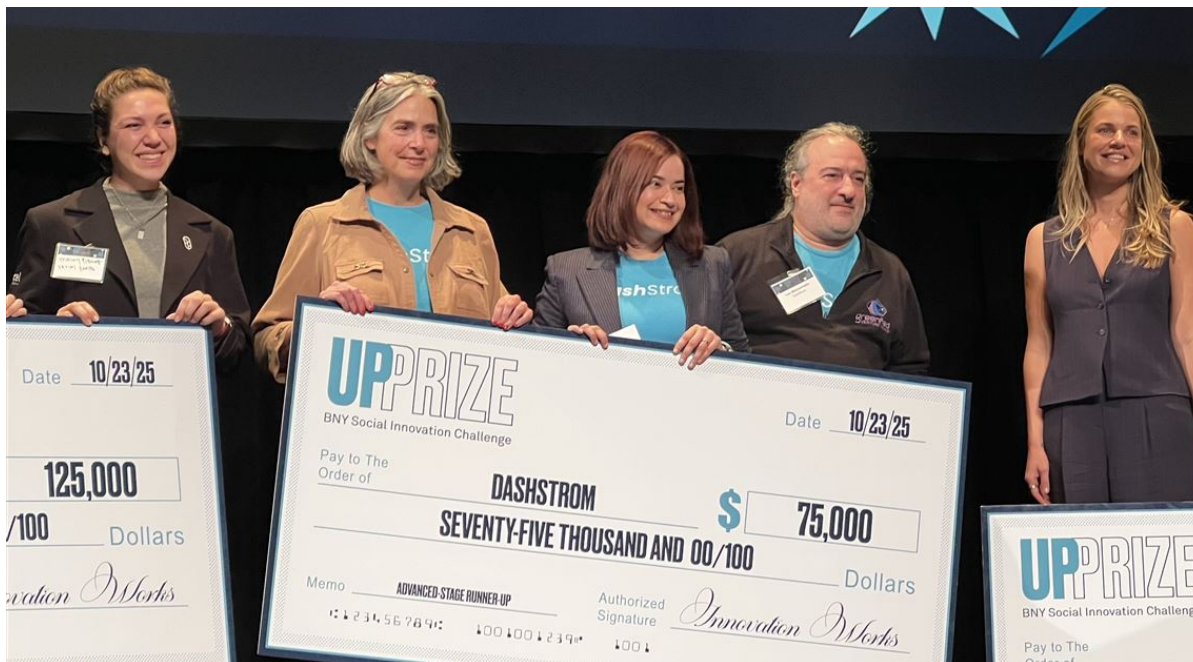




## The DashStrom app cuts screen time by challenging kids to move

A Pittsburgh startup aims to build kids up through games and physical activities



CHLOE JAD

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

cjad@post-gazette.com

NOV 26, 2025

4:00 AM

Cristina Ramirez was the kind of kid who did anything to skip gym class in high school.

When she became a mom, she wanted to be healthier.

“So I ran a 5K, and when I finished that 5K, you would have thought I won an Olympic gold medal by how I felt,” Ms. Ramirez said.

If she could just sell that feeling — the earned victory of overcoming a challenge — “we would be bajillionaires,” she said.

But you have to earn that feeling, and Ms. Ramirez wanted her kids, and all kids, to grow up with that kind of mental resilience. And the last thing kids

need to “fix” things that stem from too much screen-time, she said, was another app.

So she started DashStrom to coach that resilience through challenging play.

“Had I learned these things when I was a kid, maybe I would have made different choices,” Ms. Ramirez said.

Once a week after school, a DashStrom coach leads a group of kids through a series of competitive, physical games, including running relay races, doing burpees and running with a ball for points. After warming up, the group sits and discusses the day’s empowerment principle: “How we talk about ourselves defines who we are.” “Setbacks are welcomed as an opportunity to grow.” Games and drills are centered around the day’s principle. The winner gets a prize, and kids are taught “power words” that remind them, “I’m strong!” “I’m brave!” “I’m powerful!”.

Parents can register their children for the program if DashStrom is partnered with their school. Come next summer, DashStrom will have summer camps.

Ms. Ramirez knew what physical activity could do for self-esteem. After that 5k, she graduated to triathlons — she completed her third Ironman in 2015 — and became “a completely different person.” That same year, Ms. Ramirez asked her kids’ elementary school principal if she could host an after-school club. It would involve physical challenges, and she would donate a percentage of what parents paid back to the school.

“I started creating games that were challenging enough for them to get that feeling, but were fun enough for them to keep coming back,” she said.

“Because kids will not come back if you don’t have fun.”



That after school program started with about 20 kids, including two of her own. Eventually Ms. Ramirez was coaching a couple hundred kids across multiple schools in Miami — and realized that she’d created a sustainable business model. She called it “I-Am-Possible Run Club.”

Ms. Ramirez has trained hundreds of coaches to spread learning-through-play in their communities. Those coaches expanded her play philosophy across 41 states and 11,000 kids. But when she met co-founder Ketaki Desai in 2024 on a startup match-maker app, DashStrom pivoted into a new model. In July of this year, Ms. Ramirez moved to Pittsburgh to join the rest of the team.

## **‘Something different about the DashStrom kids’**

In 2018, Ms. Ramirez renamed the business DashStrom. What does it mean?

Like her late husband once told her, “People think that Häagen-Dazs is Danish and means something. It means nothing. It’s totally made up.”

So she asked her kids to give her some words: one said “dash” and another said “strong.” Being in the Häagen-Dazs mindset, Ms. Ramirez turned it into DashStrom.

In March 2024, Ms. Ramirez met Ms. Ketaki — a serial founder who has personally consulted more than 500 startups, Ms. Ketaki said.

Getting into a co-founder relationship was like getting married, they said.

Ms. Ketaki helped pivot DashStrom into a technology startup. Before, there was no technology involved. (Ms. Ramirez wanted to help kids learn confidence, emotional and social skills at a time when she said schools are shortening recess hours and on-screen time increases.)

Now, DashStrom has an online platform where everything happens: it’s where coaches are trained, background checked, and where parents sign up and pay for the program. The platform allows DashStrom to blossom remotely from Pittsburgh. The pair wants to reach children everywhere.

Since February, Ms. Ramirez and Ms. Desai have inked contracts with 11 schools in Pittsburgh, four school districts across Pennsylvania and Colorado and trained hundreds of new coaches nationwide for free. Earlier this month, DashStrom won second place at BNY’s UpPrize startup competition. The team won \$75,000 as the runner up in “advanced-stage” startups.

“Teachers kept saying, ‘There’s just something different about the DashStrom kids,’” Ms. Ramirez said. One teacher said he overheard a student taking a test saying “I’m strong, I’m powerful, I’m mighty” — the power words DashStrom teaches them.

## **The feeling you can’t buy**

Earlier this month, Ms. Desai watched Ms. Ramirez give a demo in a Clairton elementary school.

In the span of 30 minutes, Ms. Desai watched her co-founder turn a group of unruly kids into focused balls of energy, competing their hearts out. When the kids got tired, Ms. Ramirez prompted them to yell out their power words.

Pushing for one more lap or one more burpee, Ms. Desai heard “I am powerful!” “I am mighty!” “I am brave!” all across the gym. At the end, Ms.

Ramirez had each kid come up and look at themselves in a mirror, and repeat their power words. Then they got a cute stamp.

“For me to see that transformation in 30 minutes ...” Ms. Desai said. “Sometimes it’s that one experience that sits in your mind and you’re like, ‘Wait, I can actually do this. And people think I’m amazing because I just did that, but only because I pushed myself.’ ”

Ms. Ramirez knows that to be true.

“I had changed so much because people pushed me beyond what I ever thought was possible for myself,” Ms. Ramirez said.

DashStrom sessions are once a week, after school. Next summer, DashStrom is starting summer camps. Through partnerships such as the Will Allen Foundation, the team is finding ways to make DashStrom affordable to parents from all neighborhoods. Typically, in Pittsburgh, DashStrom charges parents \$15 per kid, per class. Parents pay for the entire season, so if that’s 10 sessions, parents pay \$150 for one kid.

To turn the “DashStrom impact” into tangible data, DashStrom is collaborating with a trio of Carnegie Mellon University master’s students in the Tepper School of Business. Although Ms. Ramirez has seen her program’s effect on kids hundreds of times over, she needed a way to quantify it. Many partners are interested in that data, too.

But it all comes back to that post-race feeling, Ms. Ramirez said, holding up her fist.

“You can’t buy it,” she said. “The only way that kid is going to feel that is if they struggle — and have the tools to overcome that struggle — and then they feel it.”

*First Published: November 26, 2025, 4:00 a.m.*

*Updated: November 26, 2025, 9:03 a.m.*



**Chloe Jad** is a business reporter focusing on retail, tech and artificial intelligence. She’s a 2025 graduate of Boston University’s College of Communication.

 [chloejad.bsky.social](https://chloejad.bsky.social)

Sponsored