



Rochester School District Leads in Introducing Respect and Teamwork through Ballroom Dance

“**T**hank you for giving us a chance to do Ballroom Dancing. I just thought the dancing program was a blast....At first I was like no way....now I love it. Thanks again and I hope all fifth graders could do this.”
--Fifth grader, Pinewood Elementary School

So wrote a young man--the most reluctant dancer in the class according to fifth-grade teacher Lisa Anderson--to Rochester District Superintendent Michael Muñoz last November to thank him for bringing Dancing Classrooms of Mad Hot Ballroom fame to Rochester last fall. Under his leadership and that of Community and Family Engagement Director Julie Ruzek, Minnesota nonprofit Heart of Dance brought Dancing Classrooms to 16 Rochester fifth-grade classrooms at Pinewood, Riverside Central, Elton Hills, Jefferson, and Gage Elementary Schools this school year.

“To be honest, at first, dancing was cringe-worthy,” said Matt Ruzek, principal at Riverside Central. “Students struggled with even the most basic parts, like simply making eye contact while standing across from a partner in the circle... It took even more practice to touch that same person’s hands.

“This partnership became something we never could have predicted,” Ruzek continued. “Before we knew it, our students were doing the Rumba, Waltz, and Tango outside of class, excited to share their new passion at our all-school assembly. . . Students showcased their elegance, respect, teamwork, trust and joy for this new art they embraced in just ten weeks and twenty lessons.”



Minnesota is one of just thirty sites in the world of the global Social Emotional Learning program Dancing Classrooms, which teaches life lessons to 5th and 8th graders through partner dance. “Arts experiences build confidence, promote self-esteem, and encourage creativity,” said Anderson. “The Dancing Classrooms program goes further by teaching values of respect, elegance and teamwork in a well-organized, structured, and lively manner. It is a program that not only welcomes all students, but expects them to demonstrate strength of character at the highest level.”

Do students agree? 73% of Heart of Dance fifth-graders in three Riverside Central classrooms agreed that “relationships with my peers improved.” 88% agreed that “I realize I can improve at anything I try.”

Perhaps most telling are the quotes from fifth-graders themselves:

“When my class first started we did not like it but a few weeks later we loved it now we miss it and we will never forget. It made me have more friends and talk to people I don’t usually talk to.”

“I feel like I can be myself around everyone.”

“It helped me to learn to trust my classmates.”

“It’s a good memory to keep. It made our school so special.”

Dancing Classrooms Teaching Artists work with classroom teachers to connect dance with their ongoing curriculum through essays, art, video or powerpoint projects, or researching cultural origins of the dances. Teachers like Anderson also participate in the classroom with the students. “Students arrive in fifth grade at a variety of skill levels in reading, math and other subjects,” Anderson said. “However, we all started the year as beginners in ballroom dancing and learned the lessons of dedication, tenacity and support as we mastered dances.”

Fifth graders at Gage, Elton Hills and Jefferson Elementary Schools started their spring residency in February, and will perform a showcase for their families and school community in late April or early May. Up to 14 students from each school will compete in St. Paul in the May 20th all-state Colors of the Rainbow Team Match.

Volunteers from the Rochester Heart of Dance Volunteer Engagement Committee, chaired by Dr. Patricia Barrier, provide essential community support. Dr. Barrier joined four other volunteer Classroom Assistants in the schools last semester. “My weekly interactions with the fifth graders were a joy and point of pride. This program is powerful,” she said. “I witnessed children who started off as behavior challenges transformed into leaders. I watched children hesitant and shy at first, develop confidence and pride in their achievements... I am certain many will continue to enrich our community through a viewpoint of inclusivity and respect.”

Rochester is the first school district in the state to embrace Heart of Dance and Dancing Classrooms at the school district level. With their success, other school districts including Richfield and Minneapolis are looking to Rochester as a model.

Said Supt. Muñoz, “It truly has given students involved in the program skills to be successful in the future, and changed their lives for the better. Any program that can help our students reach their full potential will benefit our students and the community of Rochester.”

