In 2006, lots of kids in West Virginia started dancing to a video game—not in an arcade—but in a school.

The game—called Dance Dance Revolution—incorporates dance moves to the latest pop songs, lighting up the steps on a special floor mat for players to follow.

Those kids got moving when schools saw the success in a 2004 effort launched by the West Virginia Public Employees Insurance Agency. It was an effort to address the problem of childhood obesity and help the children of the agency’s members lose weight.

In the trial phase, the West Virginia Public Employees Insurance Agency, in collaboration with West Virginia University, evaluated kids with weight problems to get a baseline of information. Those kids received the Dance Dance Revolution game, along with hardware if they needed it. They were told how many minutes to play on the workout mode, and could play on game mode to their hearts’ content.

The result: “Their risk for heart disease and diabetes was lessened by playing the game,” said Nidia Henderson, health promotions director for the West Virginia Insurance Agency.

The program through the employee insurance agency—a home-based program—drew the attention of educators. “They came to us and said if it’s so good at home, why don’t we put it in the schools,” Henderson said.

So, working with a broad range of sponsors including Dance Dance Revolution game-maker Konami, that’s just what they did.

Starting in 2006, the schools in the small state started adding the video game. Now, 55 percent of the schools have Dance Dance Revolution, and one school under construction has a room specifically built for what’s called “exergaming,” which includes Dance Dance Revolution, Nintendo Wii and other console-based exercise games, according to Henderson.

West Virginia Games for Health is one of eight national winners of The Council of State Governments Innovations Awards.

West Virginia has long had high rates of childhood obesity, but those numbers have started to level off, Henderson said. While she can’t say the Games for Health is the reason, she believes it’s part of
the solution.

“We think we’ve taken, not single-handedly but as part of a collaborative, a technology that was part of the problem and made that technology part of the solution,” she said.

While many respected agencies have long told parents to get rid of the TV, video games and computers, West Virginia Games for Health encourages their use in other ways. “(Dance Dance Revolution) takes screen time, which had been sedentary and turns it into physical activity,” she said. “That probably more than anything is one of the biggest contributions of this project.”

Another great contribution, she said, is the fact that kids are starting to enjoy physical activity.

“We’re not naïve and think that kids are always going to play (Dance Dance Revolution),” she said. “But it acts like a gateway to their enjoying physical activity ... we’ve seen an awful lot of that.”

And the game is transferable to adults, according to Henderson, who considers herself a “Dance Dance Revolution freak.”

The state recently held a competition for all ages using the game. “I saw people 60 years old playing it and loving it,” she said. “That’s the surprise thing—it’s great for adults too.”

CSG Resources

- West Virginia Games for Health Innovations Application [3]

Resources

- “Study uses video games to fight obesity,” USA Today [5]
- American College of Sports Medicine, West Virginia Games For Health: Implementing Dance Dance Revolution Into Public Schools [6]
- West Virginia 2010 Dance Dance Revolution Championship [7]

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