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The Honorable Nicole Parra, Chair
Joint Legislative Audit Committee
1020 N Street, Room 107
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Charles Poochigian, Vice Chair
Joint Legislative Audit Committee
1020 N Street, Room 107
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Audit of LAUSD Student Health, Physical Activity, and Nutrition

Dear Assemblymember Parra and Senator Poochigian:

We, the undersigned, as medical doctors, public health experts, lawyers, parents, and concerned citizens, are committed to getting people active, and giving them the places and means to do so. Physical activity in schools and parks will improve our children's health, academics, and leadership potential, and the quality of life in their communities.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and other civic leaders have called on the State to conduct a performance audit of student achievement in the Los Angeles Unified School District. They ask the fundamental question of whether LAUSD is meeting the basic education needs of our children. They point to the district's high dropout rates and low test scores in core subjects such as math and reading. To date, the calls for an audit focus only on academic performance.

We request that any audit of LAUSD address the health and physical education of our children. Health and physical fitness must be included among the core goals of a quality education. The new federal local wellness policy for schools calls upon LAUSD to promote student wellness through physical activity, nutrition education, and reduction of obesity. Healthy students perform better academically. This is the first generation in the history of this country in which children will have a lower life expectancy than their parents if present trends in obesity and inactivity continue.

Children of color in the Los Angeles region disproportionately live in communities of concentrated poverty without places for physical activity in schools and parks, and with no cars or an adequate transit system to reach those places. The human health implications of the lack of

places and policies for physical activity are profound. These children disproportionately suffer from obesity, diabetes, and other diseases related to inactivity.

Fully 87% of the children in LAUSD public schools are not physically fit. The 2003-2004 California Physical Fitness Report demonstrates the fitness crisis among children in LAUSD. Forty schools did not have a single physically fit student. In nearly one-third of the 605 schools in LAUSD, less than 10% of students were physically fit. Only eight schools had student populations that are more than 50% physically fit.

Percentage of Physically Fit Children in LAUSD Schools¹

Percentage of Physically Fit Children	Number of Schools in LAUSD
0%	40
1-5%	58
6-10%	96
11-15%	123
16-20%	83
21-25%	75
26-30%	42
31-35%	38
36-40%	22
41-45%	16
46-50%	4
>50%	8

Furthermore, 51% of school districts in California failed to meet the state-mandated elementary school physical education requirement of 200 minutes every ten days. LAUSD is among the school districts that do not comply with physical education laws, according to a study released by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy on June 8, 2006.

In addition, LAUSD provides 71% more play acres for non-Hispanic white students than for Latino students in elementary schools, according to testimony by Michael Strumwasser, an attorney for LAUSD, to the LAUSD Citizens' School Bond Oversight Committee in November 2004.

Over 91% of the children in LAUSD are children of color, and over 80% live below or near the poverty line.

Children of color disproportionately live in state assembly districts with the highest levels of child obesity, and the worst access to schools with five acres or more of playing fields and to

¹Robert García and Erica Flores, *Healthy Children, Healthy Communities, and Legal Services*, *Clearinghouse Review Journal of Poverty Law and Policy* 52, 57 (May-June 2005).

parks (maps 218, 601).² The levels of obesity are intolerably high for all children throughout the region — ranging from 23% to 40% (map 601).

There are unfair disparities in access to places for physical activity to improve health in schools and parks. Thus, for example, Speaker Fabian Nuñez's District 46 has only .51 net acres of urban parks per thousand residents, compared to 283 net acres in Senate District 37. The disparities are even more dramatic if total acres of parks including forests and other large natural open spaces are included, as illustrated by the charts and graphs for State Assembly District. For example, Speaker Nuñez's District 46 has only .51 total acres of parks per thousand residents, compared to 3,348.72 in District 37 (Chart 219C).

The shared use of schools and parks can alleviate the lack of places for physical activity to improve health, while making optimal use of scarce land and public resources. Unfortunately, schools with five acres or more of playing fields tend to be located in communities that are disproportionately white and wealthy and have greater access to parks (map 502). Only about 102 out of 605 LAUSD schools have five or more acres of playing fields.

Los Angeles City Controller Laura Chick recently published an audit of the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks calling for shared use of schools and parks to improve recreation in every neighborhood and alleviate unfair disparities.³

Unfair health, school, and park disparities are not an accident of unplanned growth, but the continuing legacy of a pattern and history of discriminatory land use, housing, and economic policies.⁴

Healthy eating is also a critically important component of any effort to reduce obesity and promote the healthy development of our children. LAUSD has made some progress on healthy diets with district-wide policies that are, in some cases, leading the country. However, even in the case of diet, we really know little about how effectively the LAUSD's own policies are being implemented district-wide, and by individual schools.

For these reasons, we believe that any audit should address the following fundamental questions:

- Why does LAUSD not comply with state physical education requirements?
- Is student health and physical education a core part of the vision and mission for a quality education by LAUSD? If not, why not?

² The Center for Law in the Public Interest is publishing a comprehensive analyses of schools, parks, health, and demographics for the Los Angeles region, *Healthy Parks, Schools, and Communities: Green Access and Equity for the Los Angeles Region (forthcoming 2006)* using GIS tools and 2000 census data. Sample Maps and Charts are available at www.clipi.org.

³ City Controller Laura Chick, Performance Audit of Recreation and Community Services in the Department of Recreation and Parks 20 (Jan. 5, 2006).

⁴ Lawrence Culver, *The Garden and the Grid: A History of Race, Recreation, and Parks in the City and County of Los Angeles (forthcoming 2006)*.

- Why does LAUSD have such a high rate of physically unfit students?
- Why do unfair disparities in school space for physical activity for children of color exist?
- Why are shared use agreements for schools and parks not used more effectively by LAUSD?
- How much space—in playing fields and playgrounds—is necessary to meet the physical education needs of every student?
- How are LAUSD’s healthy diet policies being implemented district-wide and by individual schools?
- What additional steps should LAUSD take to encourage healthy diets and eating?

In order to truly make a comprehensive assessment of LAUSD and to meet the full educational needs of our children, any audit must address these fundamental issues of physical fitness and health. A quality education improves students’ health and bodies as well as their minds.

The Center for Law in the Public Interest is empowering communities through a collective vision for a comprehensive and coherent web of parks, schools, and transportation that promotes human health, a better environment, and economic vitality for all, and reflects the cultural diversity of Los Angeles.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this request.

Very truly yours,

Robert García
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cc: Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa
City Controller Laura Chick
City Councilmember José Huizar
LAUSD Board of Education President Marlene Carter
Superintendent Roy Romer