

Fitness test misses mark

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Fitness

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it's important because we don't have any idea whether we're making a change in the kids obesity epidemic."

Unlike some school districts, the Oakley elementary school district does not train teachers in how to administer the test.

"It becomes a matter of time and resources," Rogers said of the test, which measures five fitness benchmarks besides body composition, including the ability to run a mile and do sit-ups. "It tends to be inconstant, and they change it constantly, so the data doesn't match up when you move on to the next year.

"That's how the state runs virtually every state testing program."

Whether because of flaws in the program or the way it's administered, the state fitness test does not tell a consistent story about childhood obesity in Oakley.

Contra Costa Health Services reported in its last health indicators report, issued in 2007, that Oakley had the highest rate of overweight fifth graders in the county, with 44 percent of children failing to meet the state's body-composition criteria. But one year earlier, that rate was just 32 percent, and the year after the report was issued, it fell to 24 percent — lower than the county average.

Project EAT measured obesity levels in several Alameda and Contra Costa school districts over a three-year period, and found that teachers were consistently misreporting rates of overweight children. Boynton's group uses fitness test data for grant applications, but like many anti-obesity organizations, does not deem the figures reliable enough to use in health campaigns.

To calculate body composition, most teachers simply weigh students, sometimes with a scale brought from home. This is the least accurate of the three options the state gives test administrators, according to Department of Education Administrator Linda Hooper. The most accurate is to pinch children's arms and legs to measure body fat.

More students and parents opt out of the body-composition test than any



KRISTOPHER SKINNER/STAFF

Olinda Elementary School fifth-graders do jumping jacks on the playground during PE class.

other part of the fitness assessment, and the state sometimes changes its definition of a healthy weight, making it hard to compare data year-to-year.

Health Services number cruncher Jennifer Lifshay, who puts together the organization's indicators report, has reservations about the obesity data but uses them, she says, because "it's the only source we have."

Health Services compiles its report by ranking school districts by the percentage of fifth graders who fall outside of the healthy body composition range in the state fitness test.

As the state's main source of information about obesity in school-aged children, these statistics get used a lot.

The body-composition assessment is the most studied element of the state fitness test by far, according to Hooper. Advocates have used this data to argue on the state Senate floor for school junk food bans and other nutritional standards for students.

Fitness test results should be consistent as long as the test is correctly administered, according to Matt Stewart, a West Contra Costa school district athletic director whom child health advocates cite as an expert on the test.

Guided by the mantra that "consistency is everything," Stewart retrains his teachers annually to give the fitness test. His district's obesity rates have held remarkably steady over the past decade.

The rates in West Contra Costa have been higher than average, reflecting a trend that students from low-income communities are more likely to be overweight.

Contra Costa school districts with

a high percentage of overweight fifth graders are also home to a higher-than-average proportion of students who qualify for the free lunch program, according to Health Services.

Students in the Tri-Valley school districts, which host many fitness initiatives, typically score well on the fitness test. In 2009, fewer than 20 percent of fifth graders in the Dublin, Pleasanton, Castro Valley and San Ramon school districts failed the state's body-composition test.

Stewart calls districts like Rogers' that essentially opt out of the test "criminal" because, he says, they show a lack of regard for physical fitness.

"For someone to say it's not important to me is just nonsense," he said. "If you cut the test, it takes the credibility away from PE."

But Rogers argues that a small, cash-strapped district like his cannot afford to give the test this kind of attention.

"Is it our priority to teach students to read, write and do arithmetic," he said, "or to teach kids to do physical fitness?"

More than 10 percent of school districts in the state absorbed the budget cuts of the past two years in part by cutting back on physical education, according to a Department of Education survey. Prohibited by law from eliminating physical education completely, districts are reducing the minutes of instruction or assigning gym duties to classroom teachers, both for budget and curriculum reasons.

Parents need to take responsibility for their child's fitness, Rogers said.

"As my father-in-law always used to say, the best exercise you can do is pushing yourself away from the dinner table."

Rogers believes that the state is sending mixed messages by emphasizing standardized testing while at the same time taking away the resources districts might use to implement these assessment programs.

He's unlikely to get any extra funding, though. The fitness test program, which costs the state about \$3.5 million annually, only narrowly escaped the budget chopping block last fall.

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