



Thank you, Miss Katherine

Teaching dance in an academic setting can improve student learning and boost student self-confidence.

By Cynthia Compton

A thank-you note from an elementary school-age boy renders a testament to the power of art in a world dominated by test scores. This young scholar has just completed project Minds in Motion, a year-long program that teaches 4th-grade students discipline, dedication, and self-awareness by leading them through a series of choreographic movements, which must be memorized and expanded upon in each class session. Not a ballet class, this program teaches students the benefits of applying themselves to a task involving both mental and physical challenges.

Thank you Miss Katherine, Pedro, and Miss Bobby for teaching me how to do what I need to do, and Miss Cat. I can't forget about her.

Your Dancer,
Preston

Not only does the Minds in Motion program teach dance in the participating elementary schools in the metro Richmond, Virginia, area, but it also integrates and enriches the content of the 4th-grade students' other classes (www.richmondballet.com).

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Cyndi Blount, a new principal at South Anna Elementary School in Hanover County, near Richmond, had a dilemma. If the Minds in Motion program detracted from the standardized test scores by which schools are now evaluated, the backlash would be painful. Yet, how could she discontinue the program, which had become part of the school and community culture? Students and parents expected to be involved as one of the highlights of 4th grade. The PTA raised the funds for the program each year and planned to continue to do so. Blount decided to observe carefully and evaluate the situation at the end of the year.



The program was not without detractors. Two families wanted their sons to opt out of the program, and the boys were provided an alternative curriculum enrichment. However, after two or three sessions, the boys decided they wanted to dance, too. They had witnessed their classmates return from their weekly practice full of energy and laughter, getting together

in small groups on the playground to practice the steps they had learned, and excited on the day of practice. Indeed, teachers noticed that few students were absent on the designated Minds in Motion days.

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Hidden in the fun is a planned collaborative curriculum. Each year, the director of the program, Brett Bonda, meets with 4th-grade teachers to choose an area of the content on which to focus. This year, the dance portrays the story of Jamestown which celebrated its 400th anniversary in 2007. Students learn steps to a number of dances telling the story of America's birth while they study the settlement of Jamestown in

The Minds in Motion Team XXL (previous page) defy gravity at their 10-Year Anniversary Show in May 2005. (Below) Fourth graders in the show make their stars shine.



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(Above) Cat Studdard, *Minds In Motion* Artistic Associate, teaches one of the 4th-grade classes at John B. Cary Elementary School. (Next page) dancers from *Minds In Motion* Team XXL celebrate "Jamestown: A New World in Motion" in the 2007 Performance.

detail in their classrooms. The culmination of the yearlong dance preparation will include an extravaganza with students from every participating school dancing their way through the drama.

WHY TEACH DANCE?

The program began 12 years ago when the Richmond Ballet identified this educational initiative to deepen its impact on the community. The ballet created *Minds in Motion*, modeling its program on work done by Jacques d'Amboise, former principal dancer with the New York City Ballet and creator of the National Dance Institute. Thousands of students have since been introduced to the power of dance through this program.

Why teach dance? How are movement and academics connected? Physical activity makes the brain sharper. Although some policy makers consider arts instruction an add-on or a frill, others point to a more seminal role.¹ In fact, plans are in process for a national assessment of students' knowledge in dance, art, music, and theater in grades 4, 8, and 12 through the National Assessment of Educational Progress.²

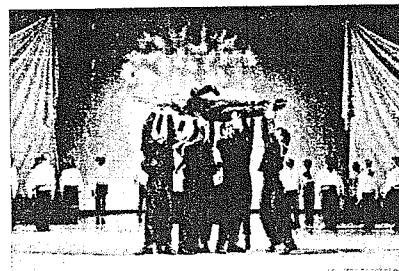
Diversity and determination grow alongside traditional topics. "Even my boys gained an appreciation for dance," commented one teacher at Chimborazo

Elementary School, a Title I school in Richmond. "It got everyone excited about doing something physical." Another commented on the "energy and fun and discipline it taught my students." Cheryl Burke, principal and long-time supporter of the program, has no difficulty convincing the community of the program's value, and students look forward to 4th grade because of it. She notes that students learn to focus and to follow directions because of the program.

Indeed, the students themselves believe they improve academic skills. Survey data indicate an increase in self-efficacy after completion of the *Minds in Motion* year. Teachers distribute surveys in fall and spring to assess students' beliefs about themselves and the value of dance in their lives. Michelle Whaley, a teacher at South Anna Elementary, noted major strides in her students' listening skills, attention, focus, and coordination during the year.

The spring surveys revealed several positive outcomes. Fifty-five percent reported that *Minds in Motion* had helped them become better students, 65% reported learning to work better with other students, and 74% reported learning to do their best. In addition, 49% learned to be more disciplined, 58% learned to concentrate better, and 71% learned to keep trying when things got tough. The dance teachers influenced the students a great deal, with 59% of

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the students reporting that their dance teacher taught them to believe in themselves.

IMPACT ON TEST SCORES

Of course, any discussion of programs in schools these days must include arguably the most relevant question of all: How does the Minds in Motion program affect standardized test scores? In Virginia, the state testing is referred to as Standards of Learning. Tests are given in the content areas of reading, math, science, and history. Although the Richmond Ballet and the participating schools have a plethora of anecdotal evidence of success, what about those standardized scores? We sought evidence by comparing the 16 Minds in Motion schools in metro Richmond with 16 economically similar schools in the same geographic area. In the past three years, Minds in Motion schools generally scored higher than the control group, although the differences are not statistically significant. Further study might reveal the reasons for the higher scores. Perhaps this occurred because of the correlation between the mandated curriculum of the classroom and the stories told in dance. Perhaps students learned listening skills and improved their ability to focus as a result of their participation. Alternatively, perhaps scores improved because of the authentic assessment associated with the live performance for friends and family that is the culmination of the yearlong program. Education research has shown the value of authentic, performance-based assessment.

Clearly, this dance program provides more than just a diversion from traditional class work. Dance has become part of the culture in the participating schools and a rite of passage for students in 4th grade. They have watched their brothers and sisters be initiated into the joy of dancing with their peers, working hard to perform as dancers, and taking pride in their accomplishments. When it is their turn for the spotlight, they are ready.

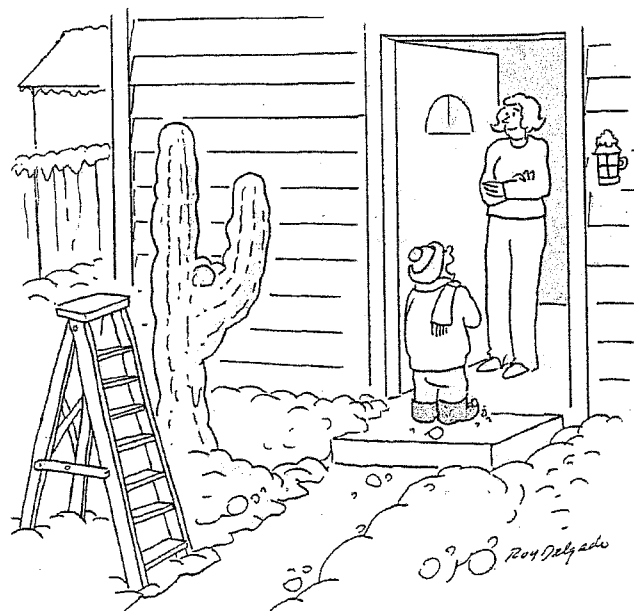
However, here is the exciting news: Taking an hour away from the classroom each week to learn the dances did not have a negative effect on the test scores.

Furthermore, the students benefited from the structure and focus of the program, as evidenced by their own reports. They believe they have improved their ability to learn, to focus, and to be successful. And teachers reported improvements in students' abilities to work together and in general attitudes toward school.

When a chance arises to provide this kind of opportunity for students, the response must be a resounding "Yes!" How could it be otherwise? America's children deserve both the feelings of increased self-efficacy and the critical thinking skills that dance instruction provides.

1. Edward B. Fiske, ed., *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning* (Washington, D.C.: Arts Education Partnership and President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 1999); Eliot W. Eisner, "Three Rs Are Essential, But Don't Forget the A—The Arts," *Arts Edge*.

2. "NAEP and Dance: Framework and Field Tests," *Focus on NAEP*, August 1998, pp. 1-6.



"Mom, can I have all your toothpicks?"