The Wiggle Jig: A Comprehensive Outreach Program Developed by BalletMet

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In describing what we do through The Wiggle Jig, we hope to inspire others to develop their own dance programs for early childhood. With so much media attention given to the importance of quality learning for young children, we in the dance community might find increased opportunities to bring dance into the lives of our youngest community members.

THE WIGGLE JIG’S HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

BalletMet piloted The Wiggle Jig in 2009 at one Head Start center in Columbus, Ohio, funded by the Head Start center. From 2010 to 2013, funded by a three-year Grow Up Great! grant from PNC Bank’s Grow Up Great! Foundation, BalletMet continued to develop the program at more Head Start centers throughout the central Ohio community. The Wiggle Jig program is currently funded by both PNC Bank’s Grow Up Great! Foundation and Battelle, and also receives various support from other foundations and donors. Some of the organizations that receive the program contribute to the cost. This is determined by specific grant requirements and each individual organization’s ability to pay. The pre-K centers that host The Wiggle Jig program serve 90 percent low socioeconomic status families, which we know through data received from the centers.

In 2010, in collaboration with Dr. Martha Eddy, founder of the Center for Kinesthetic Education, BalletMet devel-
oped a somatic brain-based curriculum and the pre-K Animal Moves rubric. This rubric, The Wiggle Jig’s primary evaluation tool, allows teaching artists to record each student’s progress in various movement categories on a periodic basis.

In 2012, BalletMet collaborated with playwright Steven C. Anderson and illustrator Sarah DeAngulo Hout to publish a children’s book, Leap and Twirl. This companion book serves as a resource for students and invites family involvement. Leap and Twirl tells the story of how Leap, a frog, and Twirl, a squirrel, discover the joys of dancing through classes with teaching artists from BalletMet. The plot follows a typical preschool day, but includes dance as well. Throughout the story, the characters dance in a circle; make creative shapes with their bodies; and move like bees, bears, and butterflies. Anderson’s rich movement descriptions allow children to follow along with the story and take part in the dance. Every participating child receives a copy of the book during the program’s residency, and there are several lesson plans written around the story for BalletMet teaching artists to use in the classroom. To increase community awareness about The Wiggle Jig, BalletMet holds periodic readings of Leap and Twirl at local libraries, bookstores, and National Dance Day events. The book is available for loan from the Columbus Metropolitan Library and for sale at the BalletMet Dance Center, and various other locations including BarnesandNoble.com. Other partners specific to The Wiggle Jig include Thurber House, which has developed literacy-themed crafts for school residencies, and Columbus State Community College, whose early childhood majors act as teaching artist interns.

In 2013, BalletMet was awarded a Battelle science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) grant to add STEM learning modules to The Wiggle Jig curriculum and expand the program from 10 to 25 weeks in selected locations. Pamela Sofras created four STEM modules that address mathematics, life science, earth science, and physical science. Each of the modules is composed of three lessons, allowing students to deeply explore STEM topics through movement. The Wiggle Jig STEM modules are exceedingly popular among classroom teachers, influencing how they teach these topics. According to Renee Linn, Principal of Sutter Park Elementary School in Worthington, Ohio:

I am seeing how our teachers’ experiences with the BalletMet teachers are influencing their teaching, even if they may not be recognizing it. An excellent example of this is how they are working with our new science standards and some of our teachers are piloting the drafts of our new curriculum maps. Two of our teachers were brainstorming about how they were going to teach children about forms of water and how water changes in the winter. They decided to have their children physically move their bodies to illustrate clouds, rain, and evaporation as well as how water changes to ice and how ice melts, just to name a few. After the lesson, one of the teachers was so excited to tell me how her children were able to sequence the cycles of how water changes and how they were able to remember the challenging vocabulary!” (Linn personal communication, March 5, 2013)

Since its inception, the program has continued to grow and last year served 25 early childhood classrooms through-
out central Ohio—both in early childhood centers and elementary schools. In 2014, BalletMet also licensed The Wiggle Jig program to the Center for Arts-Inspired Learning (CAIL) in northeast Ohio, a Young Audiences affiliate. CAIL has currently served more than eight classrooms in the Cleveland area.

During the 2015–2016 school year, The Wiggle Jig program plans to do the following:

- Reach an estimated 500 preschoolers by offering a combination of 10-, 20-, and 25-week residencies at a variety of sites.
- Provide weekly 30-minute classes and one experiential Dance Center tour for each classroom.
- Provide free state-approved professional development training for classroom teachers led by national experts.
- Hold the second annual PNC Family Day to introduce and unite children and families from pre-K centers participating in BalletMet’s The Wiggle Jig.
- Continue independent professional evaluations to obtain baseline data and progressively measure cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development of participating preschoolers.

**THE WIGGLE JIG CURRICULUM AND CONTENT**

With weekly 30-minute classes in the 10-, 20-, or 25-week The Wiggle Jig residencies, students explore stories and academic subjects through fun and effective movement-based programs. Age-appropriate creative movement activities help improve fine and gross motor skills, simultaneously teaching children to express their emotions more effectively. The program is tailored to the unique needs of each classroom and is led by BalletMet teaching artists with specialized training and bachelor’s degrees. All classes have a live musician who collaborates with the dance teaching artists. Most students participate in the program once during their preschool experience, but some students might have additional opportunities, depending on location and age.

Classroom teachers taking part in The Wiggle Jig program receive free professional development training, led by nationally renowned experts such as Dr. Martha Eddy, Pamela Sofras Med, and Dr. Elena Bodrova. Evaluation of the program occurs periodically with a specialized movement rubric, as well as student, teacher, and parent pre- and postsurveys that are analyzed by an external consultant.

**The Wiggle Jig Program Goals**

Each of the program goals aligns with the Ohio Early Learning and Development Standards (Ohio Department of Education 2012).

**Program Goals**

- **Cognitive**
  - Improve early math skills through rhythm and counting activities.
  - Increase attention span through repetition of movement activities that gradually over time increase in complexity and length.
- **Physical**
  - Improve fine and gross motor skills through engaging children in age-appropriate movement activities that are designed to stimulate the physical senses.
- **Social emotional**
  - Improve social emotional skills through group “parallel play,” small group work, and increasing attention span.
  - Increase understanding of body language and nurture young children’s ability to appropriately express their emotions.
  - Expand the world of preschool children by introducing them to culturally relevant experiences that are outside their typical environment.

**A typical Wiggle Jig class**

Through the Wiggle Jig program, pre-K teachers participate and experience the impact of integrating arts learning into the daily curriculum in their classrooms. In addition to the STEM and Leap and Twirl lesson plans, BalletMet education personnel have created several themed lessons based on seasons, holidays, and numerous children’s books. The Wiggle Jig modules are determined before the first class, in consultation with classroom teachers. With a unique lesson compilation for every classroom, teaching artists supplement and expand on current classroom themes.

Each class typically begins with a “follow-the-leader” activity using locomotor movement—marching, tip-toeing, sliding, and so on—to form a circle. In the circle, teaching artists lead students in a warmup, emphasizing several kinds of movements aligned with the pre-K Animal Moves rubric that tracks locomotor skills based on a brain-based developmental approach as well as use of the visual, auditory, and tactile senses. Following the warmup, the teaching artists introduce the story or themed lesson, which will progress throughout the 10-week period. At the end of each 30-minute class,
students have the opportunity to go across the floor one at a time to practice being both an audience member and a performer. To promote creativity and self-expression, teaching artists discuss dance elements using “artistic” terms (i.e., choreographer, solo, ensemble, etc.) and encourage students to create their own movements, with the attitude that there are no “wrong” answers.

To promote critical thinking, teaching artists often ask students questions about themed subjects and movement. For example, in the STEM life science module lesson about animals, rather than simply telling students to “move like a dog,” teaching artists will ask a number of leading questions to give students the opportunity to share their ideas. The following is an example of an interaction between a teaching artist and students:

Teaching artist: I need a dancer to quietly raise your hand and give me an example of a kind of animal. What kinds of animals can you think of?

Student 1: [Shouts out without raising hand] Cat! Cat!

Teaching artist: I heard some good examples, but I like how [Student 2] raised his hand quietly like I asked. What animal did you think of, [Student 2]?

Student 2: A dog.

Teaching artist: That’s right, a dog is a kind of animal! Now, how many legs does a dog have?

Students: Four!

Teaching artist: Correct, dogs have four legs. Now how many legs do people walk on? How many legs do you have?

Students: Two!

Teaching artist: We walk on two legs, that’s right. So do dogs have more legs or fewer legs than humans?

Students: More!

Teaching artist: Correct! Do you think dogs move in the same way as humans? How would dogs move differently?

Students: They wag their tails!

Teaching artist: They do wag their tails. How else do dogs move?

Students: Roll over! Sit! Lie down!

Teaching artist: Use your body to show me what it looks like when a dog sits. [Pause for students to make “sitting dog” shape.] Now show me how you lay down. [Pause for students to make “lying dog” shape.] Very carefully, I want you show me what it looks like for a dog to roll over. But make sure you don’t run into any of your dog friends when you roll over! Let’s all roll over this way [pointing to the right] on the count of three—one, two, three! Excellent. Let’s put together some of our dog movements to make a dog dance! Does anyone remember what our magic number is in dance?

Students: Eight!

Teaching artist: That’s right! Eight is our magic number. So let’s put our dance together and do each dog movement for eight counts. Start by finding your standing dog shape. First, let’s wag our tails for eight counts. [Nonverbally prompts students to perform the movements as we discuss them.] After we wag our tails, show me how you sit, and freeze in that shape for eight counts. Next, we will lie down and freeze in our lying dog shape for eight counts. Then very carefully, take eight counts to roll over just like we practiced, and when you are done, find an ending dog shape and freeze. Remember, dancers tell stories with their bodies, not their voices. Without using your voices, let’s practice our dog dance.

The dialogue continues in this way while students give other examples of animals. If a student says “Bird,” for example, the teaching artist might ask how many legs birds have. “But do birds normally use their legs to move? What else do birds have that helps them move? How do birds use their wings? Let’s put those movements together and create a bird dance.” By using a combination of asking questions and movement exploration, the students are encouraged to develop and engage critical thinking skills and understand the information on a deeper level.

Other aspects of the program

Participating classrooms also have the opportunity to take a field trip to the BalletMet Dance Center. During the hour-long tour, students have a movement class in one of BalletMet’s studios, make a dance-related craft, explore different kinds of costumes and dance shoes, walk through the Costume Shop, and observe part of a Company ballet class. The immersive tour experience allows students to see dance from a different perspective, giving them a deeper understanding of the art form.

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EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

Most recently, BalletMet engaged Measurement Resources to design, conduct, and implement a comprehensive program and impact evaluation for *The Wiggle Jig*. Measurement Resources is a firm that uses data-driven management tools, such as evaluation, organizational development, and performance measurement to help organizations evaluate their programs and business. Neuromotor skill gains were assessed using BalletMet’s pre-K Animal Moves movement rubric. All other outcomes were measured using pre- and post-residency student, parent, and teacher surveys. The evaluation focused on the satisfaction level of teachers, students, and parents who were participants in the program as well as specific student outcomes. Examples of outcomes included participation in neuromotor skills and gains in cognitive ability, creativity, movement, mathematics, literacy, and socioemotional skills. The following description highlights the results for the 2014–2015 program evaluation.

Overall, teachers, parents, and students have strong positive attitudes about *The Wiggle Jig* program. For example, 100 percent of teachers in both the 25-week program and the 10-week program reported that dance and movement was a valuable part of their classroom. The evaluation examined the learning gains of more than 230 students (256 10-week students and 59 25-week students) as reported by teachers based on their observations and other measurement tools. Students in both the 10-week and 25-week programs showed similar gains in socioemotional skills as well as STEM-related skills. Some highlights of program impacts include the following (Chaney Jones and Fahey 2015).

- **Significant gains in neuromotor skills.** The average number of students completing or exceeding expectations in neuromotor goals grew from 32 percent at Week 1 to 80 percent at Week 10. Approximately 85 percent of the students were able to complete or exceed expectations in these skills by Week 25 (see Figure 1).
- **Gains in math skills.** The average math scale score for the 10-week students increased by 10 percent from Week 1 to Week 10. The average math scale score for the 25-week students increased by 11 percent from Week 1 to Week 25 (see Figure 2).
- **Gains in science skills.** The average science scale score for the 25-week students increased by 10 percent from Week 1 to Week 25. The average science scale score for the 10-week students increased by 11 percent from Week 1 to Week 10 (see Figure 2).
- **Gains in cognition skills.** The average cognition scale score for the 25-week students increased by 6 percent from Week 1 to Week 25. The average cognition scale score for the 10-week students increased by 9 percent from Week 1 to Week 10 (see Figure 2).
- After the 10-week class, 93 percent of the teachers reported increased confidence in using dance in their classroom.
- 92.6 percent and 100 percent, respectively, of the teachers agreed that students liked when they danced and moved after the 10- and 25-week classes.
- The majority of parents agreed that dance and movement helps students with their learning.
- More than 90 percent of parents agreed that their child likes to dance after the 10-week and 25-week programs.

In the future, BalletMet hopes to improve evaluation methods further by adding a control group to determine whether students would have experienced similar gains without a dance program. (The students in the control group would be designated to participate in the *The Wiggle Jig* program the following session.) More work might also be needed in educating parents and teachers on how *The Wiggle Jig* is designed to enhance academic and motor skills.

CONCLUSION

BalletMet’s *The Wiggle Jig* program is a model of how a professional ballet company can provide young students with a fun and educational movement curriculum. The positive results from evaluation materials show that students who
participate in *The Wiggle Jig* program benefit not only in neuromotor skill development, but also in social skills and in academic areas such as math, science, and general cognition. Furthermore, exposure to dance promotes cultural literacy in participating children through their participation and exposure to the art form. It is clear that *The Wiggle Jig* can make dance and movement accessible to large population of young students and give classroom teachers the tools to include movement in daily curricula. We at BalletMet plan to continue to enhance this comprehensive approach that links dance with early childhood education.

**Figure 1.** Average Percentage of Students Able to Complete or Exceed Motor Development Goals by Class Week.

**Figure 2.** Gains in Social-Emotional and STEM Skills by Program Type.

**REFERENCES**


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