

# Tackling Teen Issues

AN ARTS PROGRAM PROVIDES A CREATIVE WAY FOR STUDENTS TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES.

BY KRISTEN MANIERI

**D**rugs, sex and alcohol are just a few of the risky temptations that can cause tweens and teens to make dicey decisions, especially during the after-school hours, an often unsupervised time period that law enforcement officials have dubbed “the danger zone.”

One solution is after-school programming. But when Seminole County’s Grove Counseling Center—which serves those in the Central Florida area who are struggling with substance abuse or behavioral health issues—launched its Arts in Action after-school program this past October at Sanford Middle School, the aim wasn’t to simply keep middle schoolers busy; the idea was to also creatively engage them in addressing social issues that directly impact their lives.

“We believe that the arts are a powerful tool for the prevention of substance abuse and other dangerous behaviors,” says Chelsea Dygan, associate director of outreach and prevention at The Grove. Through observation and post-program interviews, Dygan sees that the program has had a positive effect on participants’ self-esteem.

“Self-esteem plays a huge part in kids avoiding risky behaviors,” she says. “It gives them the ability to express themselves positively during this pivotal time in their development. For 11- to 13-year-olds, these are really important years for building identity in the world and deciding what sort of people they will be.”

With support from Seminole County and the Department of Children and Families, Dygan and her team of expert



**STUDENTS AT SANFORD MIDDLE SCHOOL** do breathing exercises as part of Arts in Action, an after-school program designed to get students to express themselves in a creative and constructive manner.

THE GROVE COUNSELING CENTER

instructors developed Arts in Action. The monthlong, 40-hour session is designed around creating an original, issues-based production that draws on skills in theater, improvisation, movement, dance, creative writing and visual arts. About a dozen students participate in each session, which culminates in a performance attended by family and friends. It’s also converted into weeklong camps during school breaks.

Richard Burkett, dean of students at Sanford Middle, sees the program as an ideal tool for getting his students to express themselves in a positive manner. “These kids want to talk about what’s happening in their lives and this program lets them do that in a creative way,” he says. “Most after-school programs are expensive; that this is free and on school property makes it easy for them to participate.”

Besides being fun and engaging, the curriculum is also focused on fostering

teamwork, cultivating empathy, improving communication and helping participants feel good about who they are. Denise Breen, whose son, Thomas, participated in the Arts in Action camp over winter break, says that the confidence-building is a huge advantage of the program. “I saw that the program gave Thomas the opportunity to be around new kids and express himself. Everyone was very encouraging of one another,” she says. “We need to give kids the skills and the education to make smart choices, as well as give them a safe place to share and discuss. This, I believe, will ultimately help them make good decisions as they get older.”

Call The Grove at 407.327.1765 or email [outreach@thegrove.org](mailto:outreach@thegrove.org) for more information. **oam**

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