

# BALLROOM BASIX "Art: A Catalyst for Change" Final Report

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## Introduction

With support from the "Art: A Catalyst for Change" grant, BALLROOM BASIX launched an arts-based anti-violence initiative in two co-located high schools at Brooklyn's 400 Irving Avenue campus in Spring 2025. Designed to promote respect, cooperation, and emotional awareness through ballroom dance instruction, the program culminated in a dance performance and celebration known as the BASH. This report documents observations from the orientation and final event, incorporating reflections from students, teachers, and teaching artists, and aligns outcomes with current research in anti-violence and positive youth development.

## Program Context

BALLROOM BASIX worked with students from The Brooklyn School for Social Justice and The Academy for Urban Planning. Weekly instruction introduced foundational ballroom dance concepts, etiquette, and multicultural dance forms. The curriculum emphasized respectful partner interaction, personal boundaries, and collaboration. These are key social-emotional skills tied to anti-violence work. The program culminated in a school performance and community celebration.

## Observed Outcomes

### Orientation

The program began with three separate orientation sessions, each marked by a mix of student curiosity, anxiety, and resistance, particularly regarding physical proximity required for partner dancing. Common themes included discomfort with touch, concern about dancing with same-gender peers, dancing with someone you didn't know well, and general nervousness about being seen and observed by others.

Student engagement and participation were varied across the three orientation sessions. Some students readily joined in the large group discussions and call-and-response exercises, while others disengaged, sat quietly, or joked with peers. When asked, some students shared their feelings and concerns around partner ballroom dancing:

"I don't like anyone to be too close."

"I don't know them."

"I'm scared of dancing."

Despite these challenges, the sessions remained largely orderly, with students staying present and participating to varying degrees. BALLROOM BASIX staff co-created a safe space where students could ask questions, communicate their discomfort, share knowledge, and express curiosity and excitement. Staff modeled openness and affirmation, using humor, clear expectations, and cultural responsiveness to build initial trust.

Notably, students began to show interest in the cultural aspects of dance, with a few volunteering during activities. While group dynamics were occasionally disrupted by noise or lack of engagement, especially during one orientation that took place during a co-scheduled gym class, most students remained respectful. The groundwork for deeper participation and social-emotional growth was laid during this early stage.

### Culminating "BALLROOM BASIX BASH" Event

Rehearsal for the BASH performance revealed significant growth since the orientation. Students partnered comfortably, including same-gender pairs, adapted smoothly to changes in partners, and followed directions with minimal prompting. Other students decorated the space with handmade signs for the BASH. A palpable sense of excitement and energy filled the space.

At the performance, students previously unsure about the program danced with confidence and joy, many smiling, laughing, and encouraging one another. They performed choreographed routines that also involved call-and-response and learned etiquette – "May I have this dance with you, please?" "Yes, you may, and thank you for asking!" – in front of classmates, staff, family, and a local official. Mutual respect and a sense of pride and accomplishment were evident.

Audience participation was encouraged by the BASH MC, fostering audience engagement and celebration, while also imparting culturally based knowledge about the dances to the broader school community. While some student audience members needed to leave before the event was over, the audience was largely participatory, engaged, and supportive, applauding after each routine.

The BASH concluded with the student and adult dancers high-fiving and celebrating together, taking a group picture to commemorate the conclusion and success of the program initiative.

### **Student Reflections**

Informal interviews conducted at the BASH offered rich insights into students' experiences and positive views of the program and its social benefits.

- Many initially felt awkward or resistant, especially regarding touch and partner dancing.

- Over time, they reported feeling more comfortable with the physical touch required for ballroom dancing
- Many felt the program helped them get to know peers better, feel connected, and get along better.
- Students appreciated the opportunity to learn about cultures through dance.
- Students felt the program was "fun."
- One student suggested increasing participation by incorporating student input on music and allowing more leadership from within the student body.

Notably, even students who opted not to dance in class or at the BASH due to their shyness or discomfort shared positive observations and views of the program.

### **School Staff & Teaching Artists' Participation and Reflections**

While several school staff members participated in the program orientation, voicing support and excitement for the program, communicating and collaborating with teaching artists, providing redirection and emotional support to students, and reinforcing program expectations, this level of participation and collaboration was not consistent throughout the program's life. However, one teacher proved to be a strong partner, engaging with and supporting the program throughout its implementation.

She consistently communicated with teaching artists, engaged with and guided students, and supported them, participating in weekly classes and the BASH performance. In her words, "I love the program. I think it gives the kids an opportunity to learn something different." The teacher's enthusiastic adoption of the program in these ways directly impacted her students; her class had the highest number of student participants in the BASH performance.

Over the months of the program, Ballroom Basix teaching artists observed meaningful growth in students' confidence, cooperation, and openness. They also reported challenges due to inconsistent school administration and teacher support, resulting in missed classes, inadequate communication, and a lack of support in addressing some student behavioral concerns, such as teasing of participating students, as well as logistical issues like sharing a gym space.

Despite these obstacles, the teaching artists emphasized students' resilience and responsiveness when given encouragement and clear structure. They also voiced the integral role the participating teacher played in her students' participation, embracement, and success in the program. According to evaluator observations, the teaching artists' teaching and relationship-building skills, cultural competency, and bilingual skills also directly impacted student involvement and program success. Their ability to connect with the students was evident during the BASH, with many students excitedly greeting the teaching artists upon arrival, seeking them out to chat, readily dancing with them, and hugging them goodbye before leaving, a testament to the teaching artists' ability to foster relationship and create a safe and nurturing environment, integral to any anti-violence programming.

## Evidence of Anti-Violence Outcomes

While the students and staff did not use the term "anti-violence" directly, feedback and observations gathered during the orientation and culminating BASH event reveal clear indicators that the "Art: A Catalyst for Change" project fostered increased social cohesion, peer connection, and emotional resilience, all of which are consistent with anti-violence education goals.

Several students reflected on how the program helped foster student connections. One 10th-grade student, Myasia, shared that, "At the beginning, it was difficult figuring out how to work together (with other students) and over time it got easier." She acknowledged the discomfort many students felt around partner dancing, calling it "awkward." Still, she emphasized that despite these challenges, the program helped students get along better and connect with peers they had not previously known. Similarly, Josh, an 11th grader, described the program as "fun" and said it helped him get to know people better/differently. Jenhsen, another 11th grader, agreed the program helped students get along better, and suggested that student participation could be improved if more support were given to help shy students feel comfortable. A group of 10th-grade students, Javier, Amanda, and Alantra, echoed this sentiment, saying the program was fun and that they enjoyed dancing and being able to hang out with and get to know students they don't usually spend time with. Although they initially found the physical proximity of dancing uncomfortable, they shared that it became easier over time.

These comments, while grounded in the experience of ballroom dancing, reflect a deeper set of social-emotional outcomes: increased interpersonal trust, boundary negotiation, and the ability to move through discomfort toward connection. These are foundational components of violence prevention and pro-social development.

At the culminating BASH event, these outcomes were visibly evident. The student body that previously expressed discomfort now was amply participating, rotating partners with ease, and offering mutual encouragement. High-fives, spontaneous clapping, and laughter underscored a positive and cohesive group dynamic.

The structure and guiding frame of the program, grounded in respect, etiquette, and cooperation, offered students the opportunity to practice non-verbal communication, manage boundaries, and build trust, all within a structured and joyful experience. Although not all students chose to participate, those who did reported growth in confidence and a deeper connection to their peers. Taken together, these qualitative data points demonstrate that the Ballroom Basix Catalyst for Change initiative, through its ballroom dance foundation, functioned not only as an arts education program but also as a vehicle for promoting relational skills that can reduce conflict and build more connected school communities.

## **Alignment with Research**

The outlined outcomes of the Ballroom Basix Catalyst for Change initiative align with existing research on anti-violence arts-based programs and positive youth development frameworks.

- The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) highlights that arts-based programs like dance foster social-emotional development, emotional regulation, empathy, and social behavior, critical competencies for violence prevention (OJJDP, n.d.). Ballroom Basix's structured partner work and group dance practice support these competencies, as seen in students' increased ease and respectful peer interactions over time.
- In an article in *The Atlantic*, Levinson (2016) emphasizes that ballroom dance promotes empathy, respect, and teamwork, especially in underserved youth populations. This is evidenced in students' reflections on getting to know peers differently and cooperating through dance.
- Studies on similar programs, such as *Dancing Classrooms*, show how ballroom dance fosters kindness, communication, manners, and social skills critical for healthy peer relationships (Curriculum Review, 2014). These findings parallel the goals and observed outcomes of the Ballroom Basix Catalyst for Change initiative.
- Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory, as discussed by Haglund et al. (2022), underscores the importance of safe, inclusive spaces where youth can express themselves, build resilience, and develop caring relationships. Ballroom Basix's approach to creating a respectful environment through dance aligns with these PYD principles, promoting character, confidence, and connection.

Given that the outcomes of the Ballroom Basix Catalyst for Change initiative align with existing arts-based anti-violence research and positive youth development best practices, it presents a compelling case for replicating and expanding the program, alongside continued research and investment.

## **Challenges and Recommendations**

Challenges:

- Student initial resistance to partner dancing and physical proximity, reflecting discomfort and social anxiety around unfamiliar touch and teamwork.
- Inconsistent teacher engagement, which affected classroom management and student buy-in.
- Environmental distractions (e.g., noise interference during one orientation) adversely impacting teaching and student engagement.

- Limited time for building trust and overcoming any interpersonal barriers given the brief residency period.
- Shyness and self-consciousness among some students, who may benefit from additional confidence-building supports.
- Lack of formal data collection or long-term tracking to assess sustained impact beyond the BASH event.

Recommendations:

- Increase teacher/staff involvement and training to enable them to support the dance residency better and reinforce program goals throughout the school day.
- Expand residency duration or offer multiple cycles to deepen student trust and skills, allowing more time for shy or resistant students to engage.
- Incorporate discussions and explorations about societal and cultural gender and sexuality expectations, norms, and stereotypes and their impact on comfort or discomfort with partner dancing, particularly for same-gendered partnerships.
- Mitigate environmental distractions by securing quiet spaces for orientation sessions and weekly classes.
- Develop formal assessment tools to quantitatively and qualitatively measure social-emotional growth, conflict reduction, and engagement over time.
- Explore partnerships with researchers or evaluators to document long-term effects and support future grant applications emphasizing evidence-based outcomes.
- Continue to use and expand Positive Youth Development frameworks in programming and evaluation to maximize social and emotional benefits.

### Conclusion

BALLROOM BASIX represents a promising and innovative approach to integrating arts education and violence prevention. Using the engaging medium of Ballroom & Latin dance, students are invited into a safe, structured, and fun space to build skills that extend far beyond the dance floor, including empathy, respect, boundary setting, and peer connection.

The BALLROOM BASIX "Art: A Catalyst for Change" initiative demonstrated clear short-term impact in advancing social-emotional development and peer connection among high school students in two co-located schools in Brooklyn. Despite challenges inherent in working with a diverse and sometimes hesitant student population, the program demonstrated meaningful progress in social cohesion and student confidence. The culminating BASH event showcased the transformative power of partnered dancing to enhance student relationships and cultivate a positive school climate.

Aligned with arts-based anti-violence research and best practices in positive youth development, BALLROOM BASIX is well-positioned to serve as a scalable model for other schools seeking creative, arts-based solutions to reduce violence and enhance student well-being. Future iterations that incorporate robust school partnership, longer residencies, and

rigorous evaluation will strengthen its impact and sustainability. Ultimately, programs like Ballroom Basix offer not only a creative outlet but a vital pathway toward safer, more connected communities of young people.

## References

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