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## **Texas tests fitness of 2.6 million students; finds elementary students are in best shape**

AUSTIN – A groundbreaking physical fitness assessment of almost 2.6 million Texas students in grades 3-12 found that elementary-age children are the most physically fit.

Fitness levels decline with each passing grade level. This corresponds with decreasing emphasis on physical education in upper grades.

Commissioner of Education Robert Scott said, "I appreciate the participation of school districts across Texas in completing this six-part fitness assessment. While the results may not be what we would have liked, the FITNESSGRAM® gives districts the opportunity to work with parents to create a healthy lifestyle for every child."

Schools used the FITNESSGRAM®, created by The Cooper Institute of Dallas, to test students this spring. The assessment measures body composition, aerobic capacity, strength, endurance and flexibility. Texas is the first state to order a comprehensive physical assessment of its students.

In the FITNESSGRAM® program, students are considered to be in the "Healthy Fitness Zone" if they achieve certain levels on six tests, with performance targets tied to a student's age and gender. The tests include activities such as a one-mile run, curl ups, push-ups, trunk lift, shoulder stretches and a skin fold test.

During the program's first year, 2.6 million of the almost 3.4 million students in grades 3-12 were tested.

Preliminary results, which are attached, show that about 32 percent of third-grade girls and almost 28 percent of third-grade boys reached the "Healthy Fitness Zone."

By seventh grade, only 21 percent of the girls and 17 percent of the boys still met this achievement level. By 12<sup>th</sup> grade, just 8 percent of the girls and about 9 percent of the boys met the health standards in all six tests.

Families may obtain a copy of their child's FITNESSGRAM® report from their local school.

Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, who authored SB530 which instituted the physical fitness assessment, said "We need to get back to the basics of ensuring the health of our children by promoting nutrition, fitness and overall health in our public schools."

Dr. Kenneth Cooper, known as the "father of aerobics" and the founder of The Cooper Institute located at the Cooper Aerobics Center in Dallas, said, "I hope these results shock the state into reality and into action. We must immunize children against obesity while in elementary school so that as they age they are more likely to stay healthy and fit. By the time students graduate, they should be ready mentally and physically to achieve their dreams. We

have an incredible opportunity and responsibility before us to improve the health of Texas children.”

A 2007 report from Trust for America’s Health found that Texas ranked sixth among states with the highest obesity rate for children ages 10-17. The report found that 19.1 percent of Texas children in this age group were considered obese. Ranked number 1 was the District of Columbia with an obesity rate of 22.8 percent.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2003 reported a dramatic rise in overweight children. Between 1963-1970, 4.6 percent of children ages 12-19 were considered overweight. By 1999-2000, that percentage had mushroomed to 15.5 percent.

Inactive, overweight children tend to maintain that pattern into adulthood.

The Texas comptroller of public accounts found that Texas businesses spent an estimated \$3.3 billion in 2005 on costs related to obesity. These costs included disability coverage, lower productivity, absenteeism and health care.

Recognizing this growing problem, Nelson has introduced bills promoting health and fitness each year since 2001.

Nelson said, “We can’t allow an entire generation to grow up and live shorter lives than the previous generation. If we want our children to get serious about fitness, we need to get serious about making it a priority issue.”

SB530 by Nelson and state Rep. Rob Eissler, R-The Woodlands was passed during the 2007 legislative session. It not only mandates a physical fitness assessment but it also requires “moderate or vigorous” physical activity for students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Students in sixth through eighth grade, beginning this fall, will be required to participate in physical activity for at least four of six semesters.

No state funds were spent on this statewide physical fitness assessment. About \$2.5 million in private funds was raised to cover the first two years of operation.

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