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The Impact of a Not-for-Profit Organization: Examining How Kids Dance Outreach is Guided by its Mission Statement

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**The Impact of a Not-for-Profit Organization: Examining How Kids Dance Outreach
is Guided by its Mission Statement**

A Thesis

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and

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Anna Sutton Brandner

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Kids Dance Outreach (KDO) is a not-for-profit organization that provides accessible, high-quality dance arts education to school-age children in the Indianapolis community. Founded in 2012, the organization has since served over 14,000 children through its completely free programming. Through partnerships with Indianapolis public and charter schools, KDO provides programming during school hours, using movement vocabulary that is accessible and promotes structure, discipline, focus, empathy, and self-confidence. As the organization has grown, it has developed a summer program, scholarship programs (The Swat Team and the X-Team), and a program for dancers with disabilities (Adaptive Dance Class).

KDO uses a unique pedagogy in which the movement vocabulary is not based on a specific dance style or technique. All classes are structured to provide high-energy, inspiring, and accessible movement, enabling every child to succeed. Each class is free to every child, taught by trained teaching artists (TAs), and accompanied by live musicians. KDO is the Indiana associate of the National Dance Institute of New York¹, which positions KDO as the only program of its kind in Indiana.

My first experience with KDO dates to the fall of 2021 during my junior year at Butler University. I selected the organization to focus my assignments on in my Marketing for the Arts course, researching the effectiveness of its mission and marketing strategies. I knew little to nothing when I selected this organization, but I was initially drawn to it because of its mission statement: to positively impact the lives of all children through joyful dance programs that inspire excellence, instill confidence, encourage teamwork, and applaud persistence. At this point in my college career, I'd developed

¹ National Dance Institute (NDI) was founded in 1976 by Jacques d'Amboise. As a non-profit arts education organization, it brings children together through dance and music programs.

quite a passion for increasing accessibility within the dance world, so KDO's mission aligned perfectly with my desire to develop equity and access to dance within my community.

My journey with KDO continued into the summer of 2022 between my junior and senior years when I had the opportunity to intern with the organization. Throughout my internship, I experienced both programming and administrative initiatives, providing me with a deeper understanding of how the members of the organization are guided by its mission, the impact the organization has within the Indianapolis community, and how it continues to grow. I observed the KDO impact firsthand when I assisted with its summer camp. I met children who walked into the first day of camp very shy and reserved, and by the end of the two weeks those same children were speaking in front of the audience of parents, talking about how KDO taught them that they can dance in front of anyone and feel good about themselves even on the tougher days. This truly justifies KDO's mission, because it's one thing for the organization to say that its programs instill confidence, and another to see that confidence grow within each child that takes a KDO class.

These experiences with KDO over the past two years fueled my desire to further investigate how the organization creates such great success. Thus, I developed my thesis: researching the impact of a not-for-profit organization through examining how Kids Dance Outreach is guided by its mission statement and how it lives out this mission through its staff, stakeholders, and programming.

For my research, I interviewed and spoke with several individuals who are either members of KDO who work to live out its mission or are connected to the organization and have observed its impact. I heard from Mónica Muñoz, the Executive Director of

KDO and Dana Vanderburgh, the Associate Director, Community Engagement and Programming of KDO. I spoke with Mary Lyn Moore and Megan Quiring, who both serve as TAs for KDO and taught in-school programming in a third-grade classroom at Indiana Public Schools' (IPS) Butler Laboratory School 55 (IPS Butler Lab 55) in the fall of 2022. I also interviewed Melissa Ryan, who is a current senior at Butler University who spent the fall of 2022 semester student teaching at IPS Butler Lab 55 in the third-grade classroom that partnered with KDO, spending just as much time in the KDO classroom as her students.

On November 2nd, 2022, I conducted a site visit to the third-grade classroom at IPS Butler Lab 55² to observe a KDO class in action. This is one of the 15 elementary schools that KDO currently partners with to bring in-school dance programming into the Indianapolis community.

There were 22 third graders present the day I observed class. This was the first semester KDO partnered with IPS Butler Lab 55, but it was clear the organization had already developed a strong presence within the school, as the music from the live pianist and percussionist drifted from the cafeteria through the hallways. Mónica Muñoz explained that when KDO initiates a relationship with a new partner school, the organization plans for this to be long-lasting. She said that when seeking schools to partner with, the aim is to reach the schools that are often left out of opportunities to implement programming, whether this is due to funding or resources available. The goal is to create a community within the school, while understanding what the school's

² The demographics that make up the population of the 292 students at Butler Lab 55 are 35.2% Black/African American, 13.2% Hispanic/Latino, and 42.8% White. Almost half of the students (48.8%) receive free or reduced-price meals ("IPS/Butler Laboratory School 55," Enroll Indy, 2017, <https://find.enrollindy.org/schools/0013600001R2ILgAAJ#who-we-are>)

capacity is to support such programming, and how KDO can best serve both the school's mission and their own.³

The mission of IPS Butler Lab 55 is “to inspire children to change the world”. In its vision it states, “we believe that children are naturally curious, and that our job as teachers is to build upon the unique knowledge each child brings to school every day. Our school is a place where families and community members are invited to collaborate with us, engaging students and staff in meaningful ways.”⁴ In a successful school partnership, the school's mission and the mission of KDO overlap and align. Both the mission of IPS Butler Lab 55 and the mission of KDO very clearly aim their foci toward the goal of inspiring and impacting children. This alignment allows for the two to develop an effective relationship that creates strong programming that prioritizes what's best for the students.

When I interviewed Melissa Ryan, she emphasized that the relationship between KDO and IPS Butler Lab 55 is special, because both organizations ensure their programming is built for children. Both aim to follow children's instincts, build positive relationships to find connections with their students, and find ways to engage them in learning. Melissa elaborated that it's clear KDO “stripped it back and thought about, ‘what do we want the kids to get out of this and how do we achieve this?’”⁵

The class I observed looked like a typical KDO class, as the TAs utilized constant movement and their voices to create a high-energy atmosphere that kept the students engaged. I observed how KDO implements social-emotional learning competencies, or

³ Muñoz, Mónica. *Executive Director, Kids Dance Outreach*.

⁴ “IPS/Butler Laboratory School 55,” My IPS, 2022, <https://myips.org/butlerlabschool55/>

⁵ Ryan Interview 2023. Melissa Ryan, Elementary Education student at Butler University. One-on-one interview with Anna Brandner, 27 Feb. 2023.

essential knowledge, skills, attitudes, and mindsets that individuals need to succeed in life, into its curriculum. Social-emotional learning is defined as “the process through which schools and districts implement practices and policies that allow children to acquire and effectively apply those competencies”⁶. This includes both intrapersonal qualities, such as emotional awareness, and interpersonal qualities, such as teamwork and relationship building skills, all of which are qualities that relate to the qualities that KDO strives to develop in its mission: excellence, confidence, teamwork, and persistence.

In my research, I observed how each of these qualities exist within the KDO classroom. To successfully examine how KDO fulfills its mission, I connected the information gathered from interviews and observations to each quality within the mission: inspiring excellence, instilling confidence, encouraging teamwork, and applauding persistence.

Inspiring excellence

Melissa described the shift that she witnessed among the 26 kids in her classroom over the 10-week period. The first day of class, they were very apprehensive to dance in front of each other. One kid even hid his permission slip, hoping this would get him out of having to take class. Melissa pointed out that despite the initial apprehension, the TAs of KDO fostered an environment that reeled the students in. They made sure to learn each child’s name and address them one-on-one to quickly break the ice. They were always kind while still strict with their expectations, ensuring everything is done in a loving way. Their classes are regimented and well-rehearsed, which keeps kids invested and attentive.

⁶ “What are SEL Competencies?”, Measuring SEL, CASEL, 2023, <https://measuringSEL.casel.org/assessment-guide/what-are-sel-competencies/>

When it came time for the final showcase, Melissa remembered her students feeling excited and nervous. They performed in front of the whole school, which made them feel proud to show off what they had achieved. Melissa explained that for most of these children this was the first time they had the opportunity to commit to something for as long as a 10-week period, since most of them don't have access to after school programs or activities.

She pointed out that the KDO impact does expand beyond the classroom for some of these students, as four to five girls were invited to join the scholarship program, the SWAT team. She emphasized that the opportunity to turn an in-school program that happens once a week for a single semester into a passion that could last for years is so important for these students.

Melissa also highlighted how the TAs are a source of positive role models for the students. Specifically male role models are scarce in elementary education, so for the children to experience this sort of relationship is special, as a third of KDO's TAs identify as male. Melissa noted that the teaching artists clearly know what it takes to work with children, and they serve as teachers first, and dancers second. There is also great diversity within the staff, which allows students to feel represented and recognized. She mentioned how it's clear the teaching artists try to individually connect with each student, learning who they are and where their passions lie, always focusing on the students in a positive light.⁷

In addition to the role of the teaching artists, the live band provides an opportunity for students to engage themselves in a KDO class and find inspiration. Every KDO class

⁷ Ryan Interview 2023. Melissa Ryan, Elementary Education student at Butler University. One-on-one interview with Anna Brandner, 27 Feb. 2023.

is accompanied by at least one pianist and percussionist, providing children with the opportunity to connect to the art of music and its value, while learning how to count and listen to the music. If a student isn't necessarily enchanted by the dancing, they may be fascinated by the drummer and pianist's work.

Instilling confidence

When Mary Lyn Moore served as a TA with Butler Lab 55, she described how the students that were very hesitant during the first few minutes were at least standing up by the end of class, and then five weeks later became the leaders in the class, volunteering themselves to demonstrate the movement. Some of these students transformed into a totally different person when they walked into a KDO class, and this translated to their work in the academic classroom.⁸

Megan Quiring stressed that as a TA she must build a sense of trust with her students to instill confidence. There are several practices TAs can utilize to build this sense of trust. Megan tries to find connections between the movement and topics that the students are learning about in their academics, because they immediately feel a sense of connection and knowledge. For example, an aspect of KDO's pedagogy consists of labeling a phrase of movement with a specific letter of the alphabet.⁹ Melissa explained that in her students' class, the TAs labeled phrases with the letter "A" for "activism" and "B" for "bees, bats, and butterflies", which were topics that the students had just learned about.¹⁰ A child might not be familiar with the dance steps, but if they feel they have

⁸ Moore Interview 2023. Mary Lyn Moore, Teaching Artist with Kids Dance Outreach. Phone interview with Anna Brandner, 17 March 2023.

⁹ Quiring, Megan. *Teaching Artist, Kids Dance Outreach*.

¹⁰ Ryan Interview 2023. Melissa Ryan, Elementary Education student at Butler University. One-on-one interview with Anna Brandner, 27 Feb. 2023.

some understanding, they will already have a sense of confidence in themselves and be more likely to participate.

Megan also explained how important it is for TAs to connect to the community within the school and with individuals like the class's schoolteacher.¹¹ Mary Lyn emphasized that when the TAs develop a relationship with the class's schoolteacher to better understand what the students' needs are, they can establish an understanding of the students and can then incorporate other academic aspects into the class to help build students' confidence and engagement.¹² Once again this is especially key for those students who are "outsiders" to the dance world. Megan found connection with one student through his love for poetry. Since he wasn't yet confident with his dancing, Megan focused on his strengths and had him read a poem to the rest of the class. In taking the time to get to know the student individually, she gained his trust.¹³ The more the teaching artists can learn where the students already feel comfortable, the more successful they will be in their efforts to connect with them. Especially because KDO class only occurs once a week, it's necessary that teaching artists take advantage of every opportunity to build that sense of trust and the students' confidence.

Encouraging teamwork

Mary Lyn explained that in her role as a TA, it is essential that her energy and engagement is at the same level that she expects of her students. She said that the TAs are constantly clapping and hyping students up to instill the idea that they are a team and to show encouragement. It is essential that the class's schoolteacher and TAs are just as

¹¹ Quiring, Megan. *Teaching Artist, Kids Dance Outreach*.

¹² Moore Interview 2023. Mary Lyn Moore, Teaching Artist with Kids Dance Outreach. Phone interview with Anna Brandner, 17 March 2023.

¹³ Quiring, Megan. *Teaching Artist, Kids Dance Outreach*.

engaged in the dance class as the students are expected to be. The students view all the adults in the room as role models, and so they are watching how their teacher and the TAs react and work together.¹⁴

Melissa brought attention to the sense of community that KDO creates for the entire school. The students had the chance to be leaders for the grades below them, demonstrating what they had learned with KDO at the end of semester showcase in front of the entire school. This opportunity forms a sense of community among all students and teaches them to empathize with their peers' experiences.¹⁵ All these practices connect to teaching the idea of "putting good into the world", which links directly to KDO's mission to positively impact the lives of all children by fostering a positive view of the future through their programming.

Applauding persistence

Melissa explained that throughout the semester, she observed how KDO applies "applauding persistence" in the classroom. They don't let the kids quit. They don't make a big deal when a student cannot pick up a step, but they are going to focus on it until they get it right. It is never in a negative light, just factual. The TAs will approach a student who might be struggling and will offer to serve as a "bodyguard", demonstrating the movement in front of the student until the child can do it on his or her own. They instill the children with the desire to do it for themselves, allowing them to find the intrinsic motivation and drive to care. This is evident all the way to the final showcase, where they're reminded that this showcase is for themselves, proving to themselves that

¹⁴ Moore Interview 2023. Mary Lyn Moore, Teaching Artist with Kids Dance Outreach. Phone interview with Anna Brandner, 17 March 2023.

¹⁵ Ryan Interview 2023. Melissa Ryan, Elementary Education student at Butler University. One-on-one interview with Anna Brandner, 27 Feb. 2023.

they have learned something over the past 10 weeks. The goal is not to reach perfection, it is to teach them a set of steps and show them they are capable.¹⁶

Mary Lyn emphasized how a KDO class differs from a standard dance class, one of the biggest aspects being that there is no “fear factor”, or sense of intimidation coming from the teacher at the head of the classroom. The environment that the teaching artists foster is incredibly safe and comfortable, and because the KDO dance technique is not exacting, students are pushed to whatever level of movement capability that might be for them individually. Mary Lyn explained that she prioritizes demonstrating kindness and empathy through her teaching. To “positively impact the lives of all children”, she considers that she might be the first person to show a child kindness that day. She hopes to communicate to her students that this kindness can go a long way, while helping them achieve excellence, confidence, teamwork, and persistence.¹⁷

How KDO members live its mission

Just as partner schools must align with the mission of KDO, so must all its staff members. Mary Lyn noted that from her first days with KDO, the importance of the mission was communicated to her. She and her new teammates received a binder on the first day of training, and on the very first page was the KDO mission statement and philosophy. From there they were taught that everything must circle back to “the why”. The staff is trained to always ask themselves, “why are we making this decision? Is this what’s best for the children?”. Mary Lyn said it’s as simple as asking herself, “why am I saying “good” to the student?”. Is it to instill confidence in their dancing? To applaud

¹⁶ Ryan Interview 2023. Melissa Ryan, Elementary Education student at Butler University. One-on-one interview with Anna Brandner, 27 Feb. 2023.

¹⁷ Moore Interview 2023. Mary Lyn Moore, Teaching Artist with Kids Dance Outreach. Phone interview with Anna Brandner, 17 March 2023.

their persistence?¹⁸ The staff meets once every week for an hour and a half to dedicate time to professional development, continuously learning how they can ensure the mission is at the forefront of their work.

While new staff is trained to learn about the organization and its mission, members of the KDO team must have a willingness to think outside of the box and truly believe in what the organization is doing. Mary Lyn commented on the strength of how the leaders behind KDO, Executive Director Mónica Muñoz and Founding Artistic Director Michael Johnson, interact with their students. She explained that Mónica has such an enthusiastic approach, and Michael can always find a connection to each student.¹⁹ In every one of their interactions with children, they stay true to the mission of leaving a “positive impact”. As the leaders of the organization, it is essential that they live out the mission of KDO in their work, and through the intention behind their actions, Mónica and Michael encourage each of their team members to achieve the same level of connection and impact.

Dana Vanderburgh joined the executive team just over a year and a half ago, and through the new role she’s filled, she models this embodiment of the mission. In her role, she works closely with the other members of the executive team on strategic vision casting, asking, “how can KDO grow and expand our community?”, and considering how KDO programming is directly connected to this idea. Mary Lyn reflected on the fact that the five different schools in which she teaches this semester reach five completely

¹⁸ Moore Interview 2023. Mary Lyn Moore, Teaching Artist with Kids Dance Outreach. Phone interview with Anna Brandner, 17 March 2023.

¹⁹ Ibid.

different communities.²⁰ This demonstrates how through living out its mission, KDO can reach and positively impact children from all different backgrounds. In her role, Dana communicates with the partner schools and their teachers in these communities to coordinate day-to-day programming and strategize how KDO can engage educators through events. She examines how KDO should hire new people, further existing initiatives while developing new ones, and establish their presence in the community.

Through her position, Dana embodies the mission of KDO by recognizing “the why” in every action. Her background in the dance world and not-for-profit work provided her with an appreciation for KDO’s work, and she enjoys the task of thinking critically about how something might further its mission and how to advocate and articulate this idea. Dana explained that even something as simple as finding a new scheduling platform requires this consideration. It requires asking the question, “how will this make it easier for us to show up for the children?”, which all connects to the root of the organization’s mission, to positively impact the lives of children. Mónica made the same connection when referencing the creation of social media posts, and even the KDO logo.²¹ Even decisions outside of the KDO classroom must be backed up with reasoning of how the decision aligns with the mission, and how it contributes to communicating the mission.

Dana’s role requires her to communicate the KDO mission to a lot of different stakeholders. While she utilizes different strategies depending on the audience, she emphasized that the mission doesn’t change, it’s what she chooses to pull from the

²⁰ Moore Interview 2023. Mary Lyn Moore, Teaching Artist with Kids Dance Outreach. Phone interview with Anna Brandner, 17 March 2023.

²¹ Muñoz, Mónica. *Executive Director, Kids Dance Outreach.*

mission that does. To successfully achieve this, she must be aware of what audience she's talking to, and strategically reason for which of their wants or needs align with the KDO mission. When talking to educators, she highlights the skills that are embedded within a KDO class, such as confidence and teamwork, and what that looks like inside their classroom. When meeting with donors, Dana highlights the KDO mission, but also translates the way in which the programming is an efficient use of donors' dollars. For a clinic interested in KDO's "Adaptive Dance" program, Dana emphasizes the inclusiveness and accessibility of the KDO pedagogy. In a conversation with city leaders, she discusses the importance of access to arts education, and how this ultimately helps children become better civic leaders. In each of these conversations, Dana must consider what the stakeholder's needs are and how KDO can help address those needs.

To share the mission of KDO with the community, the team must learn how to best illustrate its impact. Dance is intangible, so quantitative metrics can never completely measure its impact, which creates a barrier because society tends to value the quantitative over the qualitative. Dana pointed out that the KDO pedagogy is something most people have never seen before, so there is no prior image of what a KDO class looks like. Ultimately, the best way to show impact is to watch a KDO class in action, as my research has justified how each quality of the mission is present.²²

Melissa concluded her interview reflecting on how a KDO class publicly displays the benefits of integrating arts education programming into the school curriculum, helping to encourage people to view arts education as equal to other subjects. Melissa

²² Vanderburgh Interview 2023. Dana Vanderburgh, Associate Director, Community Engagement and Programming for Kids Dance Outreach. Phone interview with Anna Brandner, 6 April 2023.

stressed how all arts programming needs the same intentionality as KDO.²³ This intentionality allows KDO to foster a very professional reputation within the Indianapolis community, ultimately aiding the development of long-lasting school partnerships and donor relationships.

The more ways in which KDO can illustrate its mission, the more the organization can grow to create an even bigger impact. After conducting thorough research of how KDO inspires excellence, instills confidence, encourages teamwork, and applauds persistence through its programming and staff, it's evident that the organization consistently strives to live its mission in all aspects. The team members are grounded in these values and establish connections with stakeholders in the community that are as well, resulting in powerful programming that leaves a positive impact on the children of Indianapolis.

²³ Ryan Interview 2023. Melissa Ryan, Elementary Education student at Butler University. One-on-one interview with Anna Brandner, 27 Feb. 2023.

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