
AFTER-SCHOOL ARTS ENRICHMENT

A Resource Brief

PREPARED BY POLICY STUDIES ASSOCIATES, INC.

Almost every school produces an annual play. But few are as enthusiastically created or received as the musical staged by students in the after-school project sponsored by the Community Education Resource Center (CERC) at M.S. 67 (Queens). In spring 2001, three nights of sold-out performances and thunderous applause capped a year of learning for more than 100 sixth-through ninth-graders who had helped to select, audition, rehearse, produce, and promote the popular musical, "Grease."

Students who didn't sing, dance, or act built sets and props, including a multi-colored plywood car that brought down the house when it rolled on and off stage filled with singing teenagers. Parents donated costumes and time, serving as carpenters, makeup artists, ushers, and backstage chaperones. Teachers from the school day served as director, vocal coach, lead choreographer, piano player, and program designer; two even took bit parts in the play. When the last curtain fell, students walked away with a new artistic skills, greater self-esteem, and a lasting sense of accomplishment.

The annual musical production by the TASC-funded project at M.S. 67 demonstrates the power of high-quality arts activities to attract, engage, and enrich students after school—especially those in the hard-to-please years of middle school. This *Resource Brief* profiles the CERC/M.S. 67 program as an example of effective after-school arts enrichment. Although it features the performing arts, the same principles and practices apply to many arts activities in other after-school settings.

Something for Everyone

The after-school performing arts program at M.S. 67 has several strands, ensuring that students with a range of talents and interests can all develop artistic skills. The centerpiece is the **Musical Theater Guild**, a student club that creates the annual musical. Although the theater program existed before the TASC partnership began, the TASC funds enabled M.S. 67 to expand and improve the after-school activities.

In addition to the musical production,

- A **beginner's acting club** gives students who don't get big parts in the play a chance to learn and practice drama techniques. It meets three or four times a week and culminates in a small, non-musical performance held during the day for students and staff.
- A school guidance counselor runs an after-school **talent show** for students who don't have the commitment needed to rehearse a large-scale production but still want to exercise their performing skills. The talent show has featured acts ranging from Asian dance to rap music and hip-hop.
- A **cultural arts performing group** for sixth- and seventh-graders, led by a social studies teacher, offers a venue for students to explore other cultures through their arts. Students meet twice a week after school to learn about the art, music, political structure, and other practices of a culture selected by the teacher. With the help of a choreographer, they study ethnic dances and perform them for the entire school.

The Guild's annual musical production is the most visible strand of the program. Every spring, Director/Producer Barbara Goldman convenes a school-wide student assembly to see who wants to participate in the following year's production. She asks students to suggest plays, selects the three or four best options, and lets students make the final choice.

The following September, Goldman holds vocal, dance, and acting auditions. Students rehearse three times a week throughout the school year, devoting one after-school session each to dance, acting, and vocal practice. The practice sessions represent a substantial time commitment, lasting for the entire after-school period on rehearsal days.

Essential Elements

Goldman, After-School Site Coordinator Walter Sorg, and Principal Mae Fong offer the following advice about what makes this arts program work.

1. Consistent participation

The program gives students incentives to participate long enough to develop skills, confidence, and a variety of experiences. First, it offers a series of activities that students can participate in as they acquire skills, from the talent shows to beginners' acting class and the Musical Theater Guild.

Second, after-school staff use the finished product to attract students for the next year's activities. "We have tryouts for the next show while we're still flush from the previous success," Sorg says.

Third, participants must commit to the year-long process of creating a musical. If a student misses more than three rehearsals without a legitimate excuse, he or she is out of the show.

2. Inclusiveness

Every child who wants to experience the arts should have a chance to participate, say Goldman and Fong. Although the major acting roles go to older students, the younger children perform supporting roles, work backstage, help with choreography, sell tickets and commemorative T-shirts, or promote the production by visiting classrooms during the school day. These activities give the younger students a chance to learn the ropes without the pressure that comes from being in front of the footlights. It also cultivates younger students' awareness that they are developing the skills and responsibility needed for bigger roles.

Goldman creates these opportunities by inventing as many jobs as there are students. "Instead of selecting one or two to do props, have six," she advises.

3. Opportunities for student input

At M.S. 67, the creative process begins with the students themselves, who contribute choreography ideas and make suggestions for improving the script, stage directions, and acting styles. After-school staff make changes based on students' input because it encourages the children to think critically and gives them a stake in the creative process. "It makes them really motivated, because they know they've had a say in what we're doing," the arts director says. That sense of creative input is especially important for older students.

4. Good leadership

Leadership can make or break an after-school arts program because the person in charge bears responsibility for attracting participants, gaining the trust of the principal and school staff, and leading students through the creative process. According to Principal Fong, the arts director should have the following qualities:

- **The ability and desire to communicate** with parents, the principal, and school staff

The arts director must keep school staff informed and respond to their concerns, especially about the use of school rooms or supplies after school. At M.S. 67, Goldman reports on the project at faculty meetings so everyone feels invested in it. Not only does this practice alleviate concerns, it generates support for the arts activities. After hearing about the production, the school's art teachers volunteered to help build sets and scenery and a home skills teacher donated fabric for costumes.

- **The ability to work with all children** who want to participate, regardless of their level of artistic skill
- **The ability to develop a following** so the program has continuity

At M.S. 67, students come back to the after-school arts program year after year to work on the production.

- **Strong organizational skills**

Running a large-scale arts production is a labor-intensive undertaking, and every moment has to count. Make a rehearsal schedule and stick to it, Goldman advises: "You have to know exactly what you're doing each day and who you're working with so you can have your scripts ready on time, order props and costumes in advance, have cue books ready for the technical crews."

Goldman also gives student actors and stagehands a monthly calendar that shows what will happen each day.

5. Broad support within the school community—especially from the principal

Arts productions are a good way to stimulate the involvement of parents and faculty in after-school programming. That's important, because parents and faculty help to fill gaps in staffing a large production.

The principal's support is especially crucial, since she or he controls access to rehearsal space, musical equipment, and students. To some extent, Fong says, "The principal has to have the vision that the arts are important and not just fluff." But site coordinators can do a lot to cultivate the principal's support by giving him or her a role in these key decisions:

- **Selecting after-school arts activities and staff**
- **Synchronizing schedules** to avoid conflicts between school and after-school activities
- **Coordinating activities** to ensure that the after-school program offers options not available during the school day
- **Setting standards** for the products created by students, the learning opportunities that will result from the activities, and the ways in which parents might be involved in the project

6. Staff teamwork

If the goal is to involve as many students as possible in the learning experience, and to develop a range of performing arts skills, a single teacher will quickly become overwhelmed. The CERC/M.S. 67 program places a drama teacher in charge of the overall production but supports her with paid and volunteer staff who serve as vocal coach, musical arranger, and choreographer—in addition to the after-school site coordinator and director. Parents and teachers from the school day volunteer as ushers, chaperones, and backstage makeup artists. One year, an art teacher from the school day stayed after school to supervise scenery construction and painting. A classroom teacher who plays piano accompanies the after-school performances, and the school's computer

teacher worked with students to design and produce programs for the 2001 production.

Goldman and Sorg suggest building on any overlap between the regular school and after-school staffs. At M.S. 67, where most of the after-school staff are also teachers in the regular school program, teachers make announcements about auditions and rehearsals during the school day, and students use school computers to write autobiographies for the programme. The vocal director helps singers rehearse their harmonies during lunch break, and during her prep period the play's director supervises the students who collate programs and work backstage.

7. A strong script or curriculum

Mounting an arts production is hard work for everyone involved, and students will have to stay motivated and energetic over the course of an entire year. Therefore, the content of the production has to be compelling enough to attract and hold their interest.

Reaping the Rewards

When all of the elements fall into place, a good after-school arts program can produce stunning results. It gives kids who are separated during the school day a chance to interact with each other around an engaging topic. This is especially true for hearing- or language-impaired students at M.S. 67, who may not read well enough to have speaking roles but enjoy the work of building sets and costumes alongside their mainstreamed peers.

Drama also is a good hook for getting eighth- and ninth-graders to mentor younger students, according to Site Coordinator Sorg. "We have older children who would normally [leave after school] but they'll stick around and tutor the younger kids [who] they know will follow in their footsteps. They have a real sense of creating a legacy," he says.

The arts program gives students and parents an opportunity to see children in a new light. "You may have a student who gets a 70 average during day, and his father thinks he's not applying himself, and then he sees the kid working hard to memorize a script after school," Sorg observes.

The process of creating a work of art also develops a team- or family-like mentality, in which everyone has an important role in the eventual production. The act of helping teammates create a high-quality, well-received performance builds students' self-esteem, Goldman says—and she's seen dramatic proof. One year, several of Goldman's colleagues warned her not to cast a particular ninth-grader in the musical. He had a reputation for being unreliable and disruptive, and they said he would let the Guild down. But he had the right look and attitude for a major role, so Goldman decided to take the risk.

At first, the youth seemed angry much of the time, and he was too self-conscious to project his voice beyond the stage. But he quickly gained confidence and took over the role. He

became one of the most dedicated performers in the cast, missing rehearsals only when they conflicted with other after-school commitments.

On the last night of the performance, amid the public cheering and applause, Goldman noted the private transformation that had occurred for her star performer. The boy's mother told Goldman how much her son had blossomed through his involvement in the show. People who had advised against casting him admitted that they had been wrong; one even told the boy so. Best of all, the youth told Goldman he was sorry that rehearsals had ended and he would no longer be staying after school.

"I cannot tell you how much this changed him," Goldman recalls. "He became a much happier child. He became a team player."

Sources for More Information

Brice Heath, S. "Imaginative actuality: Learning in the arts during the nonschool hours." In *Champions of change: The impact of the arts on learning*. E.B. Fiske, ed. Washington, DC: The Arts Education Partnership and The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. (Available online at www.pcah.gov.) Provides an overview of how and why young people benefit from the arts.

The Kennedy Center ArtsEdge. Provides teaching materials and professional resources for educators. Website includes links to arts content planning matrices, suggestions for integrating the arts into lesson plans, and questions to guide the development of effective arts lessons for K-12 students. Available at <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org>.

National Art Education Association. Promotes art education through professional development, public discussions, books and reports, and other materials. Publishes the *Journal of Art Education*. Contact NAEA, (703) 860-8000 or www.naea-reston.org.

National Standards for Arts Education. Outlines basic arts learning outcomes for K-12 students. Available from the Music Educators National Conference, Reston, VA. (800) 828-0229.

Studio in a School collaborates with TASC to provide professional development and direct services at TASC sites, focusing exclusively on the visual arts: drawing, painting, printmaking, collage, sculpture, and photography. Studio artists model ways that staff can use art materials and talk with students about art. On Family Arts Weekends, staff, students, and parents, participate in workshops with professional printmakers, mask makers, and sculptors. 410 W. 59th Street, New York, NY 10019. (212) 765-5900. www.studioinaschool.org.

In 1998, The After-School Corporation (TASC) launched an initiative to improve the quantity and quality of after-school programs for students in the public schools of New York City and State. Through grants to nonprofit organizations that sponsor school-based projects, TASC now serves students in kindergarten through twelfth grade at almost 200 sites. This Resource Brief shares some of the promising practices used by TASC projects. We hope that it helps your planning, program improvement, and further exploration into the world of after-school services. For more information on the Resource Briefs or the companion Tool Kits, which contain checklists and other practical materials, contact TASC's Research and Education Policy staff at (212) 547-6950 or www.tascorp.org. This brief was prepared for TASC with support from The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York.