PUTTING STUDENT WRITING CENTER STAGE

"A PRINCE! And can someone with a quiet hand tell me what our main character the prince's name is?"”

Dozens of tiny arms shoot into the air. Peter McNerney, who is moderating the performance, chooses one. He leans in and waits encouragingly for the kindergartner to whisper an answer.

"Chicken Breath?" McNerney confirms softly. Then, in a booming voice to the 100 other 5- and 6-year-olds sitting on the gym floor,

"Yes, that's it! His name is Chicken Breath!" Uproarious laughter fills the room. A 20-something actor steps out from behind the curtain wearing a paper crown and blue cloth cape over his t-shirt and jeans. "Good day! I am Prince Chicken Breath!" he declares, to even more laughter.

By Liana Heitin
PHOTOS BY EMILE WAMSTEKER
Story Pirates actors Isabel Richardson, left, and Peter McNerney, right, perform during an "Idea Storm" at Little Falls School No. 2, in Little Falls, N.J. The actors' improvised performance is based on suggestions from students.

This "Idea Storm" at Little Falls School No. 2 is the first of four such live shows the performing arts group known as the Story Pirates will put on in New Jersey public schools that day. Just watching these talented actors and improv comedians jump, yell, dance, sing, and throw their bodies about on stage can feel like a workout. But they are indefatigable. The improvised performance they do for the upper elementary students later that afternoon will be just as dynamic and amusing as the one for the kindergartners.

And at each show, along with gasping and laughs, the actors will be accomplishing another goal—teaching kids to write.

The New York- and Los Angeles-based nonprofit Story Pirates began as a simple idea: Kids write stories and professional performers act them out. While that's still at the heart of what the group does today, eight years after it was founded by graduates of Northwestern University, the Story Pirates has added a variety of programs to its repertoire, including in-school and after-school writing workshops, assemblies, teacher professional development, and long-term school partnerships.

Overall, the Story Pirates programs aim to inspire kids to use their imaginations and to write. "If there's anything we can give kids, it's that it's worth putting your ideas on paper," says McNerney, who is the program's full-time associate artistic director. "That's an essential skill that bleeds into so many other life skills."

During classroom workshops, the group's performers and "teaching artists"—who have both teaching and acting experience—use games, chants, and puppets to create a safe space for students to express their most outlandish ideas.

Over four classroom sessions, they instruct kids in the elements of storytelling, using curriculum created around that particular grade's state standards.

The students draw on those lessons to compose their own stories. They submit their pieces to the Story Pirates members, who read and respond to
each one with notes known as "story love," then choose a few of those stories to adapt into short plays. A group of Story Pirates performers—most of whom are striving actors with several other jobs—return a few weeks later to perform the selected stories in front of the entire school, with silly costumes, music, and accolades for the author.

"Imagine you hand in a paper and the next time you see it, it's adults making it real on stage. You learn that, 'Oh, I've communicated this to people on a piece of paper,'" says McNerney. "If we can validate a kid's ideas, it goes a long way."

Student-authors can also bring their relatives and friends to a repeat performance, which is open to the public, at a small theater in New York City. "We set up stakes for them in their writing—they might get to see their story performed," explains Lauron Stripling, a producer and teaching artist. "We give writing a purpose beyond writing class."

### STAYING FAITHFUL TO THE TEXT

According to Rekha S. Rajan, senior research associate with the Center for Arts Education Research at Teachers College at Columbia University, one commonality among the most successful arts-education programs is that they give students ownership of what they're doing. The kids are "the ones contributing the lyrics to the song or choreographing the dance," says Rajan, who has no connection with the Story Pirates but consults with other arts programs. "By giving them ownership, they're more invested when they see the end product."

That's very much the premise behind the Story Pirates' workshops and shows. The group takes adherence to student work seriously: "If there are clarity issues in a story we'll change the words to communicate something," McNerney says, "but for the most part we stay super faithful to that text. And it ends up being awesome and super funny without being condescending to the material."

The Idea Storm assembly is the shortest—and least expensive—of the Story Pirates' programs for schools. In this setup, the Story Pirates cast members visit a school only twice, once for the assembly and a second time to perform student-written stories. During the first performance, the actors describe the basic components of a story, adapting their vocabulary for the grade in front of them. They explain that every story has a beginning, in which the characters and setting are introduced; a middle, in which a problem is
Peter McNerney, left, waits offstage for his cue during an “Idea Storm” at Little Falls School No. 2. The goal of the performance is to “capitalize on [kids’] energy and excitement and get them to create something,” he says.

They’re inspiring curiosity in writing, in being an expressive reticent kids were involved. In addition, she says, the content presented “absolutely meshed well” with what she’s been doing in the classroom.

Even when the content parallels classroom work, however, the Idea Storm leaves teachers with the weighty burden of figuring out how to incorporate performance takeaways into their instruction. While some teachers will be able to capitalize on students’ energy and inspiration—perhaps even jumping into story writing as soon as they return to class—others may feel ill-equipped to do so and simply return to business as usual.

But McNerney says that the Story Pirates tend to get a big story return after Idea Storms. “We don’t have an opportunity to go into classrooms, but the major piece is to get kids crazy excited,” he says. “We never have a problem getting stories.” Sometimes they even have to hire extra volunteers to read through all of the submissions.

Solitto of School No. 3 says she plans to integrate the Story Pirates’ material through scaffolding—for instance, creating an “anchor chart” with her students to help them recall what they learned during the show, and then composing at least one story...
with the whole class before giving them independent writing time.

The Story Pirates' methods also gave Selitto a brainstorm of her own: Why not have her students

self, in communication."

act out their own stories in class? "They already love doing Reader's Theater," she says, and the chance to portray characters they've written about would be even more motivating. "It's almost like, 'Duh, why wasn't I doing that already?'"

"INSPIRING CURIOSITY IN WRITING"

The Story Pirates has also ventured into doing longer-term, more intensive school programs. For example, through arts grants and fundraising, Bronx Charter School for the Arts in New York raised $20,000 to hire the group to do a school-wide residency for the second year in a row. Under this arrangement, one teaching artist and one actor lead five sessions for each grade level, kindergarten through fifth grade, in writing as well as science and other subjects. The artists work closely with teachers to determine individual class' needs. They also participate in school festivals, after-school programs, and professional development, and put on performances throughout the year.

According to the school's arts director, Ann Ledo, the group's method fits in perfectly with the school's arts integration mission. "It's so important to have the arts be part of a child's development, and they're supporting that,"
she says. "They're inspiring curiosity in writing, in being an expressive self, in communication."

For the year-long program format, the Story Pirates teaching artists bring in and use their own materials in classes. "They have amazing graphic organizers that they've created for each residency," Ledo says. "They have fabulous tools that teachers can modify and use for other things."

Ledo has also been impressed by the group’s behavior-management techniques. She recently had the Story Pirates conduct professional development with the teachers on using active warm-up activities, such as songs, to engage students in class from the start. "Creativity is key in classroom management," she says.

As with any instructional approach, some students connect to the Story Pirates' lessons more than others, Ledo acknowledges. For the most part, though, the students and teachers at Bronx Arts love the guest artists. "They have enriched our lives in the way they've engaged kids. ... They've inspired kids to write more and talk about writing."

ALTERNATIVE MEASURES

But these days, as most schools try to balance an increase in accountability with a decrease in cash flow, an outside program needs to be more than just fun and inspiring to merit implementation—it needs to work. Hard evidence of effectiveness is not easy to find with a time-limited, push-in arts program—and some say it's impossible to find in the form of student-achievement measures. "There are too many other factors to be able to say an artistic experience is directly linked to test scores," says Rajan, whose book *Integrating the Performing Arts in Grades K-5* is scheduled to come out in May. "You cannot make that connection."

The Story Pirates recognizes a challenge there as well, says Stripling. "If we come in four days a year ... it's difficult to differentiate that from the work that teachers are doing the other 176 days of the school year." Further, standardized tests require non-fiction writing and focus on grammar and syntax, while the Story Pirates, above all, rewards creativity and effort. Ledo of Bronx Arts says her school does not even attempt to tie the Story Pirates' teaching to student achievement, instead using teacher feedback to gauge progress on objectives laid out at the beginning of the year.

When evaluating arts programs, Rajan recommends looking for student growth in other areas—for instance, self-esteem, self-expression, artistic aptitude, and social interactions with peers. Increased attendance can be a positive outcome of an arts program as well, she says. At Bronx Arts, Ledo says, "100 percent of kids come to school when we have a Story Pirates performance."

For the first time this year, the Story Pirates will undergo "rigorous data collection," both internally and through outside consultants, looking at student writing samples with a variety of rubrics. Up until now, Stripling says, the Story Pirates has relied on—and easily found—anecdotal evidence that their programs are working. "We have teachers saying, 'You see that student? He's never picked up a pencil.' And yet he's written three pages for us."

Indeed, another sometimes overlooked benefit of arts programs is that they can be game-changing for kids who are struggling or have special needs, says Rajan. The arts can offer a time for students who are not on grade level in core subjects to shine, she explains. Arts programs can also be an outlet for improving social and communication skills.

Rhona Silverbush's 8-year-old son Jack Nierenberg, who has language and communication challenges, has taken classes with the Story Pirates at a local community center over the last year. Not only does her son now have a greater grasp of story structure, says Silverbush, but he also has moved away from strictly literal interpretation toward more imaginative and abstract ideas. And suddenly he loves writing stories. "For him, to see his words acted out encourages him to use his language in more and new ways," she says. Kids who learn from the Story Pirates "feel that what they do can have an impact, that their words can have ripple effects. It sets the stage for them to imagine what they're capable of doing in the world."

Stripling contends that the Story Pirates also fills a gap left by the testing and accountability movement: Many students these days have never written fiction before. "We'll ask a class, 'Could I write the story of a flying monkey who loves watermelons?' And the kids are like, 'Noooooo,'" says Stripling. "But that's things—they can't! That's why we're in schools."

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