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Race Trains Kids for Life's Run

Principal teaches hard work, discipline at East Point charter

By Patti Ghezzi

As she rounds an orange cone on the barren field next to her school, Lacinder Christopher calls out to her classmates who are walking: "Run y'all!"

Race day is almost here.

KIPP South Fulton Academy Principal Marina Volanakis trains with sixth graders after school last week in preparation for a 5K race Saturday at Turner Field. Volanakis, a marathon runner, wants to teach her students the importance of working hard to reach goals.

Students at KIPP South Fulton Academy, a charter school in East Point, are training for a 5K race at Turner Field on Saturday. Some, like Lacinder, who is 12 years old, plan to run to the finish line without walking. Others are aiming to run part of the way and walk the rest. Most have never run a road race. They are accustomed only to running laps around the field, something they do for about 20 minutes every other day.

Principal Marina Volanakis encourages her students to set realistic but challenging goals. She posts the goals on a wall inside the school, alongside race numbers of students who participated last year.

Volanakis, a three-time marathon runner, hopes training for the race will put her students on a path toward a healthy lifestyle. She also wants to teach them the importance of setting goals and working hard to reach them.

"That's what this school is all about," Volanakis said. "You will be a college grad, but it takes hard work."

KIPP South Fulton Academy is one of 45 KIPP schools across the country. They focus on

motivating middle school students to pursue a path toward college. Metro Atlanta has three KIPP schools. All are public charters, which are open to all students and operate with some autonomy from the local districts.

At KIPP South Fulton Academy, the school day runs from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Kids come to school for a half day two Saturdays a month. The school has 215 students in fifth through seventh grades and will add eighth grade next year.

All the students are participating in the race, even a girl on crutches who plans to hobble her way to the finish line.

Volanakis, 33, came up with the idea of a running program while training for the New York City Marathon three years ago. The Harvard Law School graduate was preparing to open her KIPP school. During long practice runs, she thought

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about how running gave her a sense of accomplishment, "a feeling that you can do anything," she said, adding that she is not a natural-born runner.

She wanted her students to experience that feeling.

"This is not a sprint," Volanakis reminds her students as they start their laps. "It's a distance run. Walk if you get tired, but don't stop."

Back in August, when they started training, they had time to "chill out," Volanakis says. But not now.

Race day for the Strong Legs Run, which benefits Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, is almost here.

Volanakis runs with the students at a slow, steady pace. She chats with the girls who run beside her. After two laps, some students wither. Others turn cartwheels, practice cheers and laugh with their friends as they walk around the makeshift track. "I've got a cramp!" a girl shouts, clutching her side.

Lacinder keeps running, even though she forgot her gym clothes and wears her school uniform.

She started running at age 6 and plans to run track in high school.

She shakes her head at her less fit classmates.

"They say they're tired," she said. "I've learned that as you continue running you enjoy it more."

Diamond Pharms, 12, said her goal is to run the shorter route on Saturday — a 2K race. She has asthma. "I have to stop and catch my breath," she said. "I just walk the rest of the time. I enjoy it."

Running outdoors lifts her mood when she's having a bad day, she said.

Like Lacinder, Hindia Mohabeer, 11, plans to run the whole way.

"Running the 5K will help me become a better runner," she said. "When I run, I think that I burn fat and I get to maintain my health."

Hindia's mother, Rita Addo-Minta, takes her daughter to the track at Mundy's Mill High School so the pair can run together.

"It's healthy. It's good for the heart," Addo-Minta said. "And it's good for her to do it now while she's young."

Addo-Minta chose the KIPP school because of its emphasis on discipline and teaching kids to think independently. She's glad the academics-oriented school finds time to squeeze in exercise.

"She's really active," she said of her daughter. "So anything that uses energy, she likes."