

Healthy Communities Program

Ohio

Cleveland Steps Program and YMCA of Greater Cleveland, OH; Empowering Youth Through Physical Activity

The Cleveland community has expressed concern about the problem of overweight among its youth and the limited opportunities for physical education that they have in schools. In response, a partnership was formed in 2006 between Cleveland Steps, the YMCA of Greater Cleveland, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, and the Rite Aid Cleveland Marathon. The partnership led to the development of the “We Run This City” Youth Marathon Program, which encourages healthy habits and exercise in Cleveland’s young people. It strives to teach students in grades 6–12 to set and achieve goals, increasing their self-confidence as well as their fitness and endurance. As part of this program, physical education teachers implement the YMCA-developed “We Run This City” physical activities curriculum with their students. Each student who commits to participating in the program earns a pair of running shoes near the end of the school year as well as incentives along the way. Media coverage and world-class marathon speakers encourage the students to accomplish their goals.

Individual teams of 15–30 students, formed at schools and community centers, are led by teachers or volunteer coaches and assisted by YMCA coaches and peer mentors. Students identified the fact that they “like to run” as the number one reason that they participated in this program in 2008. A quarter of students training to run the 10K in 2008 started the program as overweight. Student runners train with coaches and mentors over 11–14 weeks, in preparation for crossing the finish line of the actual Rite Aid Cleveland Marathon and receiving the official commemorative medal. The program has three training options: students can run the final 1.2 miles of the marathon, the 10K (6.2 miles), or the half marathon. Students do not pay any fees to participate in the program or to run in the marathon itself.

Since the program’s inception, hundreds of Cleveland area young people have “gone the distance” by training to run portions of the Rite Aid Cleveland Marathon. In its third year now, the program has been expanded to include more student runners, more school grades, and longer distances. Two hundred and eighty-three (283) student runners in grades 6–12 (representing 26 different schools) participated in the annual marathon’s events held on May 18, 2008, more than three times the number from year one. While the majority—210 students—completed the final 1.2 mile portion of the marathon as had been done in years past, nearly three times as many students than the previous year—71, up from 23 in 2007—ran the entire 10K event. In addition, two students who have been in the program since it began have worked their way up to having completed the half marathon this year. In addition to increasing fitness levels, participation in the “We Run This City” Youth Marathon Program increased these students’ sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence. Schools also learned new ways to make physical activity fun and to engage youth, parents, and the entire community in health promotion.

“This program is much more than just running. It is about the triumph of the human spirit—to do something that you can't believe you can do but want to do.”

Dawn Imler, physical education teacher,
2008 Steps Community Hero recognized for outstanding
involvement in the “We Run This City” Marathon Program,
Cleveland, Ohio