

Students Run Philly Style: Building a Culture of Success

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Summary

Students Run Philly Style, a program of the National Nursing Centers Consortium (NNCC), is the only mentoring program in Philadelphia that helps youth between the ages 12 and 18 succeed in life through distance running. The program connects students with strong adult mentors who spend 7-9 hours per week with program participants and help them accomplish goals beyond their dreams, including the completion of the Philadelphia Marathon. Students Run Philly Style is an evidence-based replication program, modeled after a program in Los Angeles called Students Run L.A. Students Run Philly Style has grown rapidly, serving over 2,000 youths in six years.

In a city with prevalent childhood obesity, high school dropout, and youth violence, Students Run Philly Style has shown impressive outcomes in students, such as decreased body mass index, increased cardiovascular health and flexibility, and improved self-esteem and performance in school. The program takes a multifaceted

and innovative approach by introducing its participants into a “marathon culture,” where emphasis is placed on completion and not on competition. Mentors encourage participants to translate the values they gain through running into success in their everyday lives.

Introduction: Hung’s Story

Hung, a 17-year-old Philadelphia high school student, has seen more of the world than many adults. Born in Hong Kong, he moved to the United States at the age of 5. Growing up, he recognized the advantages of living in a city—the liveliness, diversity, and ability to travel easily—but he also saw how simple it was for his peers to get into trouble, and witnessed violence on a regular basis.

Through Hung’s elementary and middle school years, he achieved good grades but didn’t spend much time outside and was not considered athletic by his peers or himself. During his sophomore year of high school, a friend persuaded him to join a Students Run Philly Style team. He thought a 2-mile run would be easy; midway through, he found himself gasping for air and desperately wanting to stop. Looking to his side, he found the inspiration he needed to keep going.

“I saw that my teammate had not passed me, but continued to jog at my pace telling me not to give up. Because of her, I made it through the whole practice and eventually gained a passion for running. It was only two

miles, but it showed me how wonderful this program could be," he says. And amidst the violence that so regularly surrounded him, Hung found the strength to avoid it. "The decision was hard because I had to stop hanging out with some of my friends. By being part of Students Run Philly Style, I hope I can help others with that choice," he says.

Allison Delso, one of Hung's mentors on his Kensington-based team, described him as a source of inspiration and motivation for the team. "For Hung, it wasn't about being the fastest; actually, it took us a while to find out that he was a skilled runner, because his focus was on the *team* aspect—he wanted to help kids who were struggling instead of showing off his speed," Allison says.

With his mentors' encouragement, Hung also participated with two of his teammates in an SAT preparatory class offered to selected Students Run Philly Style high school juniors at no cost. Allison says that spending time with like-minded, academically focused students was an important opportunity for the students on her team. "The SAT program offered our students a feeling of achievement—they understood 'I'm going to this class because someone recognized that I have potential,' where, in our school, potential doesn't always mean much," Allison says. "And that's what Students Run Philly Style is about—surrounding yourself with people who have goals and want to improve themselves.

Unfortunately, that mindset is not as prevalent as we

might hope."

Hung is one of more than 2,000 students who has enrolled in Students Run Philly Style since its inception six years ago, and was recently selected as one of two students to serve as a summer intern for the program. He hopes to use the internship to recruit more participants so they can find the same values—commitment, companionship, and dedication—that he did.

According to Hung, "running a marathon does not require much talent or skill, only practice. Even if it's a hot afternoon or just a bad day, we still continue to dig deep with the motivation we get from each other. We all encourage one another to keep pushing ourselves to finish."

The Problem: The Untapped Potential of Philadelphia's Youth

In Philadelphia, a disproportionately high number of youth are underserved, under-resourced, and unaware of their capacity for success. Additionally, according to the 2006 Community Health Database's Household Health Survey (Pennsylvania Health Management Corporation 2006), Philadelphia is home to neighborhoods with some of the highest rates of poverty, obesity, heart disease, violent crime, and school dropout in the state. Philadelphia's youth need access to resources that can help fulfill their needs in three areas:

Health

In Philadelphia, an astounding 46 percent of children from the Students Run Philly Style target area are obese or at risk of obesity (Pennsylvania Health Management Corporation 2006), and according to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, a study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (2007), 15.2 percent of youths are at or above the 95th percentile for body mass index (BMI) by age and gender—significantly higher than the national average. Young Philadelphians also outrank their peers by reporting that almost 51 percent watch three or more hours of television per average school day while 76 percent report not attending physical education classes on a daily basis.

Violence

According to the CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 45 percent of Philadelphia youths reported having been in a physical fight in the previous year, 10 percent higher than the national average. Just under 10 percent reported that they had skipped school at least once in the previous 30 days because of feeling unsafe at school or en route to school. While violent crime has decreased slightly in recent years, the numbers, especially for youth, are still shockingly high. Between January 1 and May 18, 2007, there were 648 shootings in Philadelphia. More than half of the victims were less than 26 years old, and 72 of the

victims were 17 or younger. On average, one Philadelphia youth was shot every two days during this time period (Philadelphia Shootings 2007).

School Performance/Attendance

Between 2006 and 2008, 21 percent of Philadelphians over 25 years of age were high school dropouts (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). And in the 2005-2006 school year, only 57.4 percent of youths graduated from high school in four years. For that same class of students, the combined SAT math and reading score, which is a good indicator of preparedness for college, fell to its lowest point in a decade, dropping 58 points from the 1996-97 school year (Philadelphia Safe and Sound 2007).

The Solution: Students Run Philly Style

Students Run Philly Style, a program of the National Nursing Centers Consortium (NNCC) and the only program of its kind in Philadelphia, has been serving at-risk and underserved youths from across the city for six years. The program's mission is to pair teams of youths with dependable adult mentors who meet three to four days per week in pursuit of a common goal: the completion of a marathon. Built on a mentorship model that emphasizes the translation of running skills to life skills, Students Run Philly Style helps youths develop positive relationships with adult mentors, learn to make safe choices, set and achieve attainable goals, and live a

healthy lifestyle. In its six years, the program has served more than 2,000 students and has shown consistently outstanding outcomes, such as decreased BMI, increased self-esteem, and improved concentration in school as determined by self-report via pre- and post-season surveys.

Over the course of each season, students and mentors participate in eight public road races, including the Independence Blue Cross Broad Street Run and the Philadelphia Marathon. Additionally, participants have no-cost access to SAT preparation classes; college visitation days; summer internships; a three-day, overnight leadership summit in Bucks County; and a summer cross-training clinic series. Three weeks after students and running leaders participate in the Philadelphia Marathon, all participants come together with their families for a dinner and awards ceremony. Students Run Philly Style gives each active participant a trophy and certificate of achievement as tangible symbols of their accomplishments. Every step of the way, the youths have the constant support of their teammates and mentors.

Students Run Philly Style is led by Program Director Heather McDanel. A runner and public health advocate, McDanel oversees the implementation of the program at all levels and ensures the financial stability of its operations. To ensure program success, she has built and maintains many important relationships with key stakeholders (community members, schools, running

clubs, corporate sponsors, and grantors).

Students Run Philly Style uses a group-mentoring model, and operates by recruiting and training mentors, many of whom are teachers, who share the program's goal of improving the lives of students in their community. After enrolling in the program, attending a comprehensive day-long training event, and acquiring a criminal background check and child abuse clearance, mentors begin the process of recruiting students. The mentors recruit students based not on athletic prowess, but on the youths' capacity to benefit from a positive mentorship relationship. The program's mentorship philosophy values long-term periods of engagement and high frequency of contact with youths. Unlike a traditional track or cross-country model, mentors complete the program's suite of activities alongside their student participants. After program completion, mentors frequently stay in contact with their students through the winter months and rejoin them as a team when the program recommences in the spring. With at least seven hours of contact per week for 37 weeks, mentors get adequate time in the first year of the program to develop a relationship with their team members and pique their interest in returning to the program in the following year.

Students Run Philly Style is based on the concept that the same skills that help students succeed at long-distance running will help them succeed in life. As Hung put it,

distance running does not require natural talent, but dedication and persistence. The emphasis on completion instead of competition means that each student who has the courage to step up to the starting line is a winner. Once a student—who may never have run more than a block before joining Students Run Philly Style—completes a 5-, 13-, or 26-mile race, getting a better grade in history class seems much more attainable

Students Run Philly Style is able to offer this suite of services at a low cost per participant with the help of many community partnerships. Both the School District of Philadelphia and the City of Philadelphia have embraced the program warmly. The School District, particularly the Office of Health, Safety, and Physical Education, has helped encourage teachers to get involved, and the City of Philadelphia has offered support in countless ways, including naming Students Run Philly Style the official charity of the Philadelphia Marathon. The program also enjoys partnerships with the philanthropic, corporate, and faith-based communities in Philadelphia, who generously give their time and talent to support the program's mission.

How Students Run Philly Style Is Innovative

First, Students Run Philly Style takes an activity that is non-traditional for Philadelphia neighborhoods—long-distance running—and introduces it to program

participants in a way that is all-inclusive. According to Students Run Philly Style's Assistant Director Mali Petherbridge, the "marathon culture" has undergone changes that lend the sport to the program's mission.

"Marathon running has developed into a sport that welcomes people of all levels. It used to be something you only did if you were a high-level, competitive runner, but now it's normal to have someone completing a 6-minute mile and a 15-minute mile in the same race. If you try your hardest, you can do it; not all sports are that inclusive," Petherbridge says. This marathon culture, which she describes as one of mutual respect and support, is not only an extremely nurturing environment in which youths can pursue success, but is also a large part of what makes this program innovative.

Second, Students Run Philly Style has adjusted the mentor-student relationship to give students a feeling of ownership in the program. Going above and beyond the normal mentor model, mentors and students work side by side on a shared goal, and many times are able to literally cross finish lines together. While an implicit part of mentoring is taking on someone else's goals as your own, this program levels that playing field; the mentor doesn't choose to take ownership of the youths' goal, but instead pursues the goal alongside those he or she mentors. The result is a higher level of empowerment and ownership than exists in a traditional mentorship model.

“Our kids feel like they are part of a movement that is bigger than them, but that is also influenced by them—they contribute to it and they have a voice,” Petherbridge says. That feeling of a larger culture keeps youths involved by letting them know they belong to something valuable. Petherbridge has been instrumental in the implementation of culture-building traditions, such as the Students Run Philly Style cheer that all participants do before races, and the program’s version of merit badges, which display one of the three program values—Courage, Effort, Respect—and are awarded to one student per team per month who exemplifies those traits. The result of these traditions is cohesion among the students that would not otherwise exist.

“Our students have very different backgrounds, come from distinct neighborhoods and have every range of athletic ability, but they come to see each other as teammates and equals. There is mutual respect because of a common goal and shared set of experiences,” Petherbridge says.

Finally, the program engages youths on multiple fronts. Students are often drawn to the program when they learn that participants are provided with running gear (including two pairs of running shoes) and free registration to all racing events. While they may initially join for the tangible incentives, once they start running with their teams, they stay involved for the relationships and the desire to achieve their goals. As participants, they gain access to

academic, athletic, and leadership-development activities: free opportunities such as the SAT preparation class, summer internships, and college visitation days help prepare students to succeed after high school; weekly practices, races, and the summer clinic series help students to make healthy choices that have consistently helped lower BMI; and the regimented training program paired with regular access to a mentor helps students learn to make responsible choices. All the while, youths see the positive physical and health-related changes that come with their new, active lifestyle. The last and possibly most significant thing program participants gain is the establishment of a consistent, mutually beneficial relationship with a positive adult mentor.

Outcomes of Students Run Philly Style

Students Run Philly Style has shown statistically significant positive outcomes that include reduced BMI, increased focus at school, increased enjoyment of school, and improved cardiovascular fitness, flexibility, and self-esteem. Data from the program's 2009 season showed a statistically significant change in ten out of thirteen categories, including "leading a healthy lifestyle" and a sense of "productivity in daily life." The data also reflected positive academic changes, with the percentage of students achieving mostly A's increasing from 23 percent to 32 percent, and the percentage of those earning mostly A's, mostly A's and B's, and mostly B's increasing

from 76 percent to 85 percent. Some of the most telling measures are the centrality of running to one's life, integrated regulation (running because one wants to do it), and commitment, all of which showed large or medium differences in the mean score. These results suggest that the students develop habits that will continue after they leave the program.

According to Petherbridge, Students Run Philly Style also has many qualitative indicators that show increased depth and long-term change. For example, many students who graduate from the program and go on to college tell staff they continue to run while at school, and many students and parents thank the program for improving the health of entire families. In the interest of learning more about the scope of change the program can effect, the staff has initiated a partnership with Drexel University's physical therapy department to study its reach into families and the community as a whole.

Social Return on Investment

Students Run Philly Style provides one multifaceted solution to a number of costly and preventable problems that control Philadelphians every day. Childhood obesity is an unacceptably prevalent condition correlated closely with chronic diseases that result in a heavy economic burden for Pennsylvania. According to a study by the Milken Institute (2007), Pennsylvania spent \$64.1 billion in 2003 on treatment costs and lost productivity resulting

from chronic conditions. Another huge economic drain on Philadelphia is the economic stimulation that is lost when students drop out before earning a diploma. In 2008, an estimated 16,400 students in Philadelphia dropped out; simply cutting that number in half would have generated an estimated \$125 million increase in combined income as well as an \$18 million increase in tax revenue annually (Alliance for Excellent Education 2010). By adjusting these numbers to reflect the more than 600 students who enrolled in Students Run Philly Style in 2010, the program's social return on investment is as follows:

**Costs saved by reduction of chronic disease +
Increase in earnings +
Increase in tax revenue = Annual Return on
Investment**

\$216,900 + \$9,137,500 + \$1,315,800 = \$10,670,200

Sustainability

Students Run Philly Style is an evidence-based replication of a similar program in Los Angeles with a 20-year history: Students Run L.A. (SRLA). As a replication program, Students Run Philly Style builds upon SRLA's long history of success, incorporating a group mentorship model that uses non-traditional means to reach young people.

Students Run Philly Style was the first entity throughout the country to utilize "Up and Running," the SRLA toolkit specifically for the purpose of replication.

When Students Run Philly Style began in 2005, six teams participated with a total of 50 students and 15 mentors. Each year, the program has seen exponential growth in enrollment; in the 2010 season, more than 650 students and 200 mentors have enrolled as part of more than 50 teams. Additionally, 80 percent of mentors return each year.

Students Run Philly Style has made great strides to improve its sustainability. With outcomes that validate the program's ability to successfully pursue its mission, Students Run Philly Style has diversified its funding sources, and also taken a huge step forward by putting on its first successful public road race: Generation Run. With over 1,500 attendees at the inaugural event in April 2010, the program was able to gain increase its visibility in the community.

Replication

As a replication itself, Students Run Philly Style was built from the ground up with the culture of Philadelphia in mind. "One of our biggest strengths is the culture we've created in Philadelphia. We were equipped with the core components, but to be successful, the program really should be shaped by the local community," says McDanel. The emphasis on developing a uniquely Philadelphian program has been a key component of success.

Susan Sherman, president of the Independence

Foundation, is the individual responsible for finding SRLA and bringing it to Philadelphia. Once the staff here had the replication toolkit in hand, they undertook the mission of boiling the program down to the essential elements and shaping it around this city's unique needs. Having successfully done this, Students Run Philly Style is well poised to lead program replication.

"As a proud supporter of Students Run Philly Style since its inception, I have seen firsthand the innovation needed to take a concept born on the West Coast and tailor it to fit Philadelphia's unique culture and climate. I am confident in the staff's ability to take the lessons learned and apply them in any city across the country," Sherman says.

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