Arts Learning in Oregon
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ON THE COVER
Oregon Ballet Theatre
teaching artist Hannah Downs dances with students at Forest Hills Elementary in Lake Oswego. Photo © Brook Manning
Making/Deepening Connections

In our increasingly complex world, where so many connect via mobile electronic devices, social media and video conferencing, there are still ways to make powerful personal connections. And the arts are an ideal vehicle for deepening those connections. We’re lucky: many programs in Oregon are committed to digging deeper: providing learning experiences for students that take advantage of the expertise of multiple partners to make every dollar and minute stretch as far as possible.

On July 1, 2012, Oregon HB 2220 took effect, encouraging schools to use “performance-based assessment” to measure the ability of a student to use knowledge and skills to create a complex or multifaceted product or complete a complex task. This policy shift indicates a willingness to move away from standardized testing and allow students to mark progress through multiple means. Oregon has a ready tool to accomplish this: the arts excel at allowing students to demonstrate their mastery of a subject through diverse and creative tactics.

This movement toward more flexibility and creativity aligns neatly with Governor John Kitzhaber’s 40-40-20 educational attainment goal (40% of Oregonians obtain a Bachelor’s Degree, 40% obtain an Associate’s Degree or post-secondary credential and 20% obtain a high school diploma or equivalent) since research continues to illustrate the critical benefits of arts experiences: improved student attendance at school\(^1\), increased SAT scores\(^2\), higher rates of college attendance, increased likelihood of having jobs that pay family-sustaining wages, higher likelihood of voting, and higher likelihood of community engagement as an adult\(^3\).

The stories in this publication underscore the important connections the arts make for young people.

**Community:** When schools cut back to a four day week in northeast Oregon, the Wallowa Valley Music Alliance provided a safe environment for kids to learn to play traditional instruments.

**Education:** Jackson Elementary in Hillsboro used visiting artists to build a community of teachers. Wordstock made use of bilingual writers to help all students feel successful in their creative writing.

**Culture:** Portland Taiko gave students a voice to speak through Japanese drumming. The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art engaged University of Oregon’s international students to develop curriculum to accompany their extensive Asian art collection.

**History:** Portland Opera To Go made a classic art form engaging and relevant in schools – large and small – breaking down stereotypes about different kinds of storytelling.

**Career:** Working artists provided professional training to Oregon Children’s Theatre students, helping to launch their careers to college and beyond.

**Health:** Oregon Ballet Theatre made sure children stayed physically active, advocated by First Lady Michelle Obama in her Let’s Move initiative.

The Oregon Arts Commission is making connections too. In partnership with the Oregon Department of Education, the Commission developed a searchable online database that tracks access to in-school arts classes in every school in the state. Users can search by school name or school district to see what classes were offered in 2009-2010 and 2010-2011:

[www.oregonartscommission.org/programs/arts-learning](http://www.oregonartscommission.org/programs/arts-learning)

Armed with stories and tools, what other connections might we make? To school boards and administrators? To local arts organizations? To dedicated groups of advocates?

Christine D’Arcy, Executive Director
Portland Taiko: A Voice for the People
Japanese Drum Integrates Art, Culture, Education in Elementary Residencies

Perseverance, respect and cooperation. These are the principles that guide Portland Taiko, the last professional taiko group on the west coast. Taiko is taken from the Japanese word for drum, and is in fact the Japanese art form of performance drumming. Although taiko originated in ancient Japanese culture, its true flowering among Asian Americans arose with the Civil Rights Movement.

“It became a way for us to say ‘No! We have a voice, we have sound, we can be loud, we can be proud,” says Michelle Fuji, Portland Taiko’s Artistic Director. Taiko also expressed the lingering social and psychological effects of Japanese-American internment camps during World War II. “It was a voice for expression, and for our identity, to demand reparations.”

Today, Portland Taiko provides five to eight residencies each academic year reaching students from kindergarten through sixth grade. Most of their residencies incorporate the entire school as in Oak Grove Elementary in Milwaukie where Taiko teaching artists led nineteen classes in that school alone. These residencies integrate cultural and historical education with hands-on experience along with the key principles of taiko (perseverance, respect and cooperation). “We encourage students to do some sort of sharing, like ‘what does respect mean for you?’” recalls Fuji. “We have as much reflection as we can to enhance taiko learning.”

Portland Taiko prepares teachers for residencies to give them the best tools possible in order to integrate the residency into their current curriculum, whether that is US history, Asian studies or self-management techniques. They’re provided with study guides, history lessons, and professional support as they take on a lesson that might be entirely new to them. The class watches historical videos, Japanese taiko terminology is introduced, and written exercises help taiko study to be a holistically educational experience.

In the longer sessions, students collaborate together on a performance piece to enhance cooperation, presented to their own school or community at the end of the program. Even teachers participate. “For the students to see their teacher on the same playing level as them, if they can see their teacher learning, it can give them more courage,” explains Fuji. “It’ll give them the opportunity to see that everyone needs to learn – your teacher isn’t just on this pedestal.”

And Fuji has heard from teachers time and time again that taiko was the highlight of the year. “Our kids were enthralled,” recalls Aubrey Pagenstecher, a pre-K teacher.

“Our kids were enthralled. The vast majority of our students do not have access to arts experiences like this outside of the school day.”

AUBREY PAGENSTECHER, WOODLAWN ELEMENTARY TEACHER

The audience is encouraged to participate during a family performance of “Ponta & The Big Drum.”

Photo © Chris Roesing
at Portland’s Woodlawn School. “The vast majority of our students do not have access to arts experiences like this outside of the school day.”

The residency not only helps students make connections with heritage, they’re able to recognize diversity in a positive way. “Some of the students at rural schools we visit have never even been to Portland, much less seen a taiko performance,” explains Fuji. “Our residency can be really eye-opening.” Although rural residencies can be difficult logistically, this season a group of taiko players traveled to Lebanon for a three-day residency funded by the Oregon Arts Commission. With their extensive exposure to the art form over many days, students “eagerly and enthusiastically participated. Even students who are known for not doing well in groups were highly engaged,” reports Wayne Reposa, a teacher at Pioneer School in the Lebanon Community School District. “Students were opened up to a new curiosity for other cultures and began exploring on their own.”

Despite logistical differences, both rural and urban residencies bring new ideas to students and teachers. History, language, music, and performance all come together to integrate into education, and Fuji reports “students are really making applications to the rest of their lives because of this, which is very rewarding to hear. Taiko doesn’t exist in isolation, it becomes a metaphor.” This art isn’t just making smarter kids, its making better kids – perseverance, respect, and cooperation are principles everyone could use a little more of.
“Opera is not a hard thing for kids to accept,” says Alexis Hamilton, Education Director of Portland Opera and coordinator of the company’s Portland Opera To Go (POGO) program. “They aren’t weirded out by the idea of singing as communication.” This is not usually the case with introducing opera to adults, many of whom have multiple stereotypes to break down (glass-shattering diva in a Viking hat, anyone?), children, in contrast, have an easier time. “They’re also not bothered by not understanding language – they receive information in lots of different ways,” Hamilton explains.

Traveling much like the troubadours of old who developed the art form, the teaching artists of Portland Opera To Go travel across Oregon, Idaho and Washington to bring opera to students from kindergarten through high school. Teachers are prepped with materials to help integrate opera into their current lesson plans, and the traveling teaching artists spend around thirty minutes in each classroom focusing on an arts-centric topic. “They might focus on singing or the opera process – vocal work, casting, etc. – depending on what they’re comfortable and the audience they’re with,” explains Hamilton. After the lesson the students watch a full production (albeit shortened and in English), and tours will often do nearly eighty shows across Oregon in a span of ten weeks.

In a teaching residency that demands such a serious time commitment, the selection of teaching artists who can sing can be daunting. “It’s not just a voice,” explains Hamilton. “It’s an ability to connect with kids. It’s a different skill set – you have to be truly passionate about this art form.” Often the teaching artists are younger artists, though they usually come with extensive opera training and the ability to translate their own artistry into an engaging classroom adventure. “Opera is a combination of so many vocations and subjects that it can only enhance the learning experience,” says Stacey Murdock, a current teaching artist with the program. “Many see opera as an isolated genre. On the contrary, it is connected to everything.” For teachers who might not be comfortable with arts integration, the teaching artists use themes of opera to create lessons that range from the biographies of composers to a map-making lesson for the show *Hansel and Gretel*, because, what if they had had a map?

The shows – including *Hansel and Gretel* – are performed on a rotating basis depending on the age group Portland
Opera to Go is working with. Yet, while age-appropriate, the performances themselves are always authentic. “I feel strongly for the kids themselves that if they see one of our shows, it should be something they can see in an opera house,” says Hamilton. The reaction to particular performances can vary but Hamilton reports that students in both rural and urban communities are consistently delighted.

“In rural communities the children can be a little scared,” says Hamilton. “Sometimes they’ve never even been to a movie theatre, so they really have no frame of reference.” But the reality is, the troupe wouldn’t be there if someone hadn’t asked them, so there’s at least one teacher who’s passionate about what’s going on. “Opera is a supremely moving way to tell a story,” she explains. “This opens a door in kids’ minds to what might be out there – there’s more than just their small culture.” Breaking the stereotypes of opera has to start early, and the remarkable teaching artists of Portland Opera To Go are on the move to do just that – in Portland and beyond.
Jordan Schnitzer Museum: A Teacher’s Resource
Asian Art Collection Provides Basis for Innovative Curriculum

Chinese artist King Tang first shows the students how to hold the pen during his calligraphy lesson at Eugene’s McCornack Elementary. Next, he draws two ears that will eventually become a mouse, one of the twelve signs on the Chinese Zodiac. An audible “awww” goes up from the classroom of third grade students when the drawing is complete, its ears resembling another mouse Tang thinks they might know better: a mouse named Mickey.

Tang’s lesson is a part of the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art’s “ArtsBridge Asia” program, an extension of the original “ArtsBridge,” which has long connected University of Oregon arts students with local classrooms for a term of student teaching. Now “ArtsBridge” focuses more on Asian art curriculum, taking applications from students who are interested in Asian Studies as well the arts. These student teachers are able to use the Asian arts curriculum that the museum has worked to develop in classrooms and continue the dialogue that the museum has established with teachers to create a more accessible curriculum.

“We wanted to bridge the gap with other cultures,” explains Lisa Abia-Smith, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art’s Education Director, “and we know that early exposure to the arts makes kids better thinkers.” Two years ago, using the museum’s first Oregon Arts Commission grant, Abia-Smith put together an advisory board of art and classroom teachers from across the state to better utilize the museum’s 6,000-plus objects in its Asian art collection.

One suggestion that took root was if the students couldn’t get to the museum, the museum would come to them. Now teachers receive “arts boxes” when they join “ArtsBridge,” complete with tools, artifacts, and lesson plans that include activities in order to contextualize what might seem like impenetrable cultural topics. “We had some unexpected conversations when it came to the tiny slipper for bound feet in the China kit,” says Kathryn Proffit, a teacher at Portland’s Arthur Academy who utilized the “ArtsBridge Asia” program and art boxes for her students. “Some of my girls felt sad, and some were upset that this practice was done to young girls.”

The Schnitzer Museum has gone even further this year to promote cultural education and conversation. After the University of Oregon received a Title 6 grant from the US Department of Education to build...
international infrastructure, it partnered with the museum to work with students from China, training in the United States to be teachers. Working with the Schnitzer Museum, those future Chinese teachers learned how to integrate arts into their curriculum, receiving a more holistic training than they might have otherwise. These teachers were then able to turn around and provide feedback and actual teaching for “ArtsBridge” classrooms before bringing what they’ve learned back to their homes in China. “It was great to see this “light” go on in their eyes,” says Abia-Smith. “We’re really giving them tools for teaching.” The University of Oregon’s number of international students has also grown since integrating “ArtsBridge Asia,” with an increase of 30% more Korean students this year.

Abia-Smith said the museum has ongoing plans for improving the resources they offer all teachers. “One goal is to have an online source where teachers can go to find objects that directly connect to their curriculum,” she explains. “It’s in PDF form now, but we envision a richer and more interactive experience in the future. As Oregon is increasingly engaged in trade with Asia, it will be important that our students appreciate the depth and subtleties of Asian culture.” They’re also working to develop after-school programs on Asian art. With the overriding mission to connect Asian culture, art, and teachers with students of all ages, the Jordan Schnitzer Museum is on the cutting edge of arts education – especially with a curriculum that works.

“We wanted to bridge the gap with other cultures and we know that early exposure to the arts makes kids better thinkers.”

—Lisa Abia-Smith
Education Director
Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art

Exchange students from China help Eugene area students learn traditional calligraphy techniques. Photo © Jack Liu
“Art is our culture,” says John Pede, Principal of Hillsboro’s Jackson Elementary School whose school, he says, always “had a rhythm of being arts focused.” Four years ago, when Pede was hired, the administrators and teachers kicked that ethos into overdrive. “We’re really trying to integrate the arts into every subject as a way to engage kids and give them lifelong tools.”

Jackson Elementary is one of four schools in Hillsboro to work with the Right Brain Initiative, a program that brings artist residencies on a regular basis. “It’s not just bringing an artist in,” says Pede, “it’s using art for learning. We set academic goals based on our curriculum and the artist we’re working with.” Whether that means using Ghanian rhythms to explain patterns in math class or the art of frozen image tableau to create a physical expression of the Oregon Trail, the school reaches out to every kind of learner through kinesthetic, tactile, visual, and auditory lessons.

In a residency two years ago with Loud and Clear, a public speaking program through Oregon Children’s Theatre, Pede and his teachers used the group’s techniques to update their own public speaking curriculum in the fourth, fifth and sixth grades. “Why recreate the wheel when we have a professional group showing us how to do it?” explains Pede of their new lesson plan which leveraged the residency and guidance from professional artists. “We have students who to this day are still using the techniques they learned in that class, and they loved the experience.”

The enthusiastic principal explains that the school operates on a ‘whole child’ philosophy. “We’re not just concerned with academic, but personal, emotional, and physical well being, and we’ve found that art really binds those all together.” Art has also bound the school together as a community in the four years he’s been there, as he’s found his teachers are more open to finding creative pathways best teach their students.

“We have developed a real community where taking risks is okay,” explains Pede, and the school is quick to support a teacher who might be working outside his or her comfort zone – especially if they’re not from an arts background. “These kids are all different! There’s no one size fits all, in teaching or in learning,” says Pede. The school focuses on using art to create multiple options for teachers and multiple tools for child development. “They are focused on
meeting the high expectations they have set for themselves...but they never lose sight of the arts as one of the tools to help them get there,” says Ed Dennis, a parent of two Jackson students and the Deputy Superintendent of the Oregon Department of Education.

That’s not to say that there isn’t the occasional stumble. Pede cites an example of a new math program in place this year that’s completely different than what the teachers are used to, though it’s very engaging for the students. “If a teacher says, ‘Hey, I’m struggling with this,’ other teachers come to observe them and give them constructive feedback. We work out a support system of improvement, and our collegial relationships are really unparalleled.”

It’s that community support that keeps the school energized and keeps teachers going through the more difficult situations, but it wasn’t always this way. Teaching can easily lend itself to solitary careers, where one classroom is all a teacher might ever think about. “Things used to be more fragmented,” says Pede, “but now everyone has a much greater idea of the bigger picture. There’s shared leadership – they see problems collectively and work on solutions collectively.”

Those solutions, time and time again, come from the culture of the arts they integrate into their day-to-day lives at Jackson. “I want my children (and all children) to be able to think outside of the box, and working with the arts opens the mind,” says Dennis. “Art helps kids understand that life is about making mistakes, making corrections, and moving forward.” And what better way to do that than a well-rounded, creative approach?
Wallowa Music: Connecting a Community
Championing Music Education, Performance in Northeast Oregon

Ten students regularly attend guitar classes at Musical Expressions for Youth, an after-school music program established by the Wallowa Valley Music Alliance in Enterprise. The program is small, but its effect is expansive. To put the attendance numbers in perspective, if a similar music program took place in Portland, it would need to attract nearly 2,000 students on a weekly basis in order to achieve an impact comparable to one in the rural communities of northeast Oregon.

In 2002, schools in Wallowa County went on a four-day school week in order to save on transportation costs. Seeking an arts-based activity to help fill the Fridays of local students, Executive Director Janis Carper established Wallowa Valley Music Alliance in 2004 with the mission of growing the musical community in Wallowa County, beginning with its youngest residents. Students – both boys and girls – aged eight to twelve arrive from all over Wallowa County for focused guitar instruction on Friday mornings.

“Heidi Muller, Music Alliance Board Member

...music education is so important for brain development in young children, not to mention the enjoyment they have in being creative.”

Brady Goss, a professional musician who participated in Musical Expressions for Youth through middle school and, after graduating from high school, continued to pursue a career in music. He’s a regular performer at Music Alliance events and has released two albums of his own music. “The WVMA was my first support group,” he says. Several other students who went through the program also continued on to a musical career, although Carper believes students with any level of skill can benefit from the opportunity.

For the younger students, Music Alliance board member Heidi Muller teaches using cardboard box instruments for students to try out. Used as an introductory instrument, the dulcimer helps children to develop confidence in their musical abilities. “It’s one of the easiest instruments to learn, and there’s no need to read music,” says Muller, noting that, “music education is so important for brain development in young children, not to mention the enjoyment they have in being creative.” The Music Alliance also donates recorders for every fourth grader in the Joseph, Enterprise and Wallowa schools every year.

While the Music Alliance has an intentional focus on youth education, it also sponsors the well-attended monthly Courthouse Concert, the annual Juniper Jam Festival, and camps and workshops for all ages year-round. Professional musicians from around the Northwest travel to Enterprise, Joseph, and other communities.

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in Wallowa County to perform (sometimes with local students and amateur musicians) and inspire their audiences.

Carper sees these full musical calendars as the Music Alliance’s major “behind-the-scenes” role in the community. “By keeping music in front of the public,” she explains, “it’s a constant reminder for the local residents about how much music is a part of their lives, and should be for their children.” Private fundraising has made it possible for every student in Wallowa County to have weekly music education. “If there was no evidence in the valley that music mattered to ordinary everyday people and their families, I bet it would be a much harder sell for those education foundations to raise the money,” reasons Carper.

Enriching their community, bringing together families and opening doors for young students, the Wallowa Valley Music Alliance has shown they know how to do a lot with very little. “We have a great sense of community in Wallowa,” says Muller, “and the arts bring us together.”
Since 2005, Wordstock has become one of the Northwest’s favorite literary festivals, but it is their lesser-known writing residencies that bring the enthusiasm for writing out of the convention hall and into the classroom. Their Wordstock Writers Residencies not only reach out to the elementary students they target, but integrate families and teachers into the learning process as well.

“Prior to the training, I wouldn’t have considered myself a writer,” recalls Tai Bainter, a third grade teacher at Vancouver’s Harney Elementary. “I was very nervous to write and avoided writing whenever possible.” Bainter participated in Wordstock’s Teacher as Writer training, a week-long summer program for eighteen teachers to prepare for their upcoming Wordstock residency – and emerged with a new outlook on writing – and teaching. “I completely changed how I teach writing. I now give students many more opportunities to write.”

Writing is particularly important in schools with large English Language Learner populations, like Harney Elementary. The school, a Spanish immersion program, has many parents who speak English or Spanish – but rarely both. Wordstock workshops and residencies connect parents who might never have crossed paths, deepening the school’s community, while also working to connect students with their families. One of these programs is a Parents Partners Workshop, specifically designed to give parents the tools to help their children with writing in whatever language their homework is completed.

“Parents can really set the tone,” says Rachel Sokolow, Wordstock Education Director. “And we encourage them to write, too – they do all the exercises we’re suggesting for their kids. Then they can see how self conscious it can make you.”

Carmen Bernier-Grand, a bilingual writer and Wordstock Resident at Harney, tells the story of how, when growing up in Puerto Rico, her own mother would make young Carmen read to her in English every night. It wasn’t until Carmen was a teenager that she realized her mother couldn’t understand the language her daughter was reading in. Her mother knew her daughter needed practice, and that familial support became one of the biggest contributing factors to Carmen’s success as a writer.
In the classroom, Bernier-Grand is equally successful inspiring the third graders in Bainter’s classroom. “After the first day of having Carmen in my classroom, students’ eyes were glued to the schedule the moment that they entered the classroom because they were checking to see when she was coming back,” recalls Bainter of Bernier-Grand’s residency this spring. “Every single student in my class enjoyed learning from Carmen. She was wonderful working with students with special needs and helped each student feel successful with his/her writing.”

With the multi-pronged outreach to students, parents, teachers and communities, Wordstock hasn’t lost sight of its beginnings as a literary festival. As so many arts organizations are acutely aware, the economics behind bringing arts programs to fruition is a complex puzzle, especially since the economic downturn of 2008. “We have to be a lot more resourceful and open to partnering with neighborhood organizations,” says Sokolow of the tough financial times and the opportunities for unexpected collaboration. “Building relationships really builds a more solid structure for affecting change in how schools approach the literary arts in their communities.”

Through reaching parents, students, teachers and communities, Wordstock sticks to its mission: Make the world a better place through writing. The economy might try to stop them, but Sokolov won’t have it. “I’ve been here a year, and reinvigoration of our educational programs has been my priority.”

“Prior to the training, I wouldn’t have considered myself a writer. ... I completely changed how I teach writing. I now give students many more opportunities to write.”

TAL Bainter,
Harney Elementary
Third Grade Teacher
Oregon Ballet Theatre: Freedom to Move
Company Brings Artistic, Physical and Academic Benefits of Dance to Schools

“Dance in school provides students an alternative to competitive physical activity.”

KASANDRA GRUENER, DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND OUTREACH, OREGON BALLET THEATRE

Kids: they dance before they learn there is anything that isn’t music.
–William Stafford

As the class of third and fourth grade students at Forest Hills Elementary School in Lake Oswego file out of the gym after their second half hour session of ballet together, Oregon Ballet Theatre teaching artist Zahra Banzi-Horn overhears two boys whispering to one another. The first boy says, “Don’t tell anyone but I think I like ballet.” To which his friend replies, “Well, DUH!”

“People have a lot of preconceived notions or fears about dance,” says Kasandra Gruener, Director of Education and Outreach for Oregon Ballet Theatre. “Everyone from kindergarten to teachers has a lot of baggage connected to being self conscious or looking silly. Once people realize it’s just a way of moving your body that feels fabulous, then everyone’s on board,” she says.

Getting students to relax is the first barrier these visiting teachers face, and may be part of the reason that dance is the least likely art form to be taught in schools. As a result, Oregon Ballet Theatre sends teaching artists into Portland-area K-8 schools to introduce the art of ballet both as a formal art form and as a path to physical fitness.

“Dance in school provides students an alternative to competitive physical activity,” says Gruener. “It is non-aggressive and offers students an opportunity to explore a wide range of movements, taking into consideration the motivation for the movement – movement as expression of feelings, ideas, qualities.”

Perhaps most importantly, the pliés and pirouettes help to fill the ever-threatened existence of physical education in Portland schools. To get an idea of the dearth of PE at one Portland school, students at Peninsula K-8 in North Portland have only one half-hour of physical education per week. It’s an issue that’s garnered the attention of First Lady Michelle Obama, whose Let’s Move! initiative advocates at least 60 minutes per day of physical education for school-aged children.

“The physical and emotional health of an entire generation and the economic health and security of our nation is at stake,” said First Lady Michelle Obama at the Let’s Move! launch on February 9, 2010. The Let’s Move campaign aims to address the startling
Over the past three decades, childhood obesity rates in America have tripled, and today, nearly one in three children in America are overweight or obese. The numbers are even higher in African American and Hispanic communities, where nearly 40% of the children are overweight or obese.

—FACTSHEET, LETSMOVE.GOV

In terms of health care costs, obesity accounts for $147 billion to $190 billion in yearly expenditures, compared with $96 billion for tobacco.

— KAISER HEALTH NEWS

Overall, Oregon obesity rates are the lowest in the nation. Rates of obesity in 2007 pushed above 20 percent in Alabama, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee and Texas, compared with a national low of 9.6 percent in Oregon.

— ARCHIVES OF PEDIATRICS AND ADOLESCENT MEDICINE 2010 STUDY
Oregon Children’s Theatre: Developing Careers

Young Professionals Program Provides Preparations for Careers and for Life

There’s something about theater students – it’s a sort of tenacity not often seen in kids their age. Oregon’s Children’s Theatre’s Young Professionals program takes that tenacity and gives it direction, with opportunities rarely available to students pre-college.

“About ten or so years ago, Artistic Director Stan Foote and I realized there was a need for kids to continue their training,” explains Dani Baldwin, Education Director. “For some kids, it was that they had taken many classes for years – They became so serious about their craft that they would benefit from pushing themselves beyond what most kids were taking.”

Capitalizing on an informal mentorship program already in place, Baldwin and Foote developed a structured, year-long Young Professionals program available to students ages 13 through 18. During this program period, the 55 student participants have access to an abundance of real-world experiences and opportunities including professional workshops taught at a college level, training on the business of theater, tickets to local plays, and opportunities to earn money working within the theater world. Along the way, students have mentors and other professionals to help guide them.

The structure of this program aligns neatly with Portland Schools Foundation’s Cradle to Career initiative’s goals to: provide support in and out of school, help students succeed academically, ensure that they enroll in college or training programs and complete a degree or training and enter a career.

“We try and respond to what they’re interested in, and our feedback is professional,” says Baldwin. “We’re going to tell you what you do right, but we’re also going to tell you what’s going to keep you from getting a job.”

“They give us the support to become the very best artist we can be,” reports Sydney Dufka, a former student in the program who was recently gained entrance into DePaul University as one of only four costume design majors accepted.

At minimum, students are required to attend two of the workshops in order to receive at least some feedback, but “some kids attempt to do everything,” says Baldwin.
“There’s no cut-out form for the program or mentorship. It’s all individual.” Many of the mentorships within the program are structured like an apprenticeship – one student expressed an interest in costume design and Baldwin was able to arrange an apprenticeship with a multi-Grammy winning costume designer – while others take the form of coaching and professional development.

“We’re developing strong, solid, experienced professionals, and that’s creating huge value for how our company is perceived,” says Baldwin. Graduates of the program have gone on to prestigious universities such as Juilliard and Tisch School of the Arts at NYU. Many come back to the program later to teach. Even students who don’t pursue theatre in college or professionally can utilize what they learn in the program. One student, who wanted to study rocket science in college – not theater – nonetheless credited her successful college interviews to her Young Professionals training program.

“The dedication of the staff and educators at Oregon Children’s Theatre is absolutely remarkable,” recalls Blake Wales, a program alum now studying theater at Adelphi University in New York. “They are a community of people who understand the passion of their students and continuously nurture that passion.”

“It’s about understanding the value of being a good person to work with,” says Baldwin of the professional skills students develop. skills many adults simply don’t have. “There’s a value to being a good, nice, kind person, and that affects your work relationships,” she explains. With students making their mark in New York and beyond, the Young Professionals must be on to something.

“‘We’re developing strong, solid, experienced professionals, and that’s creating huge value for how our company is perceived.’”

— DANI BALDWIN, EDUCATION DIRECTOR, OREGON CHILDREN’S THEATRE