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Video dance game to be used in schools West Virginia taps Konami's system to help fight obesity

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West Virginia officials are hoping a revolution can head off an epidemic of childhood obesity.

State and school officials there have struck a partnership with Redwood City's Konami Digital Entertainment Inc. to use its Dance Dance Revolution in all of its 765 public schools, Konami announced today. The innovative plan, the first statewide program to employ the dance video game, is intended to attack West Virginia's youth obesity problem.

Dance Dance Revolution, a favorite at arcades, has built up a solid following among youth and adults, who enjoy the game's fast pace, fun music and sweat-inducing challenges. In the game, players must dance on a large pad lined with sensors, timing their rapid steps carefully to the music and to video prompts on the screen. Since the game was introduced on American video consoles in 2001, Konami has sold 3 million units.

The program in West Virginia will roll out in the coming weeks at 103 middle schools and junior high schools and will reach the remaining schools by the end of the 2006-07 school year. The games, which will run on Microsoft Xboxes, will be incorporated into physical education curricula and after-school programs.

Together with a video game console, a television and rugged dance pad, the Dance Dance Revolution unit being purchased by West Virginia costs \$740 each. Konami will take in about \$30 for each game.

"DDR is something that children respond to, and it's a tool for us to make their computer time as physically active as possible," said David Bailey, spokesman for the West Virginia Public Employees Insurance Agency, which is helping sponsor the program. "We thought this is a good tool that gets kids moving."

It's a bit of a twist for game publisher Konami. It and other video game producers are sometimes blamed for the increased inactivity of today's youth.

Officials at Konami, who are helping shape the physical education program, said they are pleased that their games are being used to help children become more fit. They said it makes sense in this era of high-tech gadgets and media-savvy kids to use so-called exergames to inspire activity.

"Kids are high-tech now," said Clara Gilbert, director of business partnerships for Konami. "This fits into their lifestyle. It's fun and it's music they're familiar with. The important thing is they're having fun while working out."

In the last two years, Konami has been contacted by a number of schools wanting to use the popular game to combat growing waistlines. But no program has ever reached the size of the West Virginia initiative.

Childhood obesity has grown rapidly in the past 25 years. The prevalence of overweight children and those at risk of being overweight jumped from 15 percent in the 1980s to 30 percent now.

In West Virginia, the number is noticeably higher. In one study of children in Appalachian communities, 2 out of every 3 children were considered either overweight or obese.

Gail Woodward-Lopez, associate director of the UC Berkeley Center for Weight and Health, said games like Dance Dance Revolution should not be the only tool in fighting obesity. But if implemented alongside traditional physical education methods, it has a great chance of motivating children to exercise.

"I think the schools should look at the whole range of options to increase physical activity and work with students to find something appealing," Woodward-Lopez said. "We do know that dance is one of the most effective methods in engaging youths, so this is very promising."

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