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**LSU AgCenter, Blue Cross Team Up to Fight Childhood Obesity
“Smart Bodies” Joint Venture to Kick Off Statewide Tour in Baton Rouge**

BATON ROUGE – The LSU AgCenter and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana have joined forces on an interactive educational program designed to combat childhood obesity.

Known as Smart Bodies, the program integrates classroom activities with hands-on learning to teach children how to build strong bodies and develop active minds – by focusing on healthy eating habits and physical exercise.

Smart Bodies will be presented to schools and communities over a five-year period under the cooperative agreement between Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana and the LSU AgCenter, the statewide research and educational outreach campus of the LSU System.

The three-component educational program kicked off its statewide tour with a preview for area youth Tuesday, March 1, 2005, from 10:30 a.m. to noon at the LSU Lod Cook Alumni Center in Baton Rouge.

Representatives from both sponsoring organizations said combating childhood obesity is a critical health care priority.

“The statistics on childhood obesity are alarming, but the research on prevention is encouraging,” said Smart Bodies program coordinator Denise M. Holston of the LSU AgCenter. “When children establish good nutrition and exercise habits while young, they have a better chance of keeping those healthy behaviors.”

Childhood obesity has doubled in the past 20 years, and almost one in three Louisiana school-aged children is overweight or obese, Holston said.

“The Smart Bodies program has proven to be a successful model for teaching nutrition and the importance of healthy lifestyles in a manner that children can understand,” she said.

Likewise, a local member of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana board said there are volumes of evidence supporting the idea of obesity prevention.

“Childhood obesity has been a major focus of our community relations efforts in recent years,” said Dr. Carl Luikart, a Baton Rouge cardiologist. “It’s an important issue when you consider that one in

four obese children has early signs of Type II diabetes. Plus, obesity-related diseases account for nearly half of Louisiana's health care budget."

According to Luikart, a RAND Corporation study found that obese people spend 36 percent more on health care services and 77 percent more on medications than their average-size counterparts.

"Research proves that prevention of obesity is easier than treatment," Luikart said. "The Smart Bodies program will give educators the tools to teach Louisiana children healthy lifestyles."

The three components of Smart Bodies are the Louisiana Body Walk, the OrganWise Guys and Take 10!

The Louisiana Body Walk is a 35-foot-by-45-foot walk-through exhibit representing the human body. Designed to be an at-school field trip, the Body Walk is set up on school grounds, where approximately 450 students can walk through the exhibit in one school day. As they walk, students explore various organs, including the stomach, heart, lungs and brain. Learning stations within the exhibit focus on the effects of different foods on each organ.

The second program component makes use of fun characters, the OrganWise Guys, to help young children understand physiology and health behaviors. These characters – Hardy Heart, Madame Muscle, Windy the Lungs, Peri Stolic the Intestines, Sir Rebrum the Brain, Peter Pancreas, Pepto the Stomach, the Kidney Brothers, Luigi Liver and Calci M. Bone – are used throughout the Body Walk, as well as in the program's classroom curriculum.

Completing the three-pronged approach to education is the Take 10! series of classroom-based, grade-specific educational tools that encourage short bouts of physical activity integrated with academic lessons. Participating schools will receive curricular materials and training for each grade level. The curriculum was created by teachers for teachers and students, and the activity cards provided in the curriculum materials are linked to the content standards and benchmarks established by the Louisiana Department of Education.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana will underwrite the Smart Bodies program for 50 schools over a five-year period. The LSU AgCenter will identify qualifying schools based on a number of factors related to the potential risk for childhood obesity. To see the program in action, contact program coordinator Denise Holston at 225-578-4573 or dholston@agcenter.lsu.edu.

Smart Bodies is a public-private partnership between the LSU AgCenter, the research and outreach arm of the LSU System, and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana, the state's largest health insurer and an independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association. Marking its 71st anniversary this year, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana is a tax-paying mutual company, owned by its policyholders.

Headquartered in Baton Rouge, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana also has district offices in Alexandria, Houma, Lafayette, Lake Charles, Monroe, New Orleans and Shreveport. The company's subsidiaries include HMO Louisiana, Inc., and Southern National Life Insurance Company, Inc. For more information, visit the company's website at www.bcbsla.com.

The LSU AgCenter focuses on providing all Louisiana citizens with innovations, information and education on such topics as lawns and gardens, crops and livestock, family and home, money and

business, community matters, food and health, environment and natural resources and kids and teens. It operates a network of extension offices and research stations across Louisiana.

For more information on the Smart Bodies program, visit www.smartbodies.org, or visit www.lsuagcenter.com or www.bcbsla.com for more information on the sponsoring organizations.

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