Sole Train
Boston Runs Together
2020-2021 REPORT
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.¹ It is commonly acknowledged that “the challenges that children and teens normally face have been amplified by isolation and distancing during the pandemic.”²

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 determined:

We are HERE! We are VIRTUAL!


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.

- 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.¹

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).²

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.

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**Historical Highlights**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Increase in SEL Competencies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2019-2021</td>
<td>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.</td>
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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