 742 for schools statewide last year. Just imagine the impact we would see if every school in California participated in the Governor's Challenge Competition.

Recently, the Council launched the 2009 Governor's Challenge Competition among K-12 schools. Not only is this healthy competition open to all California students, parents and teachers, it can be administered without taking up any class time, and it's free.

But the point we're making is not about the Challenge; it's about ensuring that California children develop the health habits and academic skills that will prepare them to compete in the global economy of the 21st century. Our children deserve the very best education we can offer and they will get the most out of school -- and out of life -- if they are physically active and fit.

Physical fitness is not a partisan issue; it's an issue that affects everyone, especially our children. Children are our most precious resource, and if we fail them, we put the future of our state and our country in peril. We cannot and will not let this happen.

**JACK O'CONNELL IS CALIFORNIA'S STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION. JAKE STEINFELD IS THE CHAIRMAN OF THE GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON PHYSICAL FITNESS AND SPORTS, DEDICATED TO PROMOTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND FITNESS FOR ALL CALIFORNIANS, ESPECIALLY CHILDREN AND YOUTH.**