



Championship Training Academy

» By: Chris Palmquist

Reducing childhood obesity is one of the epic battles of our era. Fortunately, more and more volunteers, leaders and organizations are getting involved in the fight. Simple ideas, excellent organization and enthusiasm are making a difference in the lives of Chicago children.

Chicago Run is one such organization. Founded in 2007, Chicago Run's vision is to enhance the health and well-being of every child in Chicago through running. Chicago Run has partnered with Chicago Public Schools to implement running programs in 55 elementary schools serving 13,600 students in high-need communities throughout the city. With the reinstatement of recess in CPS, Chicago Run is one of the programs approved to help schools make the most of that active time.

"The idea of running is so simple and cost effective – a wonderful way to develop a foundation of fitness," says Alicia Gonzalez, executive director of Chicago Run.

Chicago Run's program for elementary school kids is based on 15 minute runs or running activities completed 3-5 days each week during recess or lunch. As the kids run, they track their miles on a database and earn rewards such as hats, t-shirts, bracelets and water bottles as individuals and together as a school. Chicago Run provides site coordinators with outdoor running plans and indoor activities that incorporate learning about famous Chicago landmarks found on the Chicago Marathon course. Lesson plans also include running games, strength exercises and indoor activities for rainy days. Sessions conclude with a

celebration for the kids, leaders and families.

"I like doing Chicago Run because it keeps me healthy and active. I think running is awesome and I love doing exercises," says Hector, a 6th grader.

Middle school students participate in a program called Chicago Running Mates. They gather three times a week after school for an hour with students from other schools to prepare to run a 5K or 8K race. Along the journey, they learn to appreciate students from other schools and neighborhoods, practice teamwork and learn perseverance. They also learn how to fuel their training with good nutrition and participate in team building activities during every session.

All services from Chicago Run are free. Chicago Run provides every school with a program liaison and pays a stipend to the school's site coordinator. The program is inclusive and as such is designed so everyone can participate. The kids tend to perform better in class and feel more alert after a little exercise. Bullying incidents decrease. Social camaraderie is enhanced. The program sends them well on their way to developing lifelong habits of healthiness. Most importantly, these kids start to define themselves as runners and athletes.

"By stepping one foot in front of another, kids are changing their lives," Gonzalez says.

If you would like to bring a Chicago Run program to your school, go to chicagorun.org for more information or email info@chicagorun.org.