

Adopt-a-Marathoner: Making the Most of School-Business Alliances

Hopkinton, Massachusetts, is a small, sleepy town approximately 26 miles west of Boston. Each year, in mid-April, the eyes of the world turn toward Hopkinton, as premier long-distance runners from around the world descend upon this town best known as the start of the Boston Marathon.

Elmwood School, currently home to 537 second- and third-grade students, has a special relationship with both the Kenyan runners and John Hancock Financial Services, sponsor of the Boston Marathon. Fifteen years ago, Fred Treseler, a John Hancock Financial Services consultant, approached superintendent William Hosmer and Tim Kilduff, then president of the Hopkinton Athletic Association, with a proposed school-business alliance with John Hancock Inc. enabling students to see first-hand the value of hard work, perseverance, and dedication, while at the same time learning about another culture. Together, they created the Adopt-a-Marathoner program, at no cost to the school district, which has grown in scope each year.

This program, the only one of its kind in the country, gives young students the opportunity to interact with the Kenyan marathoners, the elite athletes of world racing. A group of Kenyan marathoners, typically 10 to 15 male and female world-class runners, pay a visit to the school. This is the culmination of weeks of preparation by students and teachers, as Kenya-related topics are integrated into the curriculum.

Specialized Curriculum

The people, geography, and customs of Kenya are woven into the fabric of our English language arts, social studies, math, and technology curriculum. Each year, teachers at Elmwood School

and Elmwood Clinic (described later), as well as current information about the people of Kenya, their customs, food, geography, language, flag, and national anthem. Biographies are provided of each visitor, so our students feel a greater connection when the runners visit.

Social Studies. Second-grade students review the seven continents, a component of the social studies standards, and then take a closer look at Africa, focusing on the country of Kenya and examining some of its geographic features and customs. Students compare and contrast Kenya with their own town of Hopkinton. They research different aspects of Kenya and write short, descriptive paragraphs—one for each letter of the alphabet. Others create maps and flags of Kenya.

Math. The visit by the Kenyan runners corresponds to a math unit of study for all students pertaining to area and perimeter. Students write the word JAMBO (the Swahili word for "welcome"), and other Swahili words, in block letters on centimeter paper and then find the perimeter and area of each letter.

Reading. Third-grade students read *Masai and I*; *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain*; *Facing the Lion, Owen & Mzee*; *Moja Means One: Swahili Counting Book*;

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are provided with an updated teacher's kit, which includes newspaper articles on the previous year's Boston Marathon



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and *Jambo Means Hello: Swahili Alphabet Book*. Our librarian has purchased many books, videos, and DVDs pertaining to Kenya and marathoning as additional resources. Our second-grade teachers have created fascinating Web sites about Kenya that are an additional resource for both students and teachers.

Music. In music class, Elmwood's students have learned the words to the Kenyan national anthem.

Writing. In the nonfiction writing unit, students learn the steps required for research: formulating questions, reading and note-taking with multiple sources, organizing notes, and writing the report. Each child selects an animal native to Kenya and focuses on its description, habitat, food, hunting methods, predators, and methods of defense. Many sources, including encyclopedias, books, Internet articles, and fact files, are used. Students have created both PowerPoint presentations and written reports. Other students write letters to friends about an imaginary trip to Kenya, describing what they have learned about the country and its inhabitants.

Whole School Assembly

The big day of the Elmwood Clinic finally arrives on the Thursday preceding the Boston Marathon (which is always held on a Monday). This whole school assembly is part rock concert and part pep rally. The walls of the gymnasium are covered with large posters and banners created by our students to welcome the many visitors. Street banners commemorating previous Boston Marathons hang permanently from the rafters in the gym, and one entire wall of the gymnasium has been painted with a mural that includes key sites seen along the marathon route.

Town dignitaries are in attendance, as are members of the Hopkinton School Committee and districtwide administrators. Members of the media abound, from national television networks, newspapers, and running magazines.

Every child and staff member wears an Adopt-a-Marathoner T-shirt and waves Kenyan and American flags as

each runner is individually introduced and escorted into the gym by members of the Hopkinton High School track team. Last to be introduced is the previous year's Boston Marathon winner. As this final guest is introduced, confetti rains down upon the runner. Since the advent of this program 15 years ago, we have always had one soon-to-be winner present at our event. Some years, both the men's and women's winners have been Kenyans and we have met them at Elmwood School. It really is an amazing dynasty of racing history to which our students are privy.

At the completion of the formal assembly, third graders remain in the gym to participate in the second hour of the Adopt-a-Marathoner program. Students are divided into five focus groups with each group meeting with two or three runners at a time, asking questions that they crafted ahead of time.

After this exciting morning, the marathoners join members of the school

administration, members of the school council, town officials, and police and firefighters for a luncheon and a chance to relax and enjoy one another's company. Before leaving Hopkinton, our guests take a tour of the school to see the many products our students have made in their honor.

When asked about memorable events in their Elmwood careers, students invariably put this event at the top of their list. The morning of the Boston Marathon, hundreds of children and teenagers can be seen at the start of the marathon route in the center of Hopkinton, wearing their Adopt-a-Marathoner shirts and feeling very connected to the Kenyan runners. This is a sight that repeats itself every year and an experience that students remember well beyond their high school years. ☐

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