



DANCE COUNTS

Dance education can change the lives of children and youth and the communities they call home. Research continues to illustrate the tangible results of dance education on students' personal and academic success from early childhood through adulthood. Despite the documented benefits of dance for individuals and their communities, dance remains one of the least available art forms for students in schools. By investing in dance instruction across age groups and communities, education leaders, policymakers and practitioners can continue to provide students with the tools they need to learn and grow personally and academically, and to develop meaningful connections to their communities and culture.

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ABOUT THE ARTS EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP

The Arts Education Partnership has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education since 1995 and is administered by Education Commission of the States. AEP maintains ArtsEdSearch. Arts and dance education specialists vetted all studies cited in this brief, and all studies can be found in ArtsEdSearch.

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Dance education provides powerful opportunities for students to create, perform and understand movement as a means of artistic communication. Dance education impacts students' short- and long-term learning experiences and can play a significant role in their personal and academic growth. The benefits of dance extend from early childhood through adulthood and build lasting connections to culture and community. Despite these benefits, 12% of public secondary schools nationwide offered formal dance instruction in the 2008-09 school year.

DANCE EDUCATION develops the knowledge and skills required to create, perform and understand movement as a means of artistic communication. A comprehensive education includes improvisation, technique, choreography, performance, observation and analysis. Exposure to dance history and cultures, kinesiology and anatomy, and movement theories further enriches the dance educational experience.

Defined by the [National Dance Education Organization](#)

ARTS INTEGRATION is an approach to learning in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both.

Defined by [the Kennedy Center](#)

For this Special Report, the Arts Education Partnership reviewed research studies identified within ArtsEdSearch — the national clearinghouse of arts education research — to explore the importance of dance in student learning, and academic and personal growth. The featured studies show dance's positive impact on student success and support findings that dance education:

- Promotes early development of language, literacy, and social and motor skills.
- Supports positive academic and personal growth, which can build a sense of identity and personal agency.
- Builds relationships and connections to community and cultural heritage.

Cover Photo by Pink Afterglow Photography. Courtesy of Dr Phillips High School Dance Magnet.

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Early Development of Language, Literacy, and Social and Motor Skills

Dance education can support young children's acquisition of language and literacy as well as their social and physical development through movement and repetition. These skills are foundational for a child's future personal and academic success.

STRENGTHENS EARLY LANGUAGE AND LITERACY. Early childhood dance education that uses an arts integration approach can improve literacy and school readiness. One study found that preschool students in an arts and literacy program showed marked improvements with literacy and school-readiness skills after engaging in arts integration activities that included dance.¹ In another study, a group of first grade students who participated in dance-integrated learning demonstrated improvements in basic reading comprehension greater than those in traditional reading instruction.² A third study found that children in early childhood education programs who received movement instruction made notable gains in language acquisition.³

BOOSTS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT. Integrating dance into early childhood learning plays a significant role in cultivating lifelong social skills. Dance education can improve students' behavioral health and social competence. For example, Head Start students who participated in a creative dance/movement program exhibited fewer instances of depression, withdrawal, anxiety and aggression when compared to students who did not participate.⁴

SHARPENS MOTOR SKILLS. Engaging in dance education programming during early childhood positively influences a child's physical development. For instance, after participating in an eight-week dance program, a group of 5-year-old children showed significant improvements with rhythm, coordination and balance.⁵



Sense of Identity and Personal Agency

Dance education encourages creativity, accountability, academic accomplishment and personal agency — a sense of influence over one's thoughts, feelings and actions. These outcomes benefit all youths, and youths who face social or economic challenges can especially benefit from the supports and opportunities that dance education can provide.

FACILITATES ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS. Positive links exist between dance education participation, and academic and personal success for all students. Research shows that there's a positive relationship between adolescent participation in performing arts, such as dance, and immediate and long-term academic, professional and personal accomplishments and satisfaction into adulthood.⁶

Dance education can also support the inclusion and engagement of students with autism in classrooms.⁷ In addition to dance instruction, dance therapy in classroom settings can provide benefits for students with physical, developmental and emotional behavioral disabilities.⁸ Dance therapy can improve self-esteem and self-regulation; help students meet goals in Individualized Education Plans; and increase interest, enthusiasm and engagement in their learning experience. Although dance therapy offers a different set of experiences than dance education, it can be an important addition to a positive learning environment.

Dance therapy is distinct from dance education and is a recognized form of therapy to assist individuals achieve emotional, cognitive, physical, and social integration. For more information about dance therapy, visit www.adta.org

ENHANCES CREATIVITY, AGENCY AND IDENTITY. Dance instruction improves creative thinking by encouraging focus, curiosity, flexibility and perseverance.⁹ This skill set can promote a sense of agency and identity that lasts well beyond adolescence. The personal satisfaction derived from working hard and collaborating with others improves young people's influence over their own thoughts, actions and feelings. It also fosters resiliency, a key life skill that supports students when they face new or unexpected challenges. Researchers who studied an after-school arts program serving students from low-income neighborhoods found that they demonstrated higher self-esteem and leadership ability,¹⁰ as well as improved social skills, focus and adaptability. By teaching to different learning styles and recognizing student needs, dance educators can expose a diverse range of students to the benefits of dance and help students apply the creative skills they acquire through dance instruction to other areas of their lives, inspiring a sense of agency and identity.¹¹

Relationships and Connection With Community and Cultural Heritage

Community dance experiences encourage intergenerational connection to community. These dance experiences can cultivate a supportive environment for relationship-building between youth and older member in communities, affording opportunities for learning about self and one's connection to the community they call home.

CULTIVATES POSITIVE COMMUNITY LEARNING AND A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT.

Across cultures and nationalities, community-based dance programming for youths can heighten connection and pride to the world around them.¹² One study suggests that community-led dance programming for teens — particularly for youths in historically marginalized communities — creates a supportive environment that encourages positive relationship building, adaptability, curiosity and civic engagement.¹³ In another study, researchers found that community programming that included dance fostered a desire within teens to be more involved in their communities beyond the dance experience.¹⁴

FORGES CULTURAL CONNECTIONS. Community dance programming can create community pride in cultural heritage for intergenerational participants as they teach and learn from each other. Dance mentorship opportunities, where elder community members connect with youth, benefit both groups — the older mentors feel more connected with their communities while the youth develop an interest in, and understanding of, their cultural heritage. This can include cooperative, nontraditional learning experiences; a growing interest in understanding self in relation to one's cultural history; and a stronger affiliation with the social fabric of one's community.¹⁵

