

Extra News

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Combating Childhood Obesityby **Silvana Tabares**

Latino children in Chicago are facing staggering rates of obesity. Genetics and socioeconomics are two contributing factors that increase a child's risk of becoming overweight. However, there are resources available to bring about change in food and fitness. More programs are being developed in schools and organizations as well as in local churches to empower children and their parents to get involve and change the lack of physical activity.

Chicago Run is among those resources working toward fighting childhood obesity in underserved communities. In the spring of 2008, the nonprofit organization launched Chicago Runners, a running program helping schoolchildren improve their health habits, fitness and self-esteem. The program has served 2,350 elementary school students with a daily running/walking program. Of the children in the program, 45 percent are Latino and 85 percent come from low-income households. This fall, the organization is expanding the program to serve 4,000 elementary students in 18 schools.

"If you don't see [a culture] that is promoting physical fitness, unless you have some drive to be active, you know it's not going to happen," said Alicia González, executive director for Chicago Run. "A lot of teachers and coaches are encouraging students to be active in school."

Approximately 150 teachers concerned about childhood obesity are involved in the Chicago Runners program, González said.

A site coordinator, who is assigned to each school and recruits teachers to participate, designates an indoor and outdoor running course and supervises the runs. Since the program was initiated, elementary school children have run more than 60,000 miles. The child's mileage is logged into a database; children are awarded incentives for reaching their goals. One of the leading schools in miles run is Walsh Elementary School in Pilsen. About 440 runners have run more than 13,000 miles.

As a result of the Chicago Runners program, González said the children are more focused and energetic in the classroom after a session of running. According to Chicago Run, the children are building health habits at an early age and will more likely stay physically active throughout their lives because they started at a young age.

González, who grew up in Pilsen and México, is an avid runner. Her parents encouraged her to be physically active at an early age. She has been running for six years and has completed five marathons since 2004. She said statistics show that children are not getting an hour a day of moderate exercising; instead they spend four hours in front of a TV or computer.

"Parents should really be encouraged to minimizing [it] and encourage moderate exercising," González said.

The Chicago Runners program is a one-year contract with the option to renew. The program is free for schools and no equipment is required. Site coordinators receive a stipend and free running gear from Chicago Run to manage the program. They are also asked to attend a curriculum of professional development activities related to physical fitness and exercise.

Some of the elementary schools that participate in the program are Columbia Explorers Academy, Rosario Castellanos, Namaste Charter School and Avondale.

To join the program or for more information visit [@link href='http://www.chicagorun.org'>www.chicagorun.org](http://www.chicagorun.org).