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Dance Program Gets Kids in Step

By Debra Dominguez-Lund
For the Journal

Michael Moreno-Ulibarri candidly says he once was a “slacker student who used to make C’s and D’s.”

Today, the Southwest Learning center seventh-grader says he’s an “A student” who has self-confidence, discipline and direction.

He attributes his academic progress to the National Dance Institute of New Mexico, which first introduced the fine art of dance to him when he was a fifth-grader at Mission Avenue Elementary.

The school is one of 14 elementaries within Albuquerque Public Schools that has partnered with the institute to give students a chance to develop discipline, confidence, a standard of excellence and a commitment to a healthy lifestyle, said Gretchen Kok, Albuquerque managing director of the nonprofit National Dance Institute of New Mexico.

“The institute has actually taken my life into a better direction,” said Michael, 13. “It’s made me better – more physically fit and more confident. And, plus, now I can dance.”

“And it’s a nice de-stresser for me, too,” said Michael, who regularly practices jazz, ballet and tap dance with one of the institute’s advanced training teams for students called, “Celebration.”

“Ever since I’ve been in the program I’ve started doing better in school. The institute taught me to strive for excellence and how to do my best.”

Kok said the institute started out in 1997 serving 100 students at Eubank Elementary. Since then, it has partnered with APS to offer students movement-based programs during the school day that emphasize working hard, doing your best and never giving up.

“We’re not just about teaching kids to dance,” she said. “We’re a character-building program that teaches a message of excellence” that teamwork, tenacity, discipline and joyful effort can equal success.”

The institute serves more than 1,100 students at East San Jose, Mission Avenue, La Mesa, Navajo, Adobe Acres, Eubank, Pajarito, Armijo, Osuna, Montezuma, Lowell, Dolores Gonzales, Mountain View and Los Padillas elementaries.

Kok said her organization also offers advanced training for students like Michael through its “Celebration” and SWAT (Super Wonderful Advanced Team) programs, which meet on Saturdays for further study.

“The heart and soul of our programs is the work we do in the public schools,” said Kok, adding that students participate in weekly dance classes led by a certified dance institute instructor and a professional pianist.

Classes are offered as part of the curriculum and are meant to be fast-paced and fun, she said.

The program is all inclusive – it's free to the children and their families, all students from the grade level participate and classroom teachers dance alongside their students.

“Our vision for Albuquerque is to create a strong program with which we can effectively serve more children in APS,” Kok said. “We have embarked on a three-year effort to double the number of students we serve by expanding our programs in the schools, establishing a local facility and initiating a community after-school program.

Janet Kahn, instructional manager of APS' Fine Arts Program, said the institute's work is appreciated.

“We don't do a lot with dance – all our certified teachers are mostly involved with music and visual art,” said Kahn.

Michael's father, Milton Moreno, said the program has helped cure his son's lack of interest in school and given the whole family something fun in which to participate.

“We get to go to his recitals and programs,” said Moreno, who added he especially values the program as many public school art classes are being pushed out to make room for No Child Left Behind core subjects. “I think the dance institute has a necessary program because it helps kids express themselves”

“Today, all kids do is watch TV, play video games and stay indoors,” he said. “The program gets kids out, in physical shape and helps them shine on stage with self-confidence.”

Helen Tornatta, Pajarito Elementary assistant principal said dancing has helped some of the kids at her school to turn their behavior around.

“This is the first year we've had the program at our school, and I hope we continue to have it,” Tornatta said.

“I've seen children who were having difficulty with their behavior improve dramatically because the institute's taught them discipline, focus and teamwork. What they pick up from the program really does transfer into the classroom and into their learning. The program taught them to be accountable for their actions and made them excited to come to school.”

Taking all the Right Steps

Benefits of the National Dance Institute of New Mexico's school program:

- Students scores on all measures of physical fitness skills increased significantly
- Most students reported becoming more physically active and having a better attitude toward physical fitness
- The majority of students said they were more interested in attending school on days when dance institute classes were being held and that the program made them feel more fit and energized
- Endurance and strength improved

Source: National Dance Institute of New Mexico

