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NATICK

School fitness idea goes global

June 09, 2011 | By Megan McKee, Globe Correspondent

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An exercise program started by a Natick mother has spread to Boston and other area suburbs, and may soon take root in New York City, Washington, D.C., and in temporary schools set up for students in tsunami-ravaged areas of Japan.

Formerly known as Fit Kidz, the program, which focuses on before-school exercise to get the body and the mind going, is now called BOKS, which is both an acronym for Build Our Kids' Success and a nod to its corporate partner, Canton-based Reebok International, which has invested millions in the nonprofit's efforts.

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The program was launched by Natick resident Kathleen Tullie less than two years ago at her hometown's Memorial Elementary School. Since then, BOKS has spread to 25 schools across Greater Boston, including in Dover, Needham, and Sherborn, as well as Henry Grew Elementary in Boston's Hyde Park section, Tullie said.

On Tuesday, four visitors from Japan were at Memorial Elementary School to see the program in action.

Dieter Haberl, president of Reebok Japan, said the company wants to pilot the program in temporary schools set up for children in the country's Fukushima prefecture, hopefully starting this fall. BOKS could then fan out elsewhere.

"It's such an important initiative for health that it's a natural for our country," he said, citing not only the program's physical benefits but the "element of confidence and of improved academic performance."

Michelle Moorehead, Reebok's head of brand strategy, said the athletic apparel company wants "parents, teachers, and volunteers nationwide to become advocates in their communities, and work with their local schools to set up and implement BOKS programs.

"Reebok recognizes the powerful link between physical activity and increased academic performance," she said. "We are very excited about what the future holds for BOKS."

Tullie, who recruited fellow Natick mothers Cheri Levitz and Jen Lawrence to help get the program off the ground, said she is amazed by its success.

"I'd never imagine that within 18 months we'd be in 25 schools, but it proves the tremendous need, and the power of having Reebok behind you," said Tullie. The three women are now full-time Reebok staff members.

Two factors inspired Tullie, she said: the dwindling physical education offerings in schools and “Spark,” a book by Harvard Medical School professor John J. Ratey that says exercise not only keeps you fit, but makes you smarter and saner.

Tullie said she is negotiating contracts with school officials in New York City and Washington, D.C. The East Coast expansion will be modeled on the BOKS rollout in Boston, where district officials requested that the program launch in the city’s schools most in need of a lift, she said.

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