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Sparking academic achievement with art

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Ford Foundation funds Interchange program in SLPS

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Of the St. Louis American

When negative drama unfolds in St. Louis Public Schools, mainstream media are often on the scene to gather a story for the next newscast.

A larger picture shows that, when provided with access to inspiring programs and the opportunity to excel, many public school students offer a brighter story that often goes untold.

That's the motive behind Interchange, a new arts initiative between St. Louis Public Schools, local arts organizations, businesses and civic groups.

Interchange's intent is to improve academic achievement of SLPS students by providing an expanded, arts-integrated classroom curriculum.

The citywide program was spearheaded by COCA and financed by a large grant from the Ford Foundation.

"At COCA, we firmly believe that the arts are essential to a complete education," COCA Executive Director Stephanie Riven said during the announcement of the program Wednesday at Dunbar Elementary School in the JeffVanderLou neighborhood.

Ford Foundation spokesman Cyrus Driver said the nation's third-largest foundation selected St. Louis as one of eight cities to benefit from the program because of leadership efforts already in progress in the SLPS, committed arts organizations like COCA and civic-minded businesses like McCormick Baron Salazar.

"We were really impressed with the passion and commitment for improving the quality of education and life for all children," Driver said, of St. Louis.

The two-year \$250,000 grant is part of a larger initiative by the Ford Foundation, "Integrating the Arts in Education Reform."

SLPS Superintendent Creg Williams said the program falls in line with his recently announced five-year Strategic Plan for improving the district, which includes community involvement.

"If we are to be successful in these schools we need to make sure we look beyond the schools.



Antwaine Barksdale, a student at Dunbar Elementary School, plays with a balloon during the announcement of Interchange, a new arts and education program designed to improve student achievement. Photo by Wiley Price

We need to look at other resources that will help us achieve our goals," Williams said.

Sharonica Hardin, former principal of Adams Elementary School, said COCA's Urban Arts Program increased academic achievement over a four-year period.

"It wasn't just about the test scores, it was the students' excitement," said Hardin, currently a principal on assignment with SLPS and vice president for education at the St. Louis Science Center.

"The arts allowed them to have another outlet. Many students hadn't experienced high levels of success, but they were able to tap into strength and talent they weren't aware they had. Our students need to have that exposure."

Alderman Mike McMillan said the initiative is important because the district alone doesn't have the resources to provide this type programming in a significant way.

"As we look into the future, we have to come face-to-face with the needs of public education. Today, it's a little brighter," Larry Cohn, Interchange co-chair, said.

"This program will have an impact on not only the St. Louis Public Schools, but the community as a whole. Everyone benefits when students become well-rounded individuals who can take their place as responsible citizens."

As part of the announcement, fourth grade students in COCA's Urban Arts Program performed an African dance routine.

"As principle of Dunbar, I have seen first-hand the impact arts and cultural institutions have on our students," said Dunbar Principal Darlynn Bosley.

To the well-behaved children attending the announcement, she said, "Today was about you and developing every part of you. The only way to be the best that you can be is for you to have access and opportunity, and that's what this is about."

While this positive school news didn't draw a media circus, the Associate Press did spread the news with a national story that moved on Tuesday.