

St. Thomas Aquinas School is Transforming Students' Learning Experience through the Arts

When Principal Sharon McCloskey came to St. Thomas Aquinas Independence Mission School in South Philadelphia in 2020, she had a vision for transforming the school (which had no arts programming) into what she describes as a “little art center.” This year, she started the K-8 school’s music program and brought a Dancing Classrooms Philly (DCP) [Hip-hop Residency](#) to her students, the first of the many in-school arts programs she hopes to offer.

Principal McCloskey identifies joy as what students need most and the arts as how to best incorporate it into the school day. From her previous experience as a high school principal, she’s seen students become excited to be at school and perform better in their academics thanks to the arts. She wanted her students at St. Thomas to have the same experience, and the DCP program delivered. “We’re able to see that kids want to come to school for these programs. It’s the thing that motivates them to be here on days when it might not be what they want to do,” she shared, noting her student’s increased attendance record.

DCP’s in-school dance programs allow students to work collaboratively with their peers and build a sense of community and belonging within their school. For the students at St. Thomas, it’s helped bring them a sense of closeness when it was especially needed. One of the teachers became ill this year, and Principal McCloskey knew that having this extra dose of joy from the Hip-hop residency was imperative for the students and school community. “The kids are incredibly joyful when they’re in the class. It really elevates their day a lot,” she said. It also brings joy to the staff who love seeing the students excited to dance and invested in getting the moves right.

It’s more than just joy that in-school arts programs offer. They are a powerful tool for promoting student success and achievement as they inspire students to want to learn. “You get the biggest bang for your buck when you’re able to provide [arts programming] as part of their daily school day and not in addition to their school day,” Sharon emphasized. While both in-school and afterschool dance programs can be valuable and beneficial to students, in-school dance programs have the power to keep students energized and engaged throughout the day. “Afterschool programming feels like an event, but in-school programming helps kids understand, see, and feel. We want them to take advantage of it even if they can’t come after school,” she added.

The arts, which makes students excited to learn, can then be woven into the in-school curriculum, which Principal McCloskey sees as an essential part of having these programs. Integrating the arts into other academic subjects creates a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary learning experience. It can also help students to see connections between different subjects and develop a more holistic understanding of the world.

With the success of the Dancing Classroom Philly program, the school is exploring ways to expand arts programming in the future. "I want the arts to be what we're about at St. Thomas," Sharon explained. All in-school arts programs are vital to a well-rounded education, as they offer a range of benefits to students. By providing various arts programs, St. Thomas Aquinas IMS School can ensure that all their students have access to a comprehensive arts education that meets their individual needs and helps them discover their interests. Regardless of how many arts programs St. Thomas is able to offer, DCP's Hip-hop program will continue to uniquely engage students through its cultural relevance and as a source of physical movement.

"I love that you are able to provide this for our students. I love to see the joy in their faces when they're dancing, and I cannot wait to see what else we can provide," Principal McCloskey shared. We look forward to our continued partnership with Principal McCloskey and St. Thomas Aquinas and are excited to see how more dance and arts programming can make a bigger impact for their students.