

*Books and Ballet: A Turnaround Success  
Becomes a Fine Arts Academy*  
Blackshear Elementary School  
Austin, Texas



**Betty Jenkins, Principal:** I wanted to consider some options for the school. What would make it amazing, what would cause individuals to want to bring their children to Blackshear Elementary? What kinds of opportunities could we provide for Blackshear? But of course, it was struggling academically. We needed some clear systems in place to make the environment safe for our students, to make their environment organized and pleasing for our students, and also bring some strong academic programs in.

**Devin Rodriguez-Perez, Grade 3 Teacher and Classroom:** When I see a word problem, what should I do? STAR Method! How do we remember using STAR method? Our song? Let's sing it! 5, 6, 7— Study what I know/ Box key words/ Circle numbers and nouns/ Think: What I need to know/ Underline the question!

**Betty Jenkins:** Once we were able to have success with our programs in place, and once we were able to maximize the learning time or the time on task for students, we knew we were going to be able to free up some minutes in our day to make learning more special, even more special for our students.

**Toni Bravo, Ballet Austin:** What does ballet do for kids? Kids get not only a beautiful physical presence, and physical activity that helps their musculature develop in a different way, in a stronger, more connected more controlled way, but they also learn how to analyze their movement, their relationships in space, their relationships with rhythm, and this analytical thinking leads into a syncretic thinking, which means that they put together all of those elements into a new creation. And if you believe Einstein, that "creativity is intelligence having fun" it's a beautiful way of developing your intelligence.

**Betty Jenkins:** I quickly learned that if we were going to have a successful program with teaching artists coming in I was going to need to pair them up with a classroom teacher because classroom management is a talent itself. And pairing them up was a great benefit it also served as PD for teachers because we wanted to incorporate as many of the FA strategies or arts into the classroom during the day as well, and our teachers are not artists.

**Ivonne Rodriguez Grade 4 Teacher:** When I'm teaching narrative summaries, I like to put students in groups and have my students create stage pictures of what happened at the beginning, a stage picture of what happened in the middle, a stage picture of what happened

in the end. When I'm teaching vocabulary, the students use their bodies to represent the vocabulary word that we're using.

**Mackenzie Gandomi, Grade 2 Teacher:** One thing that I've noticed is that art brings beauty to our life. My students are more motivated to have more beautiful and meaningful work since we've integrated the arts. I've also noticed my students are braver, more willing to take risks and share their talents with others.

**Rebecca Birdwell, Assistant Principal:** One of the differences that I see since the school turnaround is I can walk through the halls and interact with adults and students and I see happy kids and happy staff and empowered staff and creativity just everywhere. And before the turnaround you could see that, but you would see it in selective areas.

**Betty Jenkins:** As a team here at Blackshear elementary we have decided that students will not be kept from the FA programming as a consequence because there are many benefits to students participating in the classes.

**Patrick Slevin, Austin Soundwaves:** We have seen the students that we work with are attending school more regularly, they're more academically successful, and what I think is most important, through surveys that we do, pre and post, we see that they're more motivated to come to school, that they have some sort of identity, a creative, a musical, an artistic identity, they have more skills for negotiating conflict, and perhaps most important they have this other group of mentors and teachers that know them very intimately through the study of music, so I think that's very valuable for all students.

**Rebecca Birdwell:** I think that when a six year old can perform the Lion King, they can do anything. And that confidence, I see it transferring from theater class to reading academically and to the systems we have in place for academics. Because we are an academic school and we value academics and we value art as well as academics. It's the confidence I see in kids. From being able to do that, they can take on anything.