

CHAPTER 10

ARTS TO THE CORE

I was drawn to WEDJ right from the beginning because of the school's commitment to the performing arts. We used the phrase 'Arts to the Core' to celebrate how our curriculum linked to the Common Core and the Arts. We did not want a separation between arts and academics. I considered arts education at WEDJ a serious academic subject.

At first, arts instruction at WEDJ was an expensive balancing act. The school had acquired services that cost over half a million dollars for the National Philharmonic to teach the music program, the Shakespeare Theatre Company to teach drama, and the Kirov Ballet Company to teach the ballet portion of the dance program. In addition to these costs, I had to hire a new visual arts teacher and additional dance teachers. None of these groups had met together, only signed contracts to provide services. The arts programming needed coordination and no one had come forward with a plan. After I met with all the players, I asked Mr. Harris, the returning dance teacher, to act initially as the Arts Coordinator. We needed someone to reach out and provide in-house support for the full time and visiting staff. Apart from the endless interviews to find the right candidate to fill the giant shoes left from the former visual arts teacher, Mr. Lee, I felt a constant rush of discontent from students about many of our visiting arts instructors.

Before the first week of school ended, my guidance counselor had reported details of a conversation he had with a seventh-grade student. The student indicated that she was upset because the ballet teacher had verbally abused her and physically moved her in the classroom. Mr. Carter and I investigated the allegation immediately. Many individual students in the class confirmed that the teacher was upset, yelled often and blurted out a comment that was inappropriate. After leaving multiple messages with the dance teacher to return my calls, I made contact with her direct supervisor to see if he could help in the matter. Technically, the visiting teacher worked for a different organization that made my oversight of the complete arts program somewhat complicated, especially when students and families were becoming increasingly frustrated with many of the new faces on our fine arts team. The Kirov Ballet's instructor frequently kicked kids out of her classroom and complained often that they were not serious enough to work for extended periods of time on basics and warm-up. I knew Mr. Harris, our in-house dance teacher, had ways to keep students motivated, at the same time as bring out excellent modern technique. I asked the guest teacher to observe his classes and do some team teaching with Harris, and while she dropped in one day, she stopped

going. It wasn't long before she began to come late and call at the last minute to say she had an emergency and could not come in. Mr. Carter was beginning to fill in for her dance classes too often. While we were very impressed with her obvious skill as a stellar Russian ballerina, most students, staff and parents were not pleased with her level of commitment and her negative disposition. We asked the representative from the Kirov Ballet to replace her when she didn't show up one day and didn't call in, to let us know she would not be there. We were thrilled when the Kirov Ballet sent us a new African American teacher, who was very popular at first. It didn't take long, however, for the complaints to arise again from our ballet majors. The new teacher promised to build positive relationships with the students and families, but his enthusiasm did not last. I had asked him not to wear jeans on several occasions, but this request seemed to fall on deaf ears. It was disappointing to see the new teacher give up on our kids. Within a few weeks, he had resorted to yelling at students, and then he eventually quit. The Kirov Ballet did not have the teaching staff in their bullpen to give the students the warmth they needed from a trusted instructor. In January, we asked Stephanie Burrill, a former WEDJ ballet teacher and current Teaching Assistant, to take over this class when we parted company with the Kirov Ballet.

The complaints about many guest arts teachers mounted throughout the fall. By October 2012, I had a two-inch binder filled with student and family concerns about one of the visiting music teachers, the ballet teachers and three of the five theatre teachers. Our students were tough on these teachers; many guest instructors kept Mr. Carter, the Dean of Students, on speed dial. The more they called for back up, the more the students could read that these teachers were not in control. What complicated matters might have been the background of the arts staff; at first, all twelve of our guest teachers were Caucasian. I was surprised that expertise could not be found that might have been more representative of our 96% African American student population.

On the 15th of September, after the first three weeks of school, I sent all members of the arts team a special 'bundle' outlining the importance of communicating directly with families, believing in kids and letting Mr. Harris be an important mentor. In this bundle, I also let everyone know that arts and academics were not two separate tracks. I also wanted the guest arts teachers to know I would work hard to support connections between the WEDJ staff and our guest teachers so everyone would feel a solid sense of belonging. I invited them to join in on staff meetings, as well as school and social events.

I encouraged the guest teachers to think about supporting each other. For instance, when there was a music assembly, that would cancel a drama, dance, or visual arts class, I expected the guest teachers to show up and support their fellow colleagues, rather than leave early or stay in their rooms.

The arts team decided to meet with me every Friday after school to trouble shoot situations and talk about how the school could further support arts programming. The teaching staff and Mr. Carter did everything they could to support the guest arts

teachers. I commended teachers for making generous efforts to provide additional support of the ‘classroom management kind’ for our guest fine arts instructors.

In spite of the proactive measures we put in place, there continued to be many ‘arts-related’ challenges throughout the year. Many families had expected that the new guest arts teachers would inspire their children. The addition of daily violin lessons for K, first and second grade students, was a welcome addition to the music program and we did receive rave reviews about Dr. Zirkle from the National Philharmonic (NP). I can still hear the students reciting their fun syllable-type prompts for violin positions, named after barbecue condiments: “ketchup, mustard...” Unfortunately, two other music teachers from the National Philharmonic (NP) resigned, and Mr. Bell was hired to teach the instrumental music classes, leaving Dr. Zirkle to teach the full strings program.

Prior to out-sourcing much of the music instruction to guest teachers, students at WEDJ spent the year working towards a musical production that integrated all the arts. Rather than continue with this tradition, Goldman announced the school would feature low-key ‘open house’ recitals. Many families had signed up so their kids would have the big production experience, so his decision turned out to be an ongoing source of discontent for some parents. One Board member, in particular, was very concerned about the decision to stop the school-wide arts performances. However, the hiring of independent musical and theatrical arts teachers made it impossible to coordinate an integrated production. As well, the contracts with the guest teachers did not address volunteer time for practice that would be required to put on such a large-scale event. I was aware early on that some parents felt strongly about the school not having such events, but the decision to move away from the production was made before my arrival on the scene. Had students and parents been surveyed in advance of the new changes, perhaps the school might have considered the idea of having the arts teachers work together on integrated production projects, for younger and older age groups of students, keeping some of the former program strengths intact.