Afterschool in Action:
Innovative Afterschool Programs Supporting Middle School Youth

Photo provided by Kevin P. Casey

MetLife Foundation Afterschool Alliance

2013
An In-depth Look: The Wooden Floor

"From the very first day our students walk through our doors, they are treated as artists. They have a strong voice in our program's artistic process, and they know that their ideas and thoughts are valued. We believe dance is a transformational vehicle that gives our students the confidence, perseverance and passion to reach their full potential."

—Dawn Reese, Executive Director and Co-CEO, The Wooden Floor
100% of The Wooden Floor alumni have graduated from high school on time and 100% of alumni have enrolled in college.

Located in Santa Ana, CA, The Wooden Floor is an afterschool dance education program that combines dance, academics, and family services. The Wooden Floor takes a holistic teaching approach to dance. At its core is the principle that dance is a transformational vehicle. In addition to teaching self-awareness and dance skills, the program cultivates self-assurance, self-discipline and a sense of accomplishment through dance.

A unique feature of The Wooden Floor is the level of dedication it requires of its students, as well as the level of commitment it gives in return. Students in the program—who must qualify as low-income—pledge a 10-year commitment to the program, and agree to attend at least 80 percent of their classes during the commitment period. In return, the program offers all student classes, workshops and family programs free of charge. Ninety-five percent of program participants qualify for the federal free or reduced price lunch program and 95 percent are Latino.

The Wooden Floor is open 38 weeks of the year, including the summer, offering 10 levels of ballet and modern dance classes with a number of internationally recognized choreographers, designers, artists, and dancers. In addition to dance, the program places a strong emphasis on academics. Individualized one-on-one tutoring and homework assistance are available to all students on a daily basis. Students with a GPA under 2.0 are required to attend the program’s tutoring sessions. In addition, all 7th and 8th graders must take part in mandatory life skills and character-building workshops. The workshops—the IMAGINE series for girls and the On Target series for boys—help students chart an individualized course through high school and on to college. The goal of the workshops is to teach students the motivation and discipline necessary to make positive choices in their lives and reach their goals.

The Wooden Floor’s field trips and activities are also a mix of culture and academics. The program takes students to ballet performances, symphony concerts and the theater, and offers families tickets to various performances. Students travel with the program to colleges around Southern California, taking part in college tours and learning more about the campuses. Additionally, the program hosts a Career Night, inviting corporate partners and community businesses to speak to students about the range of job opportunities available to them, as well as the skills and perseverance needed to attain those jobs. In the summer, in addition to bringing in “master class” dance teachers and academic support services, students have the opportunity to attend summer camps at Yosemite National Park and Big Bear Lake.

At The Wooden Floor, parents are viewed as partners, and program staff work with parents to keep them engaged in their child’s journey through the program. The program includes a family service component, offering counselors, in-house crisis intervention and outside referrals to partner organizations.

Individualized student attention plays a central role in the program. Students are paired with faculty members who work with them throughout their time at The Wooden Floor, providing students with a sense of consistency and helping establish a deeper level of trust between students and faculty. A close student-teacher relationship allows for real-time feedback from teachers and opens up the channels of communication. Students often view the program as a second home, and say they feel safe and taken care of when at the program.

Since 2005, 100 percent of the program’s alumni have graduated from high school on time and 100 percent of alumni have enrolled in college. Many program alumni are the first in their families to attend college.

The Wooden Floor grew out of the need for a safe environment for the youth in the Santa Ana area, which
in the 1980s experienced high levels of crime and gang violence. In 1983 Beth Burns, a sister with the Sisters of St. Joseph order, founded the small ballet summer pilot program to keep youth safe, teach them dance and help them gain self-confidence. Over the course of nearly 30 years, The Wooden Floor has metamorphosed from a small-scale summer pilot program housed in a church basement and focused on keeping youth away from dangerous situations, to a program in its own 21,000 square-foot home that not only concentrates on the transformative power of dance, but also incorporates family services, academics and youth development components. In the past five years, a greater emphasis has been placed on creating college pathways for students to help break the cycle of poverty.

To spread the word about their program, The Wooden Floor hosts a “Dance Free Week,” providing dance education workshops to more than 3,000 students at Title I schools in the Santa Ana area and neighboring cities. Through the years, the program has experienced higher student retention rates and higher enrollment numbers. In the past two years, enrollment increased approximately 80 percent.

High enrollment and retention numbers are indicators of The Wooden Floor's success; however, they have also created challenges for the program. The Wooden Floor is currently exploring ways to expand their facilities and identify opportunities to grow their program in order to meet the needs of their community. Moving forward, The Wooden Floor will use their MetLife Foundation Afterschool Innovator Award to expand their IMAGINE and On Target workshops for their middle schoolers, as well as their family services programs.

The Wooden Floor

Category: Afterschool and the Arts
Location: Santa Ana, CA

Number of Middle Schoolers Served Per Day: 91

Year Started: 1983

Main Sources of Funding:
- Individuals
- Individual foundations
- Corporations

Recommendations for Other Programs:
- Have a strong vision and clear understanding of the program’s theory of change that is tied to the program's strategic plan.
- Stay closely connected to your community—keeping in tune with and at the forefront of community issues and events.
- Give students a voice in the program to show them that their opinion matters.