

## Dormont after-school program blends art, movement

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By Shannon M. Nass

About 20 students at Dormont Elementary School stay after school to take part in a program that offers an unusual combination of art and motion.

During one session, the students made a collage about their feelings and then acted out those feelings to a drum beat, said Kathy Foster, assistant superintendent of Keystone Oaks School District, where Dormont Elementary is located.

“I was impressed with the enthusiasm and the whole movement aspect. I couldn’t imagine how they were going to tie the creative arts to the performing arts, but they had a theme and carried it out,” she said.

The students are participating in a pilot program called, aptly enough, ARTS In Motion. Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre and a nonprofit called Art Expression Inc. teamed up to create the innovative after-school program that combines visual arts, rhythm and movement.

Each session of the free six-week program, which began March 18 at Dormont Elementary, alternates between visual arts activities and activities that focus on dance and movement that share a common theme. Music also is incorporated, including a workshop on percussion.

The goal is to increase students’ self-esteem and their ability for self-expression while enhancing their social skills, said Lisa Auel, theater manager of community programs for PBT.

“The idea is for the kids to understand that we have internal and external traits. We have things inside that others don’t see — such as our thoughts and feelings — and external traits such as our physicality,” she said. “Traditional art and movement and dance can help us communicate our traits and get to know each other.”

Art Expression Inc. was founded in 2001 by James and Angela Lowden with a mission to promote positive socialization among children and adolescents through expressive art in an inclusive environment.



Students playing bucket drums they created – Photo by James F. Lowden

Ms. Lowden believes in the power of art and its ability to level the playing field.

“We have children who feel different. Once they realize that others feel different and that we have common feelings as people, we are able to communicate so much better and accept each other for who we are and work together,” said Ms. Lowden, who has a bachelor’s degree in education from Duquesne University and a degree in Applied Specialized Technology from the Art Institute of Pittsburgh.



Students pose as models for other students to sketch - Photo by James F. Lowden

Since its founding, Art Expression Inc. has served over 6,000 children in Allegheny, Fayette, Greene, Washington and Westmoreland counties. It conducts programming in 11 rural, urban and suburban school districts and at 12 homeless shelters plus community organizations throughout southwestern Pennsylvania. The programs are conducted by art therapists, faculty facilitators and staff members.

Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre’s education programs have long served local schools and educators as well. Creative Movement classes are offered in some Pittsburgh Public Schools’ pre-K and elementary classrooms, and support is provided for educators and schools that use dance and movement in their classrooms.

Ms. Auel described the partnership as a perfect combination.

“We think the combination of what Art Expression can bring in terms of emotional well-being and what we can bring in terms of physical well-being is really exciting,” she said.

PBT’s participation is being funded by a grant from the Jack Buncher Foundation.

Although ARTS in Motion is being piloted this year, Keystone Oaks began incorporating other Art Expression programs — Project EcoSmART, ARTmosphere: Weather, and StART Growing — five years ago through grants from the Grable and Benedum foundations.

Moving forward, the district will cover the cost of the programming and offer two six-week sessions in the fall and spring each year at both Dormont and Myrtle elementary schools.

Ms. Foster said the goal is twofold.

“We’re looking at the artistic aspect and we’re looking at the social skills of working in a group such as getting along with others, complementing other’s work, and recognizing differences in people,” she said.

Details: [artexpressioninc.org](http://artexpressioninc.org).

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