Senate Education
March 5, 2013
Senate Bill 684 by Sen. Bob Deuell

Good morning Chair and members of the committee. I'm Lisa Swanson, MD, a pediatrician in Mesquite, and member of the Texas Medical Association's Committee on Child and Adolescent Health. Today I'm testifying on behalf of the Texas Medical Association (TMA), Texas Pediatric Society (TPS), and the Texas Public Health Coalition, which consists of more than 20 organizations dedicated to advancing core public health principles at the state and community levels. Dr. Deuell is a good friend of medicine, but sometimes friends disagree. Today we are testifying in opposition of SB 684. We are concerned that this legislation will weaken our efforts to reduce obesity.

Our state is facing a childhood obesity epidemic. The current fitness assessment for schools provides essential data to allow schools and communities to target resources to address the epidemic. Leaders at all levels of government have recognized the magnitude of the childhood obesity epidemic and the need for data to reverse the epidemic. For example, Comptroller Susan Combs recently launched the website www.reshapingtexas.org. This website maps the FitnessGram® measurements for all public school districts in Texas, and provides a platform for schools and communities to share best practices to address the epidemic.

This data has already been used by many districts to get more grants and support for their students. The Austin Independent School District (AISD) would likely continue the measurement regardless of mandate because they know the value of the data and that it will lead to more money (e.g. grants) and resources for their students, and allow them to better allocate local resources. They also understand that healthier students miss fewer days of class and do better in school. Both of these outcomes are also critical to school and student success.

Hays Consolidated ISD's (HCISD) childhood obesity report produced by the non-profit Children's Optimal Health also showed that overweight and obese children missed more days of school that non-overweight or obese kids. HCISD also used FitnessGram® data in its proposal for a Health Resources and Services Administration grant to build a new school-based health clinic. The district was awarded $500,000 to build the clinic, which will help them combat childhood obesity.

There are likely other districts that have done the same. Instead of making this reporting optional, we should share best practices regarding how to implement the fitness assessments at the lowest cost, and maximize the philanthropic support to schools that can be accessed through presenting the FitnessGram® data, as these districts that I've mentioned have done.

The Comptroller recognizes the business impact of obesity on Texas and has taken steps to combat it. She also understands the value of the FitnessGram® data and thus has invested money and energy to disseminate the data and lead positive change.

In 2011, Sen. Jane Nelson passed SB 226, which was unanimously approved by both chambers, giving the Texas Education Agency (TEA) the authority to correlate fitness assessment data with student academic achievement. TEA has captured data in a non-identifiable, individual format but has not had the opportunity to make the most of the analysis allowed by statute. With this data in hand, we could better develop targeted interventions to help Texas children stay fit and healthy. Allowing TEA to report fitness data could enhance the ability of parents and communities across the state to combat obesity. We believe DSHS or the Comptroller's office is willing to step forward and provide analysis of the data since TEA has been unable to comply with the legislation.

In closing, I ask that we take steps to help schools implement the FitnessGram® so we can continue to capture critical data that we all can use to fight Texas' costly obesity epidemic.

We look forward to the opportunity to work with you on this legislation.