

# We Run This City: Encouraging All Students to Run, Even Those with Special Needs

by: Barbara Clint

## SUMMARY

We Run This City youth marathon program, a 12-year old collaboration between the YMCA of Greater Cleveland, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and the Rite Aid Cleveland Marathon, began in 2006 with just eight schools and 81 runners. It now averages between 35 to 40 school and 550-650 runners crossing the finish line each May. While the program emphasizes healthy eating and regular physical activity, it is equally about our youth runner's resilience skills, as our tag line suggests: "Crossing the finish line is just the beginning."



## CHALLENGE

Running, like any physical activity, is often perceived to be for persons who are "naturally athletic" or already in shape. The We Run This City program of the YMCA of Greater Cleveland works to dispel this image of running. This 12-year old, school-based program forms teams at 35-40 Cleveland Metropolitan School District schools each year. Team coaches, the majority of whom are Physical Education Teachers, are encouraged to recruit students who may be

overweight or obese and who have not been involved in sports or athletics. In fact, athletes from other sports cannot comprise more than 10% of their team. For youth with special needs, including those having mental and emotional challenges, exclusion from sports and many other activities at school is commonplace due to the additional staff resources required to ensure their safety and success, increasing program costs.

## YOUR INVOLVEMENT IS KEY

To safely and successfully guide over 500 student runners to the finish line of the Rite Aid Cleveland Marathon requires not only the work of the program's staff but also the dedicated engagement of over 200 program volunteers. Volunteer opportunities range from serving as race pacers who actually run with WRTC students in either the Rite Aid Marathon or one of eight to ten practice races offered to our runners or assisting with the program's massive logistical and administrative tasks.

*"Running...has produced incredible results for our kids. It gets them moving in positive ways, which leads to greater self-regulation. They feel connected to a group, which is positive for their social emotional development."*

*- Habeebah Grimes, Positive Education Program*

## Contact

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## SOLUTION

In early 2015, staff from the Positive Education Program (PEP) in Cleveland, Ohio met with We Run This City staff to explore enrolling eight students from one of their schools operated in cooperation with the Cleveland Metropolitan School District to educate severely emotionally and mentally challenged young people, including those on the severe end of the autism scale. Modifications were made to the training materials and schedule to ensure that all PEP runners would safely cross the finish line and six of them stuck with the program and did so. Their smiles going through the finish line gate were unforgettable. In 2016, PEP enrolled twenty students, fifteen completed their 1.2 mile run.

## RESULTS

The collaboration between the Y's We Run This City program and the Positive Education Program is demonstrating that extremely mentally and emotionally challenged students can successfully participate in a main stream physical activity program and greatly benefit from doing so. PEP staff report improved overall behavior among the 21 participants who successfully participated in WRTC, deep pride in their accomplishment and a desire to continue to push themselves. These findings are consistent with those of the WRTC student runner population in total. The fact that PEP runners are surrounded by a field of over 15,000 runners of all ages and backgrounds provides normalcy to the PEP student runners who often experience being "different" and on the outside looking in. WRTC looks forward to growing this modest initiative with PEP in the future.

## SUSTAINING SUCCESS

We Run This City is a year-round program with per student costs of \$ 500. With two full-time and three part-time staff, program costs average \$ 350,000/ year. Up to now, WRTC has been predominantly grant supported, a situation which program staff recognize is unsustainable. With the addition of student runners from the Positive Education Program, the first case management, earned income possibility is on the horizon. Program staff are also aggressively exploring corporate sponsorship prospects, launching peer-to-peer social media fundraising campaigns and planning a major annual special event fundraiser. Finally, all participating schools and programs raise funds for the program as well.