

Kids get snowshoe fit

Schools use outdoor sport to keep children active in the winter

By J.M. Hirsch
Associated Press

LINCOLN — Consider it winter warfare in the battle against childhood obesity.

A growing number of schools in the Northeast are retooling their physical education programs to add snowshoeing in an effort to entice the videogame generation to get out, get active and make the most of the region's long, cold winters.

"I hate to say we're in a crisis, but we are," Aaron Loukes, a gym teacher at Lin-Wood Elementary School in Lincoln said recently while leading 13 first-graders on a snowshoe trek through woods near the school. "We need to get people moving."

For much of the year, that's not so easy. The Northeast is home to most of the nation's roughly 500 school snowshoe programs, many of which sprang up over the past five years as childhood obesity has become a concern. Here, winter can mean months of fitness-quashing frigid temperatures and snow — and endless hours in front of the tube.

But a loose coalition of educators, public health officials and

snowshoe manufacturers hopes to change that with curricula and grants to train and equip teachers and students to embrace this seasonal fitness opportunity.

Snowshoes certainly aren't the only winter option, but for many schools they may be the most practical. Skis can cost a fortune and require regular upkeep. Learning to ski can be tricky and time-consuming — tough to do when the typical gym class lasts 45 minutes.

Meanwhile, outfitting a class of 30 with snowshoes runs around \$1,200. Maintenance mostly is a matter of keeping them clean.

And the learning curve?

"It looks complex, but the reality is it's just walking," said Kathy Murphy, general manager of Vermont-based Tubbs Snowshoe Co., which helps schools get equipment and training. "They are able to master the sport in just minutes."

Modern snowshoes are lightweight oblong frames covered with mesh or other material and are strapped to the bottoms of regular boots or shoes. The shoe broadens the surface area of the foot, allowing the user to walk

more easily through snow.

Though snowshoes date back 6,000 years, only recently have they attracted attention as a recreational sport. Ski areas now offer lessons, rentals and trails. In 2004, some 4.7 million Americans went snowshoeing, according to the Outdoor Industry Foundation.

The benefits are impressive. Snowshoeing — even at an easy walking pace — can burn up to 1,000 calories an hour.

"The reality is students can't do PE every day," Loukes said, as he led his students up a snowy hill. "But they could do this as part of their day. Twenty minutes between classes would do it."

Schools also report advantages beyond gym class. Some science teachers have led students on wildlife walks. And in Vermont,

grants are available to buy snowshoes for teachers — an insurance industry effort to improve the health of adults in the schools.

In New Hampshire, seven elementary schools recently got \$5,000 grants to start programs. Loukes spent about a fifth of his on shoes for his students; the remainder will be used to create several miles of wooded trails on school property.

In Maine, Mia Pangburn, physical education instructor at Fort Street Elementary School in Mars Hill, tries to keep it fun for youngsters.

"We play games like tag. They love it. We play tag on cross-country skis as well. You've got to make it fun or they won't do it. You don't just walk across the field, or they'll say, 'I'm bored, I'm tired,'" Pangburn said.

Legal Notice

CITY OF PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE
BOARD OF ADJUSTMENT

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the Board of Adjustment will hold Public Hearings on the following applications on Tuesday, February 21, 2006 at 7:00 P.M. in the City Council Chambers, Municipal Complex, 1 Jinkins Avenue, Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

1) Petition of Nicholas and Elda R. Ciani, owners, for property located