About Us

Drama Club provides theater programming as a means of developing empathy, promoting academic growth and empowering the individual through self-expression.

Drama Club offers year-round weekly theater classes at Crossroads Detention Center in Brownsville, Brooklyn, Horizon Detention Center in the South Bronx and the Robert N. Davoren Complex for adolescents on Rikers Island. This fall Drama Club will also be offered at Belmont, a school for youth in ‘Close to Home’ custody in NYC. This program will offer Department of Education credit for participants who meet the required seat hours.

Mission

It is Drama Club's mission to provide theater training and positive mentor relationships to NYC youth throughout each step of their journey through the criminal justice system: detention, placement and probation/aftercare. Providing a much-needed consistency for this population of chronically abandoned and underserved youth will give them positive life skills, academic support and courage to break the potentially life-long cycle of incarceration.

Recently, the Director of Programming at Crossroads pulled the lead facilitator aside and noted that the youth have been very much enjoying the program and that she noticed that Drama Club's retention levels have remained high. She felt this was due to good facilitation and relevant programming.

In post-evaluation surveys completed by youth involved with Drama Club, 100% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- DC has helped me feel more comfortable speaking in front of an audience.
- DC has improved my ability to be a team player.
- DC has helped me enjoy learning.
- DC has helped me have more courage.

But the success of the program is best evidenced in the words of the youth it serves:
“Drama Club helped me in a positive kind of a way. It helped me get rid of my frustration. When I come from the hall to the program—I be mad sometimes—then the program makes me happier when I go back to the hall. I feel much better—then I make better decisions.”

“Drama Club makes you release stress cause you express your feelings – you can tell you life and nobody can tell it’s your life.”

“Getting up and reading in front of an audience, I felt good after it was done. I felt like I did something. I accomplished something.”

“I think Drama Club is kinda cool. It allows you to express your feelings and take out anger in a positive way.

**Pedagogy**

Since our founding in 2013, we have had to learn how to engage hard to reach youth who struggle with negative associations with learning environments, high drop out rates and limited literacy as well low self esteem and limited ability to focus. Adding the very challenging environment of confinement to this equation often results in elevated levels of anxiety, anger and distrust. Through trial and error we have found that the following core tenants engage our students and result in high retention rates:

- Consistency
- Trust
- Leadership/Ownership
- And most importantly; Fun

In order to combat limited ability to focus, impulse control issues and varied literacy rates, we quickly turned to improvisational theater as our core curriculum. Improvisation is play. It involves healthy risk taking and it allows for the youth to establish and explore the rules of the world they have created, an empowering and self-reflective exercise. There is now evidence establishing the relationship between play and brain development in adolescents. In The Power of Art: The Arts as an Effective Intervention Strategy For At-Risk Youth (Anderson, Walch and Becker) it is stated, “Research shows that the arts provide adolescents with the risk-taking they need developmentally, provides them with meaning and significant mentor relationships, and supplies social connectivity and accountability. Arts programs have been found to contribute to brain development and provide a cultural opening to knowledge of the world and self.”

In the words of an administrator at Horizon Juvenile Center, “You are tricking them to have academic success!” But most importantly they are having fun, which makes them want to return.

Placing an emphasis on performances for families, peers and staff encourages the youth to persevere with the program, even on the more difficult days. It is a very powerful incentive when youth get to feel validated in front of an audience and their families have the opportunity to witness the event.

A proud mother recently remarked after a Drama Club performance at Crossroads:
"My child was given a chance to show her talents."

And a proud participant stated:

"I had a lot of strange people comin' up to me talking about 'good job.' My mom was crying. She was really proud of me. Really, really proud of me."

**Social, Emotional and Educational Achievement**

Drama Club aims to reduce incarceration and enhance educational achievement through the power of theatre. Much of Drama Club’s program is improvisation based. The core of any good improv scene is conflict, so in each scenario, students must examine what a conflict is, what causes conflict, and most importantly, how to resolve conflict. Physical violence in scene work is prohibited in Drama Club, so instead of reaching for an imaginary pistol, students need to find a way to resolve their conflicts with words.

The process of creating a character can take a student outside of him/herself and into a different persona. Despite how they are feeling inside, acting a role allows a student to take control of their feelings and harness their emotions into powerful, positive change. They can practice how they react to different situations, and gain power over their circumstances as a result. Drama Club provides a safe space to explore a possibility of oneself different from the circumstances one has found oneself in; a scared youth can become brave, a youth afraid to express their emotions can find their voice. Drama Club takes students out of their past, present and future circumstance and gives them a vision of a new way of life.

Students also gain a respect and understanding for their peers, and gain attention for acting, not acting out. When not on stage, fellow students in the audience are developing essential listening and attending skills.

In December 1994, a study was published in Corrections Today which stated “the most successful teaching techniques…involved the students with a ‘hands-on’ approach and allowed them to be creative.” Many incarcerated youth struggle with reading and literacy. Drama Club engages learners on multiple levels by allowing them to be physically part of a story in improvisation, then move to dissecting, understanding and disseminating a text from a play before translating the author’s viewpoints into performance. By analyzing characters in a text such as “Oedipus El Rey,” a modern adaption of the Oedipus tale set in an Los Angeles barrio, students examine why we make the choices we do, and how those choices directly affect both ourselves and others.

Every effort is made to align Drama Club’s curriculum with Common Core State Learning Standards (CCLS). For example, CCLS Anchor Standards are directly addressed in Drama Club activities:

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1**
  Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2**
Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.3**
  Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.6**
  Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

Every effort is made to incorporate texts that are high quality, rigorous and yet accessible for students of different ages and learning levels. Drama Club gets students out from behind a desk and on their feet, creating multiple entry points for students to access and engage with the various texts presented. The students also learn about the fundamentals of a narrative: how characters express different points of view, what makes a character, what creates conflict, and what engages us as an audience.

In addition to learning benefits, evidence increasingly shows that arts-based programs also improve executive functions in children. These include the ability to control emotions, focus thoughts, develop empathy toward others and control reward-motivated impulses, all skills linked to lowering recidivism.

“Arts programs for incarcerated youth have been shown to reduce violations, and result in less violence and fewer injuries for offenders and staff, allowing more time for constructive activities. When compared with control populations, arts programs for incarcerated youth and youth on probation have resulted in lower recidivism rates and fewer court referrals. Youth in the juvenile justice system who have participated in art programs display important pro-social and mental health characteristics, including greater self-efficacy, the ability to express themselves, improved attitudes toward school, and appropriate behavior and communication with adults and peers.” - The Power of Art: Arts in Juvenile Justice: Intervention and Aftercare by Susan Anderson, Nancy Walch, and Kate Becker

Drama Club provides a vehicle for students to engage with one another, and with themselves, in a safe, supportive learning environment. Students have the opportunity to process and express their inner feelings and find ways to channel their emotions into positive outlets, while building trust with others and gaining confidence in abilities they may have not previously known they possessed. Drama Club also support students academically, by creating an on-your-feet curriculum to help students access and engage creatively with reading, speaking and listening skills so essential to life as a productive, thriving member of their communities and society at large.
In Their Own Words

When asked what they like about Drama Club, young people offered the following:

Q: What did you like about Drama Club?

No arguing cause it’s boring.
No fights thing i enjoyed.
And the thing i enjoyed was the acting.

Q: How did Drama Club make you feel?

Happy.