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Andrew Czop, 9, and Nicole Geremia, 5, show off their moves with Deb Meunier, director of Fusionworks, a Rhode Island-based modern dance company.

**Daily Times photo by Johanna Bennett**

**W.W. students, parents pirouette with pizzazz**

By Johanna Bennett

**Daily Times Staff Reporter**

West Warwick's children and their parents are learning first-hand that there is more to the art of dance than toe shoes, tights and pretty women in tutus.

The Dance Learning Project, a three-part series of dance workshops involving about 100 West Warwick students and their parents, has whirled dance off the stage and out of the rehearsal studio, landing in the middle of the Doerening Junior High School cafeteria.

Funded by the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment of the Arts, the program is dedicated to eliminating common stereotypes that depict dance as stuffy, pretentious and boring.

"People don't understand dance and that is why they don't attend," said program Director Lucille Mota-Costa. "It's not about teaching kids how hard dancers work, but how to appreciate what they do."

The basic premise for the program, which is already well underway in West Warwick, is simple. The 100 chosen families will attend a special March 15 performance by five well-known Rhode Island dance companies — ranging from the classical style of the Festival Ballet to the contemporary gyrations of modern dance companies.

The children and parents are already in the midst of a series of three Sunday afternoon dance workshops — the last one of which is scheduled for this weekend — featuring performers from the same performing groups.

Dressed in casual street clothes or rehearsal attire, the dancers joke and answer dozens of silly and serious questions in between their routines. Suddenly, in doing so, they bring the little understood and appreciated art of dance down to earth and make it accessible and understandable to the young audience.

"There is a distance between the dancer on stage and the audience," Mota-Costa said. "These kids and their parents are not only meeting the dancers, but acquiring knowledge."

The children who flock with their parents to the Sunday workshops, on the other hand, just seem to have fun.

Eight-year-old Amanda Ball looks with amazement as the dancers from the Providence-based modern dance company Fusionworks stretch, kick, bob and leap across the cafeteria floor.

Her hands are one of the first to go up when the call goes out for volunteers.

"1-2-3-4-and-5-6-7-8, and turn," calls out the company's Director Deb Meunier, as the dozen or so children and parents stroll across the floor with their arms stretched outward.

Sharon Petrarca, a nervous mother turned dancer, looks down at her daughter, nodding her head to the beat and counting to eight out loud.

Suddenly, everyone — parents and children — are dancing and it doesn't seem so remote a world anymore.