Children's Physical Fitness in California

What It Is
On kidsdata.org, indicators of physical fitness include the percentage of public school students in grades 5, 7, and 9 scoring in the "Healthy Fitness Zone" on all six areas (upper body strength, flexibility, aerobic capacity, body composition, abdominal strength, and trunk strength) of California’s physical fitness test, the FitnessGram assessment. These data are available by grade level, gender, and race/ethnicity.

School staff reports on the extent to which their school provides opportunities for physical education and activity and the share of students at school who are healthy and physically fit also are provided.

Why This Topic Is Important
Regular physical activity promotes health and well being. Consistent exercise is associated with improvements in muscle development, bone strength, weight control, mental health, and academic performance in young people. Compared with those who are physically inactive, children who exercise regularly are less likely to develop risk factors for chronic diseases such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes and are more likely to carry active lifestyles into adulthood.

Health experts recommend that children and adolescents ages 6-17 participate in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity for a minimum of 60 minutes each day. Exercise should include aerobic activity (e.g., running or bicycling), muscle strengthening (e.g., push-ups), and bone strengthening (e.g., jumping rope), each at least 3 days per week. However, according to 2016 estimates, fewer than one in four young people nationwide get this recommended amount of physical activity. Further, inequities by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status persist, with children of color less likely to meet recommended levels of physical fitness and low-income communities offering fewer opportunities for children to be physically active.

How Children Are Faring
In 2018, around one in four (24%) California 5th graders met state standards in all physical fitness areas, a figure that has remained relatively stable since 2011. During the same period, higher percentages of students in Grade 7 (more than 30%) and Grade 9 (more than 34%) met all standards. Girls were more likely than boys to meet fitness standards in Grade 5, but by Grade 9 a higher percentage of boys met all standards. Across grade levels, Asian
American, Filipino, white, and multiracial students were more likely to meet fitness standards than their peers in other groups.

At the local level, there is wide variation in the percentage of students meeting fitness standards. For 5th graders in 2018, across locations with data, figures ranged from 7% to 44% at the county level and from 5% to 82% among school districts.

In 2015-2017, 13% of responses from elementary public school staff in California reported that nearly all students at their school were healthy and physically fit; this compares to 10% of responses from middle school staff, and 7% from high school and non-traditional program staff. When asked about opportunities for physical education and activity available at their school, 76% of responses by middle school staff indicated that these were provided a lot, followed by 68% of responses from elementary school staff, 60% of responses from high school staff, and 40% of responses from staff at non-traditional programs.

View references for this text and additional research on this topic: https://www.kidsdata.org/topic/58/physical-fitness_summary