

DANCE for ALL

An assessment of the dance opportunities, needs, and desires of youth with disabilities in Madison, Wisconsin



From May-September 2022, ARTS for ALL Wisconsin worked alongside Janel Hutchison, a UW-Madison School of Human Ecology master's student and professional ballet dancer, to conduct an assessment of the dance opportunities, needs, and desires of youth with disabilities in the Madison, Wisconsin area. By hearing directly from individuals and organizations about how young people with disabilities access and experience dance in and around Madison, this assessment aims to better support and include dancers with disabilities in the Madison area.

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The Project

This project was initiated by Janel Hutchison in collaboration with ARTS for ALL Wisconsin to assess the dance opportunities, needs, and desires of youth with disabilities in the Madison, Wisconsin area. Janel is a professional ballet dancer and University of Wisconsin-Madison master's student who is passionate about increasing access to dance. ARTS for ALL supported Janel by connecting her with community organizations and providing ongoing guidance throughout the project.

Over the course of eight weeks from June–August 2022, Janel utilized emails, phone calls, video calls, and surveys to connect with Madison area community members about their experiences related to dance programming for people with disabilities. A total of 16 parents and caregivers of people with disabilities, six local dance teachers, and seven individuals working at local disability-serving organizations participated in the assessment, the majority of whom participated in in-depth interviews.

These conversations captured the voices of community members who have experienced firsthand the power of dance to enrich lives, as well as the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from participating. Each participant shared personal insights regarding the types of disability programming needed, the challenges of accessing and/or offering adaptive programming, the quality of dance programming wanted, as well as the potential benefits of dance for people with disabilities.

The pages to follow highlight the main ideas and common themes expressed during these conversations. After evaluating interview transcripts, emails, survey responses, and local programming websites, Janel summarized the findings in relation to three overarching questions:

Question 1:

Is there a desire for dance opportunities for people with disabilities in Madison?

(p. 3-4)

Question 2:

What dance opportunities exist for people with disabilities in Madison? Who is participating and what are the barriers to access? (p. 4-8)

Question 3:

What should be considered when creating dance programming for people with disabilities? (p. 9-12)

While this report is written by Janel in her own words, Janel aims to center the voices of the community by including direct quotations whenever possible. To protect the anonymity of participants, the names of individuals and organizations, as well as other identifying information, are excluded from this report.

Question 1:

Is there a desire for dance opportunities for people with disabilities in Madison?

All participants in this assessment expressed desire for adapted dance opportunities in Madison. They emphasized how dance offers unique benefits to people with disabilities, improving both their physical and socioemotional well-being. Local adaptive dance teachers shared the ways in which dance has had a strong positive impact on the lives of their students, while many local disability-serving organizations anticipated several benefits of dance for their clients. Yet, the strongest desire for adaptive and inclusive dance came from the parents and caregivers that are experiencing firsthand the power of dance in the lives of their children. I heard from seven parents and caregivers of youth with disabilities who shared how dance has positively impacted their children. From their perspectives, dance class is a place where their children thrive.

The physical benefits of dance

Parents and caregivers of youth with disabilities expressed how through dance, their children were making great strides forward in their physical development. They emphasized how dance class provides a fun and supportive environment to work on physical therapy goals without it *feeling* like therapy. Through dance, youth with disabilities can overcome challenging physical feats, such as balance and coordination, without it feeling like hard work.

A parent whose son has autism spectrum disorder, expressed that dance is “the best way for him to build the skills he needs to build,” such as executive functioning, fine motor skills, and dealing with adversity.

“All of that happens in the dance class,” she said. “It’s in a place that he wants to be and he wants to generally do the activity. For us it feels like a great way for him to grow.”

“Dance is fun. To [my daughter] it’s not hard—it’s fun.”

Another parent of a child with down syndrome expressed a similar sentiment, stating, “Dance is fun. To [my daughter] it’s not hard—it’s fun.”

Individuals from disability-serving organizations and dance studios across Madison echoed these sentiments. They pointed to numerous physical benefits of dance, including improved hand-eye coordination, balance, spatial and body awareness, sensory experiences, muscle development, and gross motor skills.

These physical benefits of dance are important features to highlight. They indicate that the physicality and musicality of dance can offer a unique way to support individuals in overcoming physical barriers and improving their physical well-being. Yet, for many parents and caregivers, physical progress comes second to the social and emotional benefits that dance can provide.

The socioemotional benefits of dance

Parents and caregivers were enthusiastic about the ways in which dance fostered positive relationships, confidence, and joy for their children. They expressed how dance class is a place where their children can build lasting relationships with their dance peers and instructors by engaging in a shared practice of creativity and expression. Likewise, they said it’s a place to develop confidence and pride in one’s accomplishments, as performance opportunities allow students to showcase their hard work and celebrate their dance abilities with peers, friends, and family.

One parent of a child with down syndrome joyfully exclaimed, "She's so proud! I mean, she's just so proud that she knows a dance routine and was so excited to show it off to everybody before the recital."

"She loves performing, socializing, and I have seen her confidence blossom."

Another parent of a child with learning disabilities noted, "She loves performing, socializing, and I have seen her confidence blossom."

Disability-serving organizations and dance studios also emphasized the importance of dance as a social outlet and opportunity for personal expression and emotional development.

One adaptive dance teacher spoke about how through dance, her students are developing a strong sense of self-confidence, allowing them to explore new social and recreational activities in their daily lives.

Another adaptive dance teacher expressed the benefit of free expression and joy, writing, "Overall, the impact [dance] has on the kids is unbelievable. To have a safe space to freely engage in the magic of dance just puts a smile on their faces."

"To have a safe space to freely engage in the magic of dance just puts a smile on their faces."

Considering the ways in which dance can improve physical, emotional, and social well-being, dance opportunities for youth with disabilities are highly desired in Madison. Efforts should therefore be made to increase access to adaptive and accessible dance opportunities for those with disabilities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS, TIPS AND ADDITIONAL NOTES

- Dance offers a range of positive physical and socioemotional benefits to youth with disabilities, making it a highly desired programming option.
- While physical development is important, it should not be prioritized above social and emotional development. When creating programming, focus on fostering joy, human connection, and free expression through dance. The physical benefits will follow.
- Encourage social connection by creating opportunities to dance in a collaborative environment. This may include dancing in a circle or pairing up with a dance partner.
- Create opportunities for personal expression through movement. This can be achieved by allowing time for "free dance" in each class. Props and textiles may also be used to spark creativity and encourage exploration.



Question 2:

What dance opportunities exist for people with disabilities in Madison? — Who is participating, and what are the barriers to access?

Of the 19 people that participated in this assessment, not a single individual believed that Madison was providing adequate dance, recreational, or social opportunities for youth with disabilities. Community organizations are struggling to meet the need due to limited staffing and capacity limitations, while adaptive recreational programs are often filled to capacity and unable to accept new students.

One parent expressed frustration with the challenges of finding programming for her daughter with physical disabilities, stating “I searched high and low for activities for her this summer... There was nothing for this summer—literally nothing.”

“I really do think there's enough need that almost every dance studio could have an adaptive class.”

Another parent emphasized the need for more dance opportunities for youth with disabilities, stating, “I really do think there's enough need that almost every dance studio could have an adaptive class.”

Although many people acknowledged that Madison has more opportunities for people with disabilities than surrounding areas, they all said it still wasn't enough. Everyone recognized that the need was greater than what was currently being

met. Yet, they also acknowledge that not all people with disabilities have equal access to programs and services.

A few demographics were identified repeatedly as being in particular need of support. These included older age groups, such as teenagers and adults with disabilities, as well as families with less financial and social resources.

Programming gaps for teenagers and adults with disabilities

Older age groups, including teenagers and adults, were identified as in particular need of more programming opportunities. Over and over again I heard from parents, caregivers, and disability-serving organizations about the programming gaps for teens and adults with disabilities. People shared how as children age, fewer social and recreational opportunities exist.

For parents and caregivers of teenagers and adults with disabilities, the lack of programming is a source of great frustration.

“When your kids are younger and they're cute, or whenever, you know there's places for them to be, and you can even be,” said one parent. “But when you get to have teenagers, [programming] is hard to find... There isn't a whole lot of space for them in places.”

“When you have teenagers, [programming] is hard to find...There isn't a whole lot of space for them in places.”

Local disability-serving organizations also emphasized the need for more teen and young adult programming. One employee at a local disability-serving organization said that they are “constantly get calls from families looking for respite programs and other programs for teens

and young adults.”

Another confirmed, stating, “When you get to the upper ages, there really isn’t a lot.”

In addition to less adaptive programming opportunities, older youth with disabilities are also less likely to participate in inclusive programming alongside their peers without disabilities.

Several people expressed that as children age, the gap between those with and without disabilities widens. While a child with disabilities may successfully participate in a dance class with typically developing children at age 5, it may become much more challenging to “keep up” with their peers at age 15.

As children with disabilities age, they therefore experience a decrease in both age-appropriate adaptive programming and inclusive programming opportunities.

It is evident that more adaptive programming for older age groups with disabilities is greatly needed in the Madison area. Developing spaces where teens and adults with disabilities can participate in recreational activities while also building social connections should be prioritized.

When creating adaptive programming, organizations should resist the allure of prioritizing programming for young children. Instead, organizations should devote efforts to developing programming for older age groups first, with the possibility of expanding to younger age groups as resources allow.

Barriers to accessing dance programming for people with disabilities

People living in resource-strained rural communities, as well as low-income families and families who are less socially connected were identified as having less access to inclusive and

adaptive programming. For parents and caregivers of youth with disabilities, establishing a community of support is vital to accessing programs and services.

“If you are connected, if you have friends, if you're a person of advantage and means, you will find out about [programming] much more than if you didn't.”

Every parent and caregiver that I spoke with whose child had participated in an adaptive class told me that they found out about the program through word-of-mouth – either from a friend or a caseworker. In general, the more socially connected people are and the greater amount of time and resources they have to navigate the systems of care, the more successful they will be at finding recreational, art, and social opportunities for their children with disabilities.

“If you are connected, if you have friends, if you're a person of advantage and means, you will find out about [programming] much more than if you didn't,” said one parent.

Yet, even for those who benefit from the privileges of social connection, finding programming for their children with disabilities continues to be a challenge.

Parents and caregivers expressed a range of frustrations associated with finding appropriate programming for their children. Some expressed heartbreaking scenarios in which they showed up to an adaptive class, only to find out that the program was not equipped to meet the needs of their child. Several found it frustrating that they had to travel long distances to access adaptive programming, as nothing was available closer to home. For others, the time-consuming task of scouring the internet for program opportunities,

only to find that most of the opportunities advertised are longer being offered, is crushing.

"As a parent, you recognize pretty quickly if you're just going to hit a wall."

"As a parent, you recognize pretty quickly if you're just going to hit a wall," said a parent of a child with physical disabilities that uses a wheelchair.

Another parent confirmed, "I didn't really know a lot of other studios or where to reach out, and so it was nice that we happened to have a recommendation... because that information just isn't out there."

It is clear that accessing adaptive dance programming is a significant challenge for families caring for youth with disabilities in the Madison area. To enroll in an adaptive dance class, families must first hope to receive a good word-of-mouth recommendation. They then must hope the class is accepting new students. If they land a spot in the class, they then must hope that the class is the right fit for their child, that it works with their family's schedule, and that the class continues to be offered in the future. None of these steps are a guarantee, and each of them requires time and investment of resources.

For all to access the benefits of dance, more needs to be done to ensure that people are informed of the dance programming and resources available to them. Community outreach, marketing, and communication all play an important role in this effort. Other efforts should be made to break down existing financial or geographic barriers to participation.

Yet, to achieve these goals, support for dance studios and other disability-serving organizations is vital. Individuals from dance studios and disability-serving organizations mentioned a host

of challenges associated with offering programming. These challenges must be addressed if the community is to increase dance programming opportunities for people with disabilities.

Support needed to increase access to adaptive dance opportunities

For youth with disabilities to experience the richness of dance, removing barriers to access is vital. The first and perhaps greatest barrier to access is the sheer lack of adaptive dance opportunities available in the Madison area.

The majority of people I spoke with only knew of one adaptive dance program that existed in Madison—some knew of two, while others knew of none. But as much as dance studios and disability-serving organizations may like to offer more adaptive programming, securing the human, financial, and educational resources to do so presents a challenge.

The need for human resources

Dance teachers, dance studio directors, and individuals working at disability-serving organizations across Madison expressed a few key challenges to offering programming for youth with disabilities. The first and arguably greatest challenge is securing enough instructors and assistants to run the programs.

To offer dance classes for students with disabilities, significant human resources are required. In addition to the instructor, oftentimes at least one or two assistants are needed to help demonstrate movement adaptations and provide one-on-one instruction. One local dance teacher expressed the importance of having volunteers to assist her while teaching the adaptive dance classes.

"I usually have at least two [volunteers]... and

that's for like six or seven kids," she said.

Oftentimes, she said her students need one-on-one attention that she is not able to provide as a single individual. Volunteers help her instruct the class in a way that is both sustainable for herself, while also providing the highest quality experience for the students.

But securing enough volunteers to run the class is often a challenge. While she would love to expand the adaptive program, she knows it is not possible without more resources.

"I am so grateful for the volunteers that I've had and that I still have, but there's always a need because they come and go," she said. "So, I'm always in a bit of a panic [when] I don't have anybody... I have to keep my class numbers low because there's only so many of us and it has to be a number where it's still a good class and effective for the kids who are there."

Other dance studios and disability-serving organizations also expressed the challenge of securing human resources to run adaptive programming. One organization said that it took them a full year to find a teacher for one of their adaptive classes. Another organization had to cut programming due to staffing shortages, and a third organization expressed concern about securing volunteers, which is integral to their programming.

Especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations are struggling to secure the people needed for programming to continue. For many organizations, merely having people who care about the work and are willing to give of their time and energy is what is most needed.

While there are some cases where certain qualifications are desired, most organizations expressed a desire for anyone who is honest and willing to engage in the work.

"They don't have to be the best dance teachers," said a local adaptive dance instructor. "They need to just be compassionate and open and willing."

"They don't have to be the best dance teachers... They need to just be compassionate, and open and willing."

The need for financial resources

In addition to human resources, financial support is also needed to sustain adaptive programming. Currently, many families pay for adaptive programming through Children's Long-Term Support (CLTS), a Wisconsin state program that funds services for children with disabilities. CLTS supports families in being able to pay for adaptive dance programming, while also supporting dance studios by acting as a revenue source to fund the programs.

However, CLTS funding alone is typically not enough to fully fund adaptive programs, especially for programs that require multiple instructors and assistants. Due to lack of funding, most adaptive programs rely upon the assistance of unpaid volunteers, which limits program capacity.

"It's finding the time, the money, and the people."

"It has to be volunteer right now, because we don't have the resources to pay anybody," said the director of a local adaptive dance program. "If I could, I would have funding, and I would have a team, and I would have occupational therapists on that team... That would be the dream, but it's finding the time, the money, and the people."

It's also important to note that while CLTS offers

support to families caring for children with disabilities, the funding is only offered to people younger than 22 years of age. This could pose a challenge to organizations that want to offer adult adaptive programming. Additionally, some families and dance studios alike may not be aware that CLTS funding can be used towards adaptive dance programming. Education and training that aims to help families and organizations access CLTS and other private or government funding opportunities may help alleviate this issue.

The need for training and education

If adaptive dance programming is to expand throughout the Madison area, more dance teachers are needed that have the knowledge and understanding necessary to work with students with disabilities. While individuals do not necessarily need to be experts in dance and disabilities before engaging in the work, establishing a foundation of knowledge will help dance teachers build confidence and competence, as well as create the optimal dance experience for their students.

One adaptive dance teacher spoke about the importance of developing a “tool box” that can be pulled from when facing challenging circumstances. Learning how to adapt, make necessary adjustments, and manage shifting dynamics is especially important when working with students with disabilities.

Most dance teachers likely feel uncomfortable teaching students with disabilities if they are not equipped with the tools needed to respond to the needs of the class. While some adaptive dance teachers in the Madison area are certified through adaptive dance training programs, certifications take considerable time and money to complete. This may discourage dance teachers from pursuing them. Yet, working with students with disabilities should not be perceived as too

challenging for dance teachers to pursue. On the contrary, it is something that many can participate in if they come open and ready to learn.

To support new adaptive dance teachers, a community of support is needed. Opportunities for community knowledge sharing, skills development, and disability education can be ways to better equip dance teachers to work with students with disabilities, enhancing the experiences of the teachers and students alike.

KEY TAKEAWAYS, TIPS, AND ADDITIONAL NOTES

- More dance opportunities for people with disabilities is needed in Madison. To meet the need, dance studios and disability-serving organizations should consider ways to increase inclusivity in their programming. This could include finding ways to adapt current programs to be more inclusive, or creating new adaptive dance programs.
- While more programming is needed across all age groups, programming is especially needed for teenagers and adults. When creating programming, resist the tendency to only focus on the needs of young children.
- Information about adaptive programming is difficult for parents and caregivers of youth with disabilities to access. Coordinated marketing efforts between disability-serving organizations and dance studios could help alleviate this issue. Additionally, program websites should be kept up to date to clearly indicate if a class is no longer available or not accepting new students.

- Dance studios are struggling to secure the human resources needed to offer adaptive dance programming. Additional funding is needed for recruitment of personnel and compensation for instructors and assistants.
- Funding is available to support dance opportunities for people with disabilities, but not everyone has the knowledge and skills needed to access it. Education and training for accessing available funds should be supported.
- A community of support should be established to increase interest in teaching adaptive dance classes and equip new adaptive dance teachers to lead successful classes. The community could include knowledge sharing from seasoned adaptive dance teachers, teacher training, and disability education.

Question 3:

What should be considered when creating dance programming for people with disabilities?

It is evident that more dance opportunities for people with disabilities are needed in Madison and the surrounding areas. Yet, in an effort to increase the number of program opportunities available, a thoughtful and community-centered process must be maintained.

Parents and caregivers of youth with disabilities

expressed the importance of finding programming led by people that they trust and that have a breadth of understanding and responsiveness to the needs of their children. Dance studios must exhibit an organization-wide commitment to fostering acceptance and belonging for their students with disabilities. Because when an organization's commitment is shallow, families and students can feel the impact.

The importance of trust

When developing a program, it is first and foremost important to understand the essential role of trust. For parents and caregivers of youth with disabilities, trust is demonstrated by a true understanding of the needs and experiences of their children; it is characterized by a commitment to providing for and prioritizing the well-being of their children, despite any challenges that may arise.

For parents and caregivers, seeking out dance programming for their children with disabilities looks different than how they might seek out programming for typically developing children. Rather than prioritizing the details of the program offerings, such as the dance style, one parent of a child with intellectual and developmental disabilities said she places more emphasis on the quality of the care.

"For me, it's more about [having] a studio where I know that my kid will be safe, that she will not be treated like a mascot, and where we won't use a kind of 'disability porn' approach, because that is so infuriating to me," she said. "What I look for are good human beings. Where you're like, I know I trust this person. I know this person gets it."

"What I look for are good human beings. Where you're like, I know this person gets it."

Another parent also emphasized the importance of finding people who ‘get it’—people who understand the unique strengths, challenges, and needs of youth with disabilities.

“Good intentions are great, but it’s not enough,” she said.

Building trust with the student, as well as with their parents and caregivers should be at the center of all program planning and execution. Trust requires that dance instructors and program administrators prioritize the well-being of the students in all their operations, ahead of their own personal gain or any organizational benefits.

To build trust, organizations must demonstrate commitment to the student and their family, practice flexibility and adaptability to meet the student’s needs, and foster a place of inclusion and belonging.

Building trust through commitment

Part of building trust requires that studios and instructors demonstrate a longstanding commitment to their students with disabilities. Too often, parents experience short winded programs that feel more performative in nature than a true attempt to meet the needs of their child.

A stand-alone session or a 6-week program may provide children enjoyment for the moment, but a long-term commitment to building relationships and offering programming is needed to produce the greatest benefits for the students and their families.

“Having things that are consistent is really helpful,” said a parent. “[When programs end,] you as a parent have to be the one to keep maintaining things. There’s just only so much you can realistically do at home when your kid is not motivated by being with their peers and not motivated by being at the place they know.”

Maintaining a consistent schedule fosters a sense of comfort and security for children with disabilities while also providing the continuity needed to experience the full benefits of dance.

Commitment requires that organizations prioritize the needs of students with disabilities in the same ways that they do for their typically-developing students. This includes providing ongoing classes at practical times of the day, securing the human resources needed to implement the classes, and including students with disabilities in the organization’s ongoing goals and future planning.

Building trust through adaptability

Trust is built when an environment of inclusivity is fostered—when a student is never turned away, and adaptations and modifications are made to meet the student’s needs.

This requires instructors to be flexible in their class structure and expectations. Instructors must be willing to shift their plans and offer sufficient adaptations so that all students can participate successfully, regardless of their disabilities.

“It’s important that [we’re] not trying to fit people into something that doesn’t make sense,” said a parent of a child with autism spectrum disorder. “It’s [about] flexibility, support, honoring people for where they are... [That] feels real. It feels authentic to me.”

“It’s important that we’re not trying to fit people into something that doesn’t make sense... It’s [about] flexibility, support, honoring people for where they are.”

Sometimes flexibility means being willing to let go of preconceived notions of what dance is, and

what it is not. Dance instructors should provide plenty of movement options so that each student can discover what works for them personally, even if it looks different than their peers.

“Dance allows a person to have fun and be creative without needing any specific skills,” wrote a local adaptive dance teacher. “You can dance standing or sitting or by just moving your arms. There are endless opportunities for people to dance, [and] that really makes it possible for those with disabilities.”

"Dance allows a person to have fun and be creative without needing any specific skills... That really makes it possible for those with disabilities"

Adaptive dance teachers are reimagining dance—what it is, who it is for, and why we do it. Yet, many dancers and dance teachers find it difficult to break outside of their pre-existing understanding of dance as a highly technical, challenging art form.

While it is true that some forms of dance can be highly technical, and that this technicality can make dance riveting and powerful to watch, overemphasizing the technicality of dance can diminish its positive potential.

The goal of aesthetic perfection and the proceeding competitiveness it produces can result in a myriad of mental, emotional, and physical harms. To reduce the potential for harm, dance teachers must be willing to break free from their rigid understandings of dance and create an inclusive environment where all dancers are given the opportunity to thrive.

In addition to adapting understandings of what dance is and who it is for, adaptability may also require changes to class structure to better meet

the physical, cognitive, and emotional needs of students. This could include providing extra instructors or volunteers to provide personal support to the dancers when needed.

One parent expressed frustration with the lack of one-on-one support available to her daughter who is nonverbal and has down syndrome.

“Just because everybody says you're including disabled people into a program doesn't mean it always works,” she wrote. “Many programs rely on the parents, which isn't fair... If I'm not there or an adult is not there to motivate her, she would just be sitting in the corner doing nothing.”

Additionally, dance instructors can exhibit flexibility by letting go of any preconceived “dance class rules.” For example, one teacher said that she encourages relationship-building by allowing time for the students to talk and get to know each other at the beginning of each class. She said this practice allows her students the space to “feel safe and heard.”

Through flexibility and adaptability, dance studios can celebrate diversity by affirming that dance is for everyone, regardless of their abilities. By recognizing the needs of students and responding appropriately, dance studios and instructors exhibit the level of care and understanding necessary for developing trusting relationships and fostering positive dance experiences.

Building trust through belonging

Fostering a sense of belonging is the ultimate form of trust between dance studios and their students. Throughout this assessment, parents and caregivers expressed a strong desire for their children to experience belonging and acceptance within their communities.

For many students, belonging is characterized by personal relationships with program instructors,

mentors, and other students. Relationship-building encourages student participation in the class by contributing to a trusting and inclusive environment. It also adds to the richness of the class by enabling instructors to meet the needs and build upon the strengths of their students.

For some, a sense of belonging is also stimulated by interacting with those who share similar life experiences. Adaptive dance programming can provide opportunities for students to interact with, build relationships with, and dance alongside those with similar abilities as their own. This can foster a sense of security and normalization of disabilities, while also leading to positive social interactions and better dance experiences for some students.

Adaptive programming meets students with disabilities where they are at; it provides the time, resources, and structure needed to build upon the strengths of each student and allow them to thrive in an accepting and normalizing environment.

However, parents and caregivers also expressed a strong desire for inclusion. Ultimately, they said they wanted their children to be able to dance alongside students without disabilities in an equal and accepting relationship.

"My ultimate dream is always a fully inclusive environment," said a parent of a child with autism spectrum disorder..

"My ultimate dream is always a fully inclusive environment."

Another parent of a child with developmental disabilities said, "[I] would love to see more opportunities for truly inclusive programming... I know it's hard. I don't believe it's impossible."

The "truly inclusive" programming parents described can normalize disabilities while also providing positive social experiences for both students with and without disabilities.

In addition to classes where students of all abilities dance together, inclusion can also be achieved by including dancers with disabilities in recitals and other performance opportunities alongside dancers without disabilities. Another possibility for inclusion is a "buddy" program, in which typically developing students are paired with students with disabilities during adaptive dance classes.

However, when implementing buddy or mentor systems, it is vital that the personhood of every student is equally affirmed, regardless of their abilities. Parents and caregivers have expressed hurt when they sense that their children with disabilities are perceived as "projects" instead of fully human.

Both adaptive and inclusive dance programs are wanted and needed for youth with disabilities. They can both help foster a sense of belonging and acceptance that is central to the well-being of students and their families.

To achieve true inclusivity, it is vital that dance studios center the needs of students with disabilities and intentionally include them in the broader dance studio community.

KEY TAKEAWAYS, TIPS, AND ADDITIONAL NOTES

- Trust is central to the success of dance programming for youth with disabilities. When creating programming, dance studios and instructors must build trusting relationships with students and their families. This includes demonstrating

a long-term commitment to providing programming for students with disabilities, adapting programming to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and fostering an inclusive and accepting environment where students with disabilities know they belong.

- Include time in every dance class for relationship-building. This may be achieved by beginning the class with a “question of the day,” or by asking students about their personal preferences and interests. Instructors should actively work to establish a personal relationship with each student.
- When planning classes for students with disabilities, dance studios should offer year-round programming, just as they would for their students without disabilities.
- Routine is often important for students with disabilities. Try to keep class structures consistent and predictable.
- Find ways to include dancers with disabilities in activities with typically developing dancers. These could include inclusive performance opportunities, social events, and inclusive dance classes.
- Invest time, energy, and financial resources into adaptive and inclusive dance training and education. There is always more to learn about fostering positive, accepting, and inclusive dance environments. To start, utilize free online resources, such as Stopgap Dance Company’s [Beginners’ Guide to Inclusive Dance](#).

Next steps:

Supporting inclusive and accessible dance experiences for people with disabilities

This assessment reveals that dance opportunities for people with disabilities are wanted and needed in Madison, Wisconsin, and beyond. Dance offers a unique way for people to improve their mobility, strength, and coordination while simultaneously advancing their mental and emotional well-being through creative expression and social connection.

Yet, few opportunities exist for people with disabilities to participate in dance. People with disabilities face several barriers to access, including lack of appropriate dance opportunities, lack of awareness of existing programming, and insufficient trust between participants and program leadership.

A response to the parents and caregivers, disability-serving organizations, and dance studios that participated in this assessment is needed. To better serve those with disabilities in Madison and beyond, the community must come together to support appropriate adaptive and inclusive dance opportunities. This includes supporting the development of new adaptive dance programs as well as responding to the needs of existing programs.

By using this assessment as a guide, the dance and performing art community has an opportunity to better care for and live in relationship with those with disabilities. The call to expand access to dance for those with disabilities should not be ignored. Dance has the power to uplift, inspire, and transform lives; it needs to be for everyone.

About the Author



Janel Hutchison is a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Human Ecology. She is passionate about building stronger, healthier, and more equitable communities through community-based partnerships and creative collaborations.

In addition to pursuing her education, Janel is a professional ballet dancer who enjoys performing across Wisconsin, as well as working with youth and adults as a dance instructor. Prior to moving to Madison in 2018, Janel danced at the Milwaukee Ballet, where she had the opportunity to assist in the development of an adaptive dance program for children with physical and developmental disabilities. Janel's experiences teaching in this adaptive dance program served as a primary source of inspiration for this assessment.

Janel will graduate with her master's degree from UW-Madison in December, 2022. She looks forward to continuing to explore ways to increase accessibility to dance moving forward. If you have any questions or comments about this assessment, Janel welcomes you to email her at janelhutch1@gmail.com.

About ARTS for ALL Wisconsin



ARTS for ALL Wisconsin is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that seeks to expand the capabilities, confidence, and quality of life for

children and adults with disabilities throughout Wisconsin by providing programs in the arts. For over three decades, ARTS for ALL has served people of all ages, providing an outlet for creative expression and unlimited possibilities for personal, academic, and professional success.

ARTS for ALL provides statewide, in-depth, and comprehensive programming across the full spectrum of arts activities and disabilities. It conducts effective and well-loved arts programs for people with disabilities throughout the state of Wisconsin.

Currently, ARTS for ALL is in discussions with a collaborating dance organization to develop an Accessible Dance program based on the findings of this report. If you would like to learn more about ARTS for ALL and its efforts to support accessible dance, please email Christina Martin-Wright at christina@artsforallwi.org. More information about ARTS for ALL can also be found at ARTS for ALL's website, artsforallwi.org.