

## **“DANCING CLASSROOMS” AT HUTCHINSON SCHOOL**

Typical ten year olds might grimace at the idea of ballroom dancing classes, but thanks to a collaboration between the Pelham Education Foundation and the Hutchinson School PTA, Hutchinson fifth graders are learning to dance and loving it! As fifth grade teacher Maureen Morrissey says, “Even the reluctant dancers are having fun in spite of themselves.”

Teachers Paul Bloom, Lisa Buzin, Maureen Morrissey and Jackie Soccodato saw a need, found a program to address it, and sought and received a \$3,000 grant from the Pelham Education Foundation. Because the total program cost is \$6,300, explains Hutchinson PTA Co-President Maria Rosell, “Our PTA, with assistance from Southern Westchester BOCES, is providing the funds for the balance for this worthwhile program. We are very proud of the research our teachers made in order to have this program available for the fifth grade students.”

Every Tuesday and Thursday, each fifth grade class meets for a 45-minute session with Mr. Mario, the instructor from “Dancing Classrooms”, a not-for-profit project of the American Ballroom Theater Company. The arts-in-education program is designed to build social awareness, confidence and self-esteem in the context of social dancing. Each of the twenty lessons in the series introduces students to the steps of at least one new dance and provides opportunities to practice dances learned in previous classes. The program focuses on expressive ways to celebrate culture and communities while meeting New York State standards for instruction in the arts. At Hutchinson School, students also work on their writing skills by tracking their experiences in journals.

Since the beginning of January, the students have mastered the fox trot, rumba, tango, polka, stomp and more. Because they change partners every couple of minutes, no student ever feels left out. Mistakes happen, but Mr. Mario’s gentle corrections and the good humor of the students and their classroom teachers—some of whom participate actively in the lessons—prevent students from feeling embarrassed. Students vie for the opportunity to demonstrate their skills for their classmates and to be the one to choose the final dance of the session. The small room in which the students dance can barely accommodate their exuberant bodies, but collisions with each other and with the furniture along the walls just add to the fun.

As Mr. Bloom points out, “This program is so much more than just about dancing.... It is about recognizing that the person standing across from you is relying on you to do your part and that is a lesson that I hope they carry with them through life as we are all part of the same global community.” To the students, though, the dancing is the main attraction. Adrian Baginski’s view is that “dancing is very fun. We get to learn cool moves.” Classmate Isaiah Gant, showing an appreciation for both glamour and hard work, adds that it “feels like you’re a star from ‘Dancing With the Stars’. It takes a lot of practice to become a dancer.” Isabella Joseph sees another aspect to the program: “In dancing we are allowed to express our feelings when we do the many different dances such as the rumba.” The students’ newly acquired dancing skills will be on display when the project culminates in a school-wide assembly and when the students perform the dances they have learned as part of their graduation program in June.

The “Dancing Classrooms” project reflects the emphasis on the arts requested by both community members and school district staff in surveys recently undertaken by the Pelham

Education Foundation as part of its strategic planning process. This teacher-initiated minigrant supports the mission of the Foundation, which is to enhance the quality of public education in Pelham with the help of educators, citizens, parents, students, alumni, businesses and foundations. The Foundation funds educational programs that are outside the annual school budget and awards grants for projects that strengthen and enrich the curriculum by helping to develop and promote innovative programs, support additional faculty training and resources, and provide funding for special school facilities and equipment. Founded in 1995, The Pelham Education Foundation is a 501 (c) (3) not-for-profit organization, directed by a non-salaried board of community members.