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The MOVband

## Fighting Obesity In Kids With A Cool, Affordable Gadget

**Kerry A. Dolan, Forbes Staff -**

In the battle of the Nintendo DS, the Wii and Facebook vs. children's outdoor activities, sedentary electronic pursuits are winning by a mile. This is bad news for the waistlines of our nation's youth. Nearly one in three children in the U.S. is overweight or obese – a health crisis in the making, already visible in rising rates of Type 2 diabetes among young people.

In an effort to get kids moving more, nearly 2,000 students and faculty in Chagrin Falls, Ohio walked a combined 187,000 miles in three weeks during October—part of a program begun by the school district two years ago to improve children's fitness and get them more ready to learn. The gadget that helped get students excited about taking 10,000 steps a day – as well as measured their mileage – was a new, kid-friendly wristwatch-style pedometer called the MOVband.

The MOVband uses the same technology that most more expensive pedometers do: a 3D accelerometer in a solid state chipset. But its slimmed-down features (the only data you can input are age and the time) mean that the MOVband, priced at \$20, sells for about a third of what it costs for the competing Nike+ Sportband. "Pedometers are expensive and complicated," says MOVband founder Blake Squires, citing \$100+ models from companies like Fitbit and Jawbone. "We said there's an

opportunity to create a better, simpler pedometer at an inexpensive price point."

Squires, a serial entrepreneur based in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, previously cofounded Findaway, a company that made digital audio book players called the Playaway (see story about the Playaway here). He got the idea for the MOVband from his wife, Michelle. While the couple were watching the TV show 'The Biggest Loser' one night, Michelle, a former teacher and fitness enthusiast, urged him to come up with a gadget that could make a dent in the obesity epidemic. As he and his partners did with the Playaway, Squires has outsourced production – this time to China to keep costs low. He's got a design team there as well.

Chagrin Falls schools proved to be fertile ground to pilot the MOVband, since the district had started a program called Kids Move Smart in 2009 and has put a big emphasis on getting kids to be active. It's only partly for health reasons. Books like Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and The Brain by psychiatrist John J. Ratey have shown that kids perform better academically if they're more physically active. "We're trying to change the culture here so physical fitness is part of our students' being," says Kurt Gabram, Director of Personnel and Business at Chagrin Falls Exempted Village Schools. "The

MOVband really fits with our philosophy."

To get kids juiced about the MOVband, the district created a MOVband challenge with the goal of getting each student to walk as much as 100 miles in 21 days. Students raised money from sponsors – family and friends – for their extended "walkathon." (The idea is that the money raised from such "walkathon" challenges can be used by schools to purchase the MOVband.) Faculty and staff participated, too. As students walked more miles, they got different color wrist bands to signify their progress.

Gabram, who has three daughters in Chagrin Falls schools, says his girls are still wearing the MOVbands. But the challenge is to figure out how to keep incentivizing kids to keep moving without an ongoing walkathon.

Squires, meanwhile, has been approached by a financial services company that wanted MOVbands for its 100 employees, and is in talks with a regional Coca-Cola distributor and the head of wellness at a health care institution. The opportunities to sell into the corporate world are just beginning.

It's unlikely that a pedometer with colorful watchbands will alone reverse the childhood – or adult – obesity crisis. But it's a fun step in the right direction.

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