

NYFA Chalkboard: Bringing Dance to the Public Schools by Michelle Vellucci



The Bronx Charter School for the Arts, where fourth-graders did a dance and social studies residency linked to the study of the Declaration of Independence and Colonial America.
Courtesy of Notes in Motion Outreach Dance Theatre

At P.S. 78 Anne Hutchinson School in the Bronx, student attendance is erratic and parents' involvement in their children's education notoriously low. But something changed when the students performed in a dance production at the year-end assembly in 2008: The parents showed up.

The performance was the culmination of a residency with Notes in Motion Outreach Dance Theatre, the educational arm of Manhattan-based [Notes in Motion Amanda Selwyn Dance Theatre](#). "It was the biggest parent attendance they had ever had," says Selwyn, the organization's founder, artistic director, and choreographer. "It was our first project with the school and we hadn't sent any formal letter home, so clearly the kids were going home and talking about this."

For Selwyn, who has been teaching, performing, and choreographing for 15 years, the breakthrough at P.S. 78 was a testament to how the arts can help children—and their families—become more invested in education. "Across the board, it's helped motivate these students," says Selwyn, now in her third year with the school. "This is a population where there's a lot of inconsistency with attendance, and to give kids a reason to get excited about school is an amazing thing."

P.S. 78 is one of four partner schools currently working with Outreach Dance Theatre, which has been a vendor of the [New York City Department of Education](#) for three years. ODT emerged when Selwyn, who founded her performing company in 2000, began looking for ways to combine her artistic work with her passion for education. "As I was running my company I also had a full-time teaching career," she explains. "But the more I

grew the organization, the more I felt that it would be wonderful to marry these two things together and incorporate my approach to teaching with what I already do with the company.”

At the heart of Selwyn’s work is the interaction between dance-making and community. As a choreographer, Selwyn prefers to collaborate rather than provide preconceived movements for her dancers. “I give them images and themes to work with, and the dancers get to find their own response to the material,” she says. “We develop an identity as a community because we find the commonalities in all the ways our bodies want to move.”

ODT approaches students in the same way. Selwyn’s Movement Exchange Method allows them to play an active role in learning, from having a say in curriculum design to participating in critical discussions about peers’ work. “I never liked teaching down to children,” Selwyn says. “I wanted them to develop choreography projects and develop their own voice.”

ODT’s residencies fall into two categories: Process and Performance, which focuses exclusively on dance, and Interdisciplinary Creative Curriculum, in which dance is linked with an academic subject. For example, in a program called Thinking Like a Dancer, third- and fourth-graders at P.S. 63 in Manhattan explored fundamental dance principles like rhythm, timing, and variation. At P.S. 78, fourth-graders investigated how words can inspire movement in a Dance and Poetry residency.



Fourth-graders from P.S. 78 in the Dance and Poetry residency with teaching artist Tami Mansfield. Courtesy of Notes in Motion Outreach Dance Theatre

In the early stages of Notes in Motion, company members performed double duty as teaching artists, but today there is little crossover among the 17 TAs currently working with ODT. In keeping with her focus on community, Selwyn conducts mandatory training sessions throughout the school year to allow the TAs to come together and exchange ideas.

When it comes to their work in schools, the TAs’ first priority is to get classroom teachers involved. “Everybody says they want the teachers to partner with them, but nobody really

gives them the tools to do it,” Selwyn says. “Some of them have never danced before, and they may find dance very intimidating.” With that in mind, ODT holds professional development sessions so that teachers know exactly what to expect during the residency and what their roles will be. They are given copies of the curriculum, along with recommendations for activities between sessions, such as reviewing dance vocabulary, or allowing time for reflection.

In general, teachers have responded by throwing themselves into lessons with enthusiasm. “We participated fully,” says Lauren Cohen, a third-grade teacher and arts liaison at P.S. 63. “We’ve been getting on the floor with the kids and running around. It’s been great for the students to see us in a different light—we’re right there with them. That was a big help in integrating reluctant students.”

Selwyn notes that the more engaged classroom teachers are in the process, the more likely they are to continue building on the work when the dance TAs aren’t there. It’s a positive practice for many reasons, not least of which is that most schools simply can’t afford to bring in teaching artists as often as they would like.

“The landscape is so scary right now,” Selwyn says. “No one has any money and the schools have no arts.” To help counter budget constraints, ODT plans to fundraise in conjunction with its partner schools. “If we team up and try to get different sponsorship for programs, we’re going to get a little further,” she explains.

ODT’s first fundraising effort with a partner school, a dance celebration breakfast with P.S. 78, will take place in December. Parents, government officials, and potential sponsors from both the corporate world and the local business community will be invited to the event, which will include a presentation about the dance program and a student performance. In addition to continuing to build parent support for dance, the goal is to raise enough money to increase ODT’s presence in the school. Ideally, ODT would like to offer dance to every class once a week for the entire school year.

“P.S. 78 can see the difference in their student population,” says Selwyn, adding that teachers tell her the children are more likely to come to school excited and ready to learn, on days when they have a dance class scheduled. They’ve seen shy children become more expressive, and so-called troublemakers blossom into successful students.

“Again and again we’ve heard that for the kids who have a difficult time sitting still, or are having a hard time succeeding in language arts, dance is an area where they are excelling,” Selwyn says. “I was like that—romping all over the room, dancing, putting on productions. I went to a public school that had an amazing arts program, and it made a difference for me. I know that’s what made me the person I am now.”

Michelle Vellucci, a former editor of Dance Teacher magazine, writes about the arts in New York City. A lifelong dancer, she spent several years teaching children and teens at a studio in upstate New York, and she holds an M.A. in dance and education from the University at Buffalo.