SALT LAKE CITY, Utah (AP) -- Head lice -- those nasty nuisances for schoolchildren and parents -- were blown away in half an hour by a new blow dryer-like device its inventors call the "LouseBuster," university researchers report.

The device, which kills bugs and eggs by drying them out, might one day offer an alternative to the powerful delousing shampoos currently necessary for dealing with this widespread problem.

The LouseBuster results were reported in the November issue of the journal Pediatrics by University of Utah researchers who said the device eliminates infestations by preventing reproduction.

The study, involving 169 children in the Salt Lake area, showed the LouseBuster killed 80 percent of hatched lice and 98 percent of eggs on infested children. Enough bugs were killed to prevent remaining lice from breeding so "virtually all subjects were cured of head lice when examined one week following treatment with the LouseBuster," the scientists wrote.

"The idea would be that instead of sending kids home from school, which is a hardship on kids and the parents, a kid might be able to go to the front office and get treated" and return to class, said biologist Dale Clayton, the co-inventor and leader of the research.

The appliance works by blowing twice as much air as a typical blow dryer, he said. Treatments typically take 20 to 30 minutes, he said, although in the study they lasted 30 to 35 minutes.

Clayton studies birds and lice, but after moving to Salt Lake City, Utah from England in 1996 he found the air was too dry to keep lice alive on laboratory birds. He had to humidify rooms to keep the bugs alive.

If dry air could kill lice on birds, Clayton reasoned, it might do the same on humans. And the project became personal: His own kids had them.

Clayton found temperature was not as important as the amount of air. The air in his device is cooler than a standard hair dryer.

Larada Sciences, a University of Utah company set to market the LouseBuster to schools and doctors, believes the device could be available within two years.

"The device itself will be definitely under $2,000, and hopefully under $1,000," Larada president Randy Block said. "While that sounds like a lot, think about the average parent spending $40 or $50 for a treatment." Chemical shampoos are the most common method for treating head lice. But they often require multiple treatments and do not always kill eggs. That leaves many parents picking the bugs and eggs out by hand.

California banned the use of the chemical lindane in the treatment of head lice because of fears that it was polluting sanitation systems and causing side effects.

The research was partly supported by the National Pediculosis Association, a nonprofit group based in Needham, Massachusetts, that wants to end chemical treatment of lice.

Richard Pollack, a Harvard University researcher and an authority on lice, said shampoos don't deserve a bad reputation.

"People in this country tend to suddenly jump to the conclusion that these things are horribly toxic and dangerous. That's true -- if you're a louse," said Pollack, who said he does not get funding from chemical companies.