

# THE PLAIN DEALER

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## Student Runners are getting a leg up 'We Run This City' helps kids prepare for marathon

For most people, running 26.2 miles is out of the question. But for students in the Cleveland School District, a marathon is becoming an ever-more realistic goal.

What do they have the rest of us don't? Well, in addition to youthful energy, they have free shoes, discounted race fees and structured encouragement through a public health initiative called "We Run This City."

Since its debut three years ago, the program has helped hundreds of kids stabilize their weight and build self-esteem by enabling them to take part in races affiliated with the annual Rite Aid Cleveland Marathon. This year, the program expects to involve around 500 kids, up from 80 in 2006.

"All we want is for them to cross the finish line," said Tara Taylor, youth marathon coordinator for the Greater Cleveland YMCA, a key partner in the program. The Y, at East 22nd Street and Prospect Avenue, is opening its facilities to kids who commit to the race, which is Sunday, May 17. "The goal is for them to keep it up and do this for the rest of their lives."

Inspiration for the effort came from "Students Run L.A.," a successful, ongoing program in which inner-city kids are given equipment and training leading up to the Los Angeles Marathon. Running doesn't just keep kids in school and out of gangs, officials in California found. It also counteracts unhealthy lifestyle habits.

Figuring a similar program might work here, the Cleveland Department of Public Health combined funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the national YMCA to create a program called "Steps to a Healthier Cleveland," which organizes "We Run This City." Funding from the 2004 grant supporting the program is slated to expire this September, prompting administrators to seek a renewal or a local sponsor.



LISA DJONG / THE PLAIN DEALER

William Dixon, 15, an eighth-grader at Willow Elementary School in Cleveland, takes a fitness survey on a personal digital assistant as part of a program called "We Run This City." The survey, which covers issues such as body image and eating habits, gauges participants as they begin training for the Rite Aid Cleveland Marathon.

Cleveland also took the Los Angeles model one step further, incorporating a scientific dimension through the Center for Health Promotion Research at Case Western Reserve University. In this version of the program, which targets students in grades six through 12, all participants are monitored before and after the race to determine how much they benefit from running.

Before the race, participants submit to a screening measuring their body-mass index (a ratio between height and weight), blood pressure and cardiovascular fitness. Organizers also use surveys to document risk factors such as the quantity of vegetables they eat, tobacco use and physical activity at home.

At one time, nearly a quarter of respondents in Cleveland were found to be overweight, while large portions had or were at risk of developing hypertension (high blood

pressure). Thirty-eight percent said their neighborhoods were unsafe for outdoor activity.

While these results were unsurprising, they demonstrated that children in Cleveland lag behind their suburban peers in terms of fitness and opportunities for physical activity.

"It was really informative," said Karen Butler, the city's commissioner of health. "It validated a lot of what we already suspected."

Most students enrolled in "We Run This City" commit to completing a marathon in stages, to running 25 miles on their own plus 1.2 miles on race day. Much of their running takes place in school, during physical education classes.

Most years, students in the 1.2-mile division are accompanied on race day by running legends Anne Audain and Bill Rodgers, celebrity spokespeople for the Cleveland Marathon.

Older, fitter students have the option of running the 6.2-mile 10K, an official race within the marathon, right alongside thousands of adult participants.

"If I put my mind to it, I know I can do it," said Dominique Beck, an eighth-grader at Willow School who plans to run the 10K. "I'll be holding my stomach, but I'll just keep running regardless. I'll give it my best shot."

A select few, meanwhile, take on the 13.1-mile half-

marathon. Along with the 10K runners, these students get to sleep at the downtown YMCA the night before the race.

"Running is not something they're being forced into," Taylor said. "It's something they started on their own and want to continue."

All participants in "We Run This City" receive free Asics running shoes courtesy of Second Sole as well as medals and shirts from the Rite Aid Cleveland Marathon.

"The shoes are awesome," said Anna Candella, a seventh-grader at Denison School, who ran in the 1.2-mile division last year and will do so again this year. "I still have them."

Catching up with students after the race, program administrators have seen "We Run This City" already serving its intended purpose. Since 2006, the program has kept weight gain in check, helped reduce the prevalence of hypertension and boosted strength and physical endurance.

Just as importantly, students have reported greater self-esteem and intentions to be more active.

Barb Clint, director of community health and advocacy for the YMCA, eagerly relates the story of a student who, two years ago, was sure he couldn't run a 10K but now figures he will finish the race this year with the fastest kids in his class.

"It's been great to see that change in attitude and confidence," she said.