

NEWSWIRE KIDS RUNNING

So Simple It's Brilliant: Schools Worldwide Buy Into "The Daily Mile"

A Scottish teacher starts a free, anytime, anywhere program that reduces childhood obesity—and makes kids happy.

By [Sarah Barker](#) THURSDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2016, 1:14 PM



At the national launch of The Daily Mile in March 2016, founder Elaine Wyllie (center) runs with children at Hallfield Primary School in London. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE DAILY MILE

Elaine Wyllie, headteacher of St. Ninians Primary School, was shocked to see that her students were unfit. A class of 11-year-olds struggled mightily to jog, or even walk, a mile. Not about to stand by and let the pride of Stirling, Scotland, succumb to crisps, video games and the ravages of obesity, the next day Wyllie's class was outside circling the school grounds for 15 minutes.

They were out there the next day, and the day after that.

That was February 2012, the birth of [The Daily Mile](#). The idea was to improve fitness and social and emotional health, and to combat obesity. But equally important to Wyllie—a brisk, no-nonsense woman—was that the program be utterly simple. Fifteen minutes, outside, every day. No gym clothes, no fancy facility, no competition, no rigid schedule, no additional staff, no cost.

“No-brainer” is the response Wyllie said she gets most often about her program.

Like much of the developed world, childhood obesity in the U.K. is considered a public health crisis. Results from a 2014 health survey for England showed that 31.2 percent of children ages 2 to 15 were either overweight or obese, and a 2015 study of 10,000 primary school children in the U.K. found that two-thirds lacked basic fitness.

Knowing that cost and taking time out of instructional schedules are major barriers for schools, Wyllie emphasized The Daily Mile could be implemented by any school for free, at any time that suited the teacher. Other tenets are that TDM be done outdoors, that it be non-competitive, social, and all-inclusive. Wyllie suggested students help in designing, mapping, and measuring the course.

By September 2012, all the children at St. Ninians, ages 3 through 11, were running or walking for 15 minutes every day, in addition to their PE class. Anecdotal results were remarkable: Most kids could run the whole time, no Primary One (equivalent to first grade) students were deemed overweight by the school nurse, and students’ concentration, behavior and mood improved. Maybe most important? They enjoyed it.

While in the early stages, scientific studies show Daily Milers have improved sleeping and eating patterns, improved physical fitness and scores in math and working memory, and reported being happier in school. (In the video below, students from Applegrove Primary School in Forres, Scotland, attest to that.)

The program also earned praise from Sebastian Coe, England’s most famous miler and president of the IAAF. “Children must be given every chance to live healthily,” Coe told [The Sun](#). “This mile a day will make a difference.”

Wyllie, who was awarded Pride of Britain’s 2015 Teacher of the Year, has since retired from teaching to introduce her idea to

schools and adult groups worldwide. Because there's nothing to buy, it's spread largely by word of mouth, with schools adapting the idea to fit their circumstances.

The Daily Mile is now a fixture in an estimated 1,750 schools in the U.K., more than 540 schools in Belgium, and 100 in the Netherlands, with programs popping up in Canada, Ireland, Egypt, Australia, France, Spain, Switzerland, and Germany. And yes, in one place in the U.S.—Montgomery County, North Carolina.

"The program may look different here in the U.S. than it does in Europe," said Roxanne Elliott, policy director for FirstHealth of the Carolinas, who heard about The Daily Mile at a health conference. This version is being implemented by FirstHealth community services in two rural school districts, funded by a \$450,000, three-year grant from the Duke Endowment. The funding, Elliott explained, goes toward teacher training, a toolkit FirstHealth developed, and infrastructure—permanent quarter-mile walking trails on school grounds that will be open to the community.

"This is rural America—there are no sidewalks and the school grounds can get muddy," Elliott said. "The greenway material is quite costly. So far, we've built one path for \$20,000.

"You can absolutely do this program without building a \$20,000 trail," she continued, "and some of our schools will be participating without any additional infrastructure. We wanted to do something for the schools, as our partners, for allowing us to implement the program. They're taking 15 minutes out of their instructional time, which is a lot to ask, so we want to make sure they have a safe place to walk or run."

Elliott said the students at three elementary schools in Montgomery County will be running 15 minutes per day by the end of December, with other schools coming on board in 2017. Heart disease and obesity are troublingly high in the area, and since money has been invested, FirstHealth is expecting a return in the form of lower student BMIs. The schools may track test scores to see if they're affected by the daily activity.

Significantly higher budget and more complex than its Scottish model, Elliott is nonetheless proud to have been the first to plant The Daily Mile on U.S. soil. "This is a fantastic, feel-good program," she said. "It's been super exciting to see the way the kids interact with each other, and how it's already instilling this habit of physical activity."