

Organizing a School Fun Run



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Done right, a jogathon can build school spirit while also earning some big bucks.

by Christy Forhan
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It takes a special event to get 400 children eagerly jogging around a track for 10, 15, or even 20 laps. If that event brings out dozens of parent volunteers at one time and raises funds while also raising school spirit and improving physical fitness, even better.

“A successful fun run accomplishes all the things a PTO tries to create all year. It builds school spirit, increases participation, raises school pride, and is a fabulous, fun whole-school event,” says Stacey Brickman, who has organized several elementary and middle school fun runs in West Bloomfield, Mich. “We would have a fun run even if it didn’t raise money because it is a blast.”

Whether it’s being called a fun run, fund run, walkathon, or jogathon, the basic concept is the same. Students solicit pledges of financial support from friends, relatives, and neighbors. Then they participate in a monitored running event. After the run, students collect donations based on their pledges and their personal performance in the run. Supporters can donate per lap or simply make a flat donation to the PTO.

After the run, students get prizes depending on their performance or level of financial support. The concept is no different from walkathons organized to raise money for national causes. It’s not a new idea, but it is becoming an increasingly popular fundraiser for parent groups.

One reason fun runs are popular is that they promote physical fitness. The PE teacher can partner with the PTO to prepare students for the event by teaching the importance of warm-up exercises, how to pace themselves as they run, and proper running technique.

Also, a fun run is typically a whole-school project, so every student participates regardless of financial commitment. The anticipation and excitement can spread through the whole school, and classrooms can develop camaraderie when they view themselves as a team. Some schools schedule their run near the beginning of the year as a welcome-back event. Others hold it in spring as a culminating celebration for a year of hard work.

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Fun runs can raise a lot of money. Brickman's events have raised \$39,000 at the 500-student Doherty Elementary and \$31,000, including corporate sponsorships, at the 800-student Orchard Lake Middle School in West Bloomfield, an upscale suburb of Detroit. The disadvantage is that fun runs require a lot of volunteer support. Typically, you'll need eight organizing volunteers and as many as 30 on the day of the run for a big-dollar event. In addition, if the concept is new in your area, you'll need to allow time to market your event so that everyone understands the approach, the benefits, and how to get involved. That level of marketing takes much more time than simply distributing catalogs and order forms to the kids for a typical sales fundraiser.

Keys for Success

Planning a fun run is like planning any major PTO event. Although it's less complicated than a silent auction, a fun run still requires careful advance planning and strong leadership to ensure that the event meets its goals.

Start as much as three months in advance to make your parents, school staff, and students aware of the event. If this is the first time you've done a major "-athon" sponsorship fundraiser, you'll need to educate your parent community. Most folks intuitively understand the concept of a catalog-based sales fundraiser: They buy something, your group gets a cut of the proceeds. But now you're asking people to give money to your organization and get nothing tangible in return. Why should they? What good will come from the money raised? How will it benefit the school and their child? The answers to these questions should be evident in anything you send home to families.

Your school staff also needs to be educated about the fun run so that they will be supportive of the event. Support from your principal is absolutely essential, too. Usually a fun run is held during the school day, so teachers and other staff members must see this as an exciting, worthwhile schoolwide event rather than as an irritating disruption to their already full day. Early on, communicate clearly with teachers about their role and show them how the proceeds will benefit the school and their classrooms. You also should reassure the teachers that the PTO will handle all the details.

The students are the easiest group to get on board. Most kids are excited about the opportunity to have a special event in the middle of the school day. Plus, the chance to win prizes and awards can stir their enthusiasm. But don't take their support for granted. You still need to publicize the event well in advance. One good technique is to set up a bulletin board about the fun run in a well-trafficked location in the school. Include pictures of the prizes and awards. This crowd is not as concerned with how the profits will ultimately be spent, but they might get excited if they see there's a chance to win an iPod.

Communication is key for bringing your school community together on this important project. To promote the event, use the school newsletter, email broadcasts, daily public address announcements, flyers, your PTO's website, even street signs. If everyone understands the basic concept and purpose of the fun run, they will be raring to go when the pledge sheets are finally distributed.

Establish a Strong Team

Like any big project, the fun run needs a well-organized committee working with a strong leader. This should be treated as a top priority for your PTO, not some little add-on to your event calendar. Ideally, your fun run chair is a member who has been around for a while, knows the ins and outs of your school, and has coordinated some other event for your group. But even if that super-volunteer doesn't exist in your PTO, you can still have a great fun run. Just be sure to design your event to fit the number of volunteers you can realistically recruit. It's better to keep your fun run simple than to stretch it into an overly ambitious family carnival juggled by a few overstressed volunteers.

Break the workload into subcommittees. The tasks to plan a basic fun run are fairly predictable, so you can easily delegate specific work to various volunteers. You don't need dozens of people on each subcommittee; one or two volunteers can handle each area. By distributing the work in this way, you can reassure volunteers that they won't be stuck with an unexpected monumental load. Typical subcommittees include pledge management, walk planning, snacks, T-shirts, prizes, and publicity.

In addition to the planning team, you'll need lots of volunteers to help on the day of the run itself. A standard fun run will need volunteers to assist with warm-up, hand out lap counters, tally lap counters, and hand out snacks to students after the run. Depending on the size of your school, you'll benefit from 30 or more people on-site that day. Don't panic—working for an hour or two is a great way for parents to get involved without a long-term commitment. Get the plea out early; you might be pleasantly surprised by how many parents agree to help out.

Follow a Systematic Plan

So far, the fun run sounds like a complicated project. You have to start months in advance, set up a bunch of subcommittees, recruit dozens of volunteers, bend over backward to explain the event, solicit support from your community, and then hope for beautiful weather on the day of the run. That's nearly enough stress to scare anyone away from the idea. But you can learn from other PTOs that have experience. There are many ways to personalize a fun run, but there's a systematic methodology for running a basic event. And even a simple fun run can be a financial success that also builds school spirit, gets parents involved, and promotes healthy habits.

The key is not to overcomplicate the event, especially if it's your first fun run. Focus on doing the basics well. Add extras only if you have the volunteer resources and the time. For example, you might be tempted to invite local celebrities to join your students on the track. Nice idea. But identifying, contacting, and following up with the celebrities will consume precious volunteer time. Remember in your planning that it's a fundraising event first, though team-building and healthy living run a close second in priority.

Be realistic about your potential financial success. Do the math. Calculate the gross profit if a reasonable percentage of your student body donates an average amount you feel is reasonable for your school community. For example, in a school of 500 students, if 70 percent donate an average of \$40 each, the event will gross \$14,000. Estimate this amount and don't be afraid to advertise the financial goals to your parents. You might even be able to announce that the fun run will be your group's only fundraiser for the year. Many people want to support the school, but in the absence of a sales catalog, they are unsure of how much would be a reasonable donation. Tell them. You don't mean to offend anyone, but it is a fundraiser, after all.

Budget your expenses systematically. It's not that hard to project how much T-shirts, snacks, DJ, prizes, and incidentals will cost. Compare your projected expenses to your projected gross income, and you can see how much net profit your fun run can realistically bring in. If you need to earn more money, cut back on expenses or seek donations and sponsorships from the local business community.

Use a pledge form up front and then collect donations after the actual run. The pledge form is the equivalent of the candy sale catalog. It gives the students a physical tool to help them ask friends and relatives for their financial support. The form should list the benefits of the run, the financial goals, and what the PTO intends to do with the proceeds. After

the run, students collect the donations from their supporters, proudly announcing how many laps they completed. Of course, flat donations are gladly accepted, as well, and the instructions on the pledge form should indicate that.

Putting It All Together

The basic fun run project can be summarized like this: The project is kicked off with a student pep assembly. Pledge forms are distributed to the students about two weeks before the actual run. Students solicit pledges and donations from their friends and relatives during that time. On the day of the run, every student receives a free T-shirt that identifies their team color. Four classes at a time begin the run with a set of warm-up stretches. Then the groups take their place at their team's color corner around a one-tenth-mile track. The track can be marked out with paint and cones on the school's sports field.

At "go," music is cranked up and the kids start power-walking or jogging around the track. As they pass their team's color corner, they receive a lap counter. One easy method is to slip a rubber band onto the runner's wrist as he completes each lap. After 15 minutes of running, the students do a cool-down lap and then move to the lap-tallying stations. Parent volunteers count and record the number of laps for each student. The lap counts are subsequently transferred to the students' donation collection envelopes, which the volunteers distribute to each classroom at the end of the day.

After the students get their laps tallied, they pick up a healthy snack and water bottle and enjoy a few minutes outside before returning with their teachers to the classroom. A good fun run will be carefully scheduled so teachers know what to expect and when to join in. Usually the entire fun run cycle can be completed in about an hour for each group of four classes. Depending on the size of your school, you could conceivably finish the run before lunchtime.

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