

June 25, 2003

Dear Superintendents:

As the nation faces a growing childhood obesity crisis, we in the California school community have the unique opportunity to provide quality instructional programs in physical education and nutrition education, and model healthy eating and physical activity environments for California's children.

I would like to challenge all of California's district superintendents and school districts to make their students' nutritional health and physical activity a priority.

This first annual California Superintendent's Challenge is a coordinated effort between the California Department of Education (CDE) and the California Task Force on Youth and Workplace Wellness. The Superintendent's Challenge is a challenge to all local school districts across California to improve the health of their students through the development and implementation of policies that promote healthy eating and regular physical activity for all students and ensure quality instructional programs.

Even during difficult budget times like this one, nutrition and physical activity should be a priority for all schools and districts. Healthy, active, well-nourished children are more likely to attend school and are more prepared and motivated to learn. Furthermore, the childhood obesity epidemic in California continues to grow each year, with nearly 76 percent of our students considered unfit, and more than a quarter overweight. Our schools have an exceptional opportunity to guide children toward healthier lifestyles, and the passage of nutrition and physical activity policies is the first step toward providing a healthy learning environment for all students.

Each school district that takes up The Challenge by passing and implementing nutrition and/or physical activity policies will receive recognition from the Superintendent's office, the CDE and the state Senate. The most exemplary districts also will receive a plaque and cash award in recognition of their efforts.

We in California became national leaders when we enacted Senate Bill 19, which beginning in January 2004, should additional funding be appropriated, requires that food sold at elementary and middle schools meet nutritional standards of which we can be proud.

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To further our leadership in this area, the Superintendent's Challenge awards will reflect a wide range of healthy food, nutrition education, and physical activity programs that address California's growing childhood obesity epidemic and provide healthier meals, education, and active days for students.

As you are aware, California law requires that all students be provided physical education. Students in grades one through six must receive 200 minutes of physical education instruction every 10 school days, and students in grades seven through twelve must receive 400 minutes every 10 school days. In our necessary focus on academic achievement, we have, unfortunately, centered our commitment on investing in strong minds, but at the expense of ensuring strong bodies. Both are critical. Thus, in addition to promoting healthy food choices and nutrition education, a comprehensive district policy also will address the importance of physical activity and education, and makes quality physical activity a priority.

I would like to congratulate those local school communities that already have embraced this critical opportunity to improve the health of students and applaud them for their outstanding efforts to take a lead on nutrition and physical activity policy issues. I challenge all of California's districts to follow their peers and make student nutrition and physical activity a priority for district leadership.

Sincerely,

JACK O'CONNELL

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Enclosures