

# SOLE TRAIN



# Sole Train

Boston Runs Together

## 2020-2021 REPORT

# Uplifting Youth Amidst the Pandemic

Today's youth have been especially hard-hit by the effects of COVID-19. Public health restrictions have made daily life, as well as learning, more than a normal challenge. Recent studies show an alarming percentage of children and adolescents experiencing "a global-wide mental health crisis" in which depression and anxiety symptoms have doubled compared to pre-pandemic times.<sup>1</sup> It is commonly acknowledged that "the challenges that children and teens normally face have been amplified by isolation and distancing during the pandemic."<sup>2</sup>

Now, more than ever, students need a safe space to come together to deal with the important issues they face, with support to discuss their points of view, frustrations, solutions, and concerns about the world around them. They also need creative outlets, mentors, role models, and supports to maintain physical fitness and healthy lifestyles.

As a result of COVID-19, Sole Train was forced to deliver the last of its 2019-2020 program online. As pandemic uncertainties continued into the Fall of 2020, Boston Public Schools were contending with conflicting pressures from teachers, parents, students, and others. At both district and site levels, decisions were made and changed multiple times about where and how lessons would be delivered. Given the environment, the Sole Train team was unsure of what to do and how to maintain virtual programming. Sole Train was determined to figure out a way to push through this major challenge.

**Sole Train** is a community-building and mentoring program that uses running as a vehicle for setting and achieving seemingly impossible goals.

Sole Train connects students with adult volunteers in schools across Boston (i.e., **Young Soles**, grades 4–12 with **Old Soles**, 50 percent of whom are school staff).

Typically, Sole Train sites practice twice weekly during the school year and come together for community-building events and races. The culminating goal each year is Boston's Run to Remember, a five-mile run or half marathon.



*Sole Train determined:*  
**We are HERE! We are VIRTUAL!**

<sup>1</sup> McCoy, H. (2021, August 9). COVID-19: Depression and anxiety symptoms have doubled in youth, help needed, warn UCalgary clinical psychologists. University of Calgary. <https://arts.ucalgary.ca/news/covid-19-depression-and-anxiety-symptoms-have-doubled-youth-help-needed-warn-ucalgary-clinical>

<sup>2</sup> UC Davis Health. (2021, April 8). Even before COVID-19 pandemic, youth suicide already at record high. UC Davis Health Newsroom. <https://health.ucdavis.edu/health-news/newsroom/even-before-covid-19-pandemic-youth-suicide-already-at-record-high/2021/04>

# More than 100 Young Soles and a comparable number of Old Soles stayed involved virtually during this stressful time.

Given the challenges Young Soles faced this year, staff were extremely proud of the numbers of participants and levels of ongoing engagement. Staff recognized that both young people and adults needed a space to escape the restrictive bubbles imposed on them by the pandemic, to exercise, reduce stress, connect, and talk about their week with those they came to trust.

## RESILIENCE WINS THE DAY IN HARD TIMES

To ensure that physical health and exercise remained central, Sole Train got creative. Activities were re-designed for in-home practice. Community members were asked to lead yoga, Zumba, and circuit training. Twice-weekly, one-hour, community practices were open to all Young Soles and Old Soles. On off-days, some school sites added their own virtual programming, drawing on the resources provided by Sole Train.

Relationship-building and community activities flourished. Old Sole volunteers maintained their consistent, mentoring presence, even in such challenging times.

As vaccines became available and restrictions were lifted, six school sites conducted yearend events outdoors. Three other sites chose to engage in virtual celebrations.



We are just helping young people see how incredible they are."

-Sole Train Staff



- Youth appreciate the safe space and opportunity to have fun
- Through virtual programming, youth were able to connect with others across Sole Train sites
- Youth motivated each other physically and stayed fit
- Youth were supported by mentors and formed meaningful relationships



Sole Train provides a space for youth and adults to run side by side, leveling the playing field in a way that roles and expectations are less hierarchical than in a school setting. Participants value the opportunity to establish supportive relationships beyond the norm.

# Why Develop Social-Emotional Competencies

Research shows that Youth with stronger SEL are more likely to make meaningful contributions to society & gain:

**POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

**ACADEMIC & CAREER SUCCESS**

**BETTER PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH**

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is an integral part of individual human development. It is equally important at the systems level, in advancing educational equity and excellence through authentic partnerships between schools, families and communities.<sup>1</sup>

A meta-analysis of over 200 programs, covering three decades of research, found that programs focused to develop social and emotional well-being had lasting, positive effects. Students showed decreased emotional distress, such as anxiety and depression, improved social and emotional skills (e.g., self-awareness, self-management, etc.), improved attitudes about self, others, and about

school (including higher academic motivation, stronger bonding with teachers), better classroom behavior (e.g., following classroom rules), decreased classroom misbehavior and aggression, and improved academic performance (e.g., standardized achievement test scores).<sup>2</sup>

An SEL program provides well-rounded instruction and continuous evaluation.

For the past four years, Sole Train has been using the SEED Impact Competency Ladders™ to assess and accelerate SEL growth for middle school participants resulting in actionable findings.

## Historical Highlights

**9%**

**2017-2018**  
Increase  
in SEL  
Competenciess

**14%**

**2018-2019**  
Increase  
in SEL  
Competenciess

**2019-2021**

Staff were able to provide a breadth of qualitative feedback in a year when the pandemic prohibited engaging school staff to collect a depth of quantitative statistics.

<sup>1</sup> CASEL.org. 2020. What Is SEL?. [online] Available at: <<https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>> [Accessed 20 October].

<sup>2</sup> Durlak, J., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions (PDF). Child Development, 82(1), 405-432.





Students of color often lack access to running and its many benefits. Sole Train provides access to safe and supportive running communities where youth gain the physical benefits of movement and improve their SEL skills.

## In Their Words: Young Soles



When I exercise, I am in a better mood. Sole Train helped with that. It also felt cool to work-out and talk with people I didn't know. I feel more comfortable talking with strangers now."

-Stephanie, Age 12, 1st year with Sole Train



I liked hanging out with nice kids from other grades, and the coach is nice, too. Being more social with Sole Train made me more patient with my younger sister at home, too."

-Sandra, Age 14, 1st year with Sole Train



Running helps me focus."

-Belinda, Age 14, 2nd year with Sole Train



It was pretty boring staying inside all day. I liked how I could talk to people and tell jokes. Even in bad weather you could still have a Sole Train practice."

-Pablo, Age 14, 1st year with Sole Train



You have been my rock ever since I joined Sole Train. I have much more energy than before. Thank you for doing this in these tough times."

-Simone, Age 15, 1st year with Sole Train



## In Their Words: Old Soles



Sole Train has become an institution—some of our students remain connected even as they transition to high school. It's a pleasure to watch Young Soles grow and take on leadership roles.”

*–Jess, Site Coordinator, McCormack Middle School*



It was a little more difficult to keep the enthusiasm going when we were remote. It was helpful for the Young Soles to have a remote space to come to every week. We had an unbelievable group over the years and I plan to continue on with it in the future.”

*–Matthew, Site Coordinator, McCormack Middle School*



What I most appreciate is the consistency of Young Soles having a weekly space to move their bodies, engage in positive social interactions, and have grown-ups rooting for them and building trust.”

*–Darcy, Site Coordinator, Orchard Gardens*



It was gratifying to see them excited over the games and workouts. Some students opened up and felt comfortable interacting with students from different grades. I appreciated being able to build trusting relationships with students I previously thought I could not reach in this way.”

*–Isabelle, Site Coordinator, Mother Caroline*



“Sole Train is my family. Sole Train is my love.”

*–Anita, Site Coordinator, Rafael Hernandez School*