

APAP | MetLife Foundation Case Study
Engaging Underserved Communities

THE WOODEN FLOOR

Santa Ana, CA

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Take Note

- The Wooden Floor works with renowned choreographers to develop its dance curriculum, art-making processes and arts presenting standards. Since no national peers combine these program elements with the organization's target demographic (low-income youth), the Wooden Floor creates its own assessment and benchmarking tools. This effort, partially funded by a James Irvine Foundation grant, engages leading experts, such as WolfBrown, in arts impact assessment.
- Based on current data, Wooden Floor students consistently exceed their peers nationally in abilities, behaviors and attitudes that help lead to successful, healthy lives.
- The Wooden Floor's community goal is to improve the self-concept of youth and help them navigate and overcome increasing hardships and challenges at home and in the community.

Overview

The Wooden Floor is one of the nation's most innovative arts-based programs for youth, and has transformed thousands of young lives since 1983. This nonprofit after-school program provides hope and opportunity, using dance to teach young people what it takes to succeed in life: self-awareness, confidence, leadership, cooperative learning and discipline. The Wooden Floor offers dance education for low-income youth and performances for Southern California audiences with special outreach to underserved communities. Cutting-edge programs, exposure to internationally celebrated contemporary dance choreographers, and insight from specialists in the academic and social service fields all combine to ignite creativity and awaken the spirit in nearly 400 low-income youth annually. Dance and supporting academic and family services programs are offered free of charge and take place at the Wooden Floor campus – a 21,000 square foot facility located in Santa Ana, California.

Commitment

Strategic Concepts

- The Wooden Floor's long-time commitment to strategic planning enables it to focus on advancing its arts model to deepen youth and community outcomes and broaden participation among its audiences.
- The Wooden Floor's goal is to retain students up to ten formative years to optimize artistic progress and personal growth. In this context, Wooden Floor's retention strategies – keeping youth engaged in their programs and their families engaged as audience – are part of its marketing initiatives.

Professional Development

- The dance faculty receives mentorship training by social workers and clinical psychologists to identify the special needs of the youth population.

Leadership in the Community

- The Wooden Floor is considered a leader among arts-for-youth programs due to its early attention to outcome measures and impact studies. Since 1993, The Wooden Floor has published three independent studies that assess the effectiveness of its programs and their impact on children's long- and short-term social and behavioral development.
- The Wooden Floor leadership participates with community leaders in regional initiatives to identify and meet the needs and aspirations of its diverse, underserved populations.

Community Engagement

- The Wooden Floor engages youth, parents, community leaders, social service providers, faculty and artists to vision, plan and evaluate program needs and offerings. Two parents serve on the board of directors and other parents are active volunteers.
- The Wooden Floor pursues artistic and community partnerships and awareness-raising activities through dance festivals, speaking engagements, media outlets and forums in which it can advocate for its model of change through the arts.
- Through public performances, audiences learn more about new dance and its artistic and cultural value. In the long-term, youth realize their full potential, achieve post-college self-sufficiency, and continue their engagement in the arts. The community gains greater awareness of the transformative power of art-making.

Implementation

The Wooden Floor's ten-year curriculum for youth ages 8-19 is built on a comprehensive platform.

- **Dance Instruction:** Ballet and Modern Dance are taught using a ten-level syllabus to ground students in formal technique (53 classes/ week, 1-1.5 hours/ class, averaging 65 instruction hours/week, 38 weeks/year). Students begin attending classes twice a week and increase to 20 hours/week, over ten formative years.
- **Dance Making:** Includes improvisation and choreography classes, as well as collaborations with guest choreographers.
- **Somatic Studies:** Somatics are movement processes that develop body intelligence leading to heightened physical, mental, and emotional awareness, as well as psychological functioning.
- Faculty provide three weeks of free dance instruction to nearly 2,500 4th and 5th grade students in 23 of Santa Ana's lowest performing elementary schools as part of its outreach program, DanceFree Weeks.
- Students also participate in six weeks of Summer Workshops in technique and dance composition with semi-formal performances at the Wooden Floor Studio Theatre. The Annual Concert, five performances held at the 756-seat Irvine Barclay Theatre, is the culmination of the Wooden Floor experience – a professional production where students participate in the creation of new work developed for them by established choreographers.

Evaluation

- Since 1993, the Wooden Floor has published three independent studies that assess the effectiveness of its programs and their impact on children’s long- and short-term social and behavioral development. Longitudinal studies, begun in 2003, measure whether “self-concept” improves based on length of time at the Wooden Floor and/or level of dance proficiency.
 - Youth Self-Concept measures include the Bracken Motivational Self Concept Scale, California Healthy Kids Survey, United Way’s Developmental Assets Profile, in-house counseling, evaluations, and entry/exit questionnaires.
 - Dance Program measures include student proficiency within a 10-level dance syllabus, curriculum offerings, and faculty/artist qualifications.
 - Academic measures are report cards/GPA, standardized test and SAT scores, high school graduation rates and college matriculation.
- Impact of community education programs are measured by audience increases and retention, survey feedback, and support for the Wooden Floor mission and programs.

Challenges

- Because Wooden Floor works with a low-income population, they face the challenges that accompany that particular socioeconomic population. Transience is an issue, as is the participants’ inability to comply with expectations due to challenging circumstances such as joblessness, home problems, or multiple jobs.
- In addition, their constituents need to be educated and saturated with the philosophy and values of the organization and its programs, and staff needs to provide this education constantly and continually.

Advice

- Engage in a habitual feedback system. Listen to the people you serve. Respond to their feedback. Ask them if the project is working, and ask again—and again—for their input. Survey them to discover barriers to their participation.
- Be willing to invest in long-term approaches and build sturdy relationships.



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