

Musical-in-a-Week Evaluation Summary

Prepared for Great River Educational Arts Theatre (GREAT)



Photo credit: St. Cloud Area School District 742

Key findings

- Nearly all students surveyed said they learned about theater and enjoyed making a musical during Musical-in-a-Week. About 80% of students showed at least some interest in doing theater or a musical again in the future.
- After participating in Musical-in-a-Week, more students said they feel proud of themselves, can present in front of a group, and can be a leader.
- 82% of students rated themselves as able to work with other students “a lot” after participating Musical-in-a-Week, as compared to 55% before participating.
- Beyond performers, this evaluation also engaged student audiences who viewed the final Musical-in-a-Week performances. Schoolwide data collection shows that student audiences who attended a final performance report an increased interest in theater.

“[I learned] that if I practice,
I can get better and
I can be proud of me.”
– Student

About GREAT

Great River Educational Arts Theatre (GREAT) provides high-quality theatrical experiences to nearly 50,000 community members each year in the greater St. Cloud region. Through an annual programming cycle that includes full productions, summer camps, drama workshops, school partnerships, student matinees, and a youth artist project, GREAT creates meaningful ways for people of all ages to explore creativity, build confidence, develop lifelong skills, and find a sense of belonging. Led by professional artistic staff, GREAT’s programming brings people together on stage, behind the scenes, in classrooms, and in community spaces across Central Minnesota.

One of GREAT’s programs is their Musical-in-a-Week program, which is in its fourth program year in the 2025-26 school year. Musical-in-a-Week is a one-week residency facilitated by GREAT with partnering schools. During a single week, GREAT teaching artists bring together all the 5th grade students during the school day to audition, rehearse, and perform a musical. The week culminates in two Friday performances for fellow students and for family and friends. For the 2025-26 school year, GREAT partnered with 8 schools from November to March and connected with 684 students who participated in the Musical-in-a-Week program.

Evaluation

This evaluation is part of the Arts Board 2025-26 youth development evaluation cohort, for which the primary evaluations questions were:

- To what extent do Arts Board grants impact youth arts engagement and skills?
- To what extent do Arts Board grants impact youth emotional and social well-being?
- To what extent do Arts Board grants impact youth career and educational outcomes?

Arts Board cohort evaluation question	Specific GREAT outcomes	Method
To what extent do Arts Board grants impact youth arts engagement and skills?	Students have fun Students are engaged Students learn core theater elements (based on GREAT curriculum)	Youth survey, includes retrospective pre-post questions Teacher interviews Sticker voting activity with students in other grades who attended the final performance
To what extent do Arts Board grants impact youth emotional and social well-being?	Students increase confidence Students feel like they belong Students collaborate with each other	Youth survey, includes retrospective pre-post questions Teacher interviews
To what extent do Arts Board grants impact youth career and educational outcomes?	Students build leadership skills Students build public speaking skills	Youth survey, includes retrospective pre-post questions Teacher interviews

Methods

Youth survey. The youth survey included questions about students' overall experience in the program as well as retrospective pre-post questions to assess changes. Classroom teachers administered the survey to students as a confidential web survey in the weeks following the residency. Survey questions closely align with the outcomes outlined above. Out of a total of 684 students that participated in the program this year, 223 completed the survey for a response rate of 33%. Please note that a small portion of students (~20) were part of a 6th grade afterschool program that completed the program curriculum in two weeks after school, instead of one week during the school day.

Teacher interviews. The teacher interviews were conducted by Wilder Research staff in the weeks following each residency, focusing on perceived impacts to classrooms, individual students, and the school as a whole. The interviews focused on the most recent residency, as well as teachers' experience with previous residencies if they had been present for more than one programming year. Four teachers completed the interview, out of a total of 32 teachers that were invited

Sticker voting activity. This is a brief, participatory method used to gather data from students in other grades who attended the final performance. The goal was to understand how the residency impacts students and the host school at a broader level, such as helping to cultivate a community of arts and theater engagement. GREAT staff and volunteers visited a select classrooms at each school following the final performance to guide students in the activity. A total of 403 students voted in the activity.

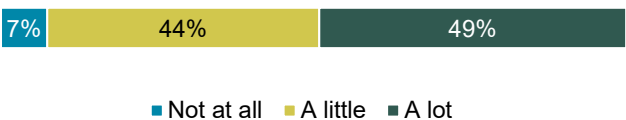
Evaluation findings

Youth report increased knowledge in core elements of theater.

During the program, GREAT staff spend intentional time reviewing theater curriculum and teaching core elements of theater, such as what theater is, what a musical is, what an audition is, and how actors create characters. Given this focus, a key outcome of interest for the evaluation was if students learn and understand these elements of theater. When asked, about half of students report they learned “A lot” about theater during Musical-in-a-Week, with another half saying “A little” (Figure 1).

1. Student learning of theater (N=216)

I learned about theater during Musical-in-a-Week.



This finding is supplemented by students’ responses to an open-ended question in the survey. When asked to share one thing they learned from Musical-in-a-Week, nearly half (44%) of students reported improved performance skills, including singing, dancing, voice project, memorizing lines, and expression or embodying a character. This was the most common category of responses to the open-ended question. In teacher interviews, teachers likewise spoke on observing their students learn about theater. Partner schools often take some time to prepare students in advance of the program week, such as by watching clips of the musical they will perform or beginning to learn the songs.

[I learned] how to sing and be an actor and use my body and voice to be a performer. – Student

[I learned to] use voices and gestures to explain what you are saying and use expression and always have fun. – Student

Youth report increased confidence, including in leadership and public speaking

When comparing themselves before participating in the program to after, a higher proportion of students reported that they feel proud of themselves, can be leaders, and can present in front of a group. In open-ended responses, about 10% of students said they learned about persistence or “practice makes perfect.” Some students specifically mentioned in open-ended responses feeling more confident (5%), understanding that their part matters or there are “no small parts” (3%), and how to handle rejection or not getting the part you want (2%).

[I learned] that it is okay to mess up. – Student

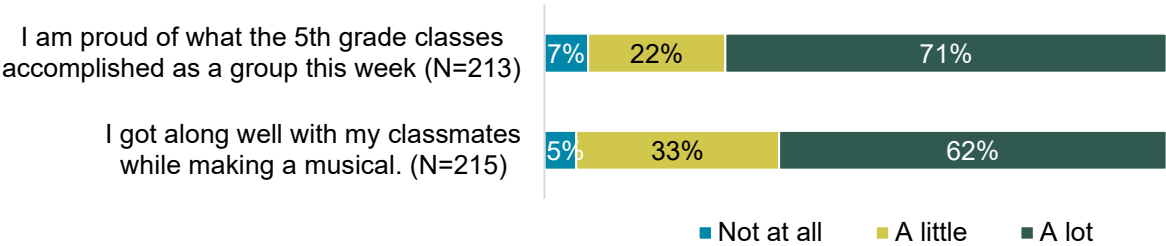
[I learned] that you matter. If we did not have you, the show would be bad. – Student

Teachers similarly shared observing improvements in confidence over the course of the week from practicing and preparing for the final performances: “The first day or two, they’re like, ‘I’m never going to remember all this.’ Then by the end of the week, it just all comes to [them].” Another teacher noted that having two end-of-week performances (one during the school day for students and the other after school for family and community members), naturally gives students a chance to practice and feel more confident the second time around.

Youth report collaboration and connection with their peers during the program

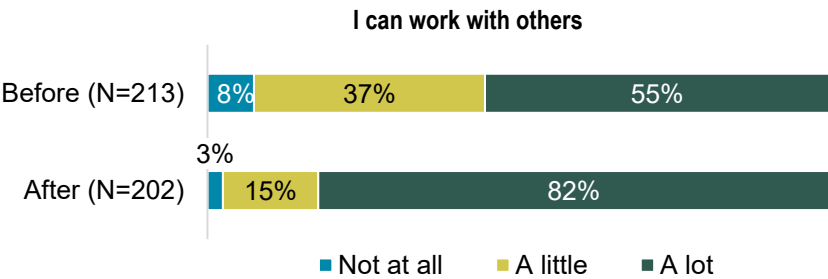
Musical-in-a-Week requires group effort to create and perform a musical within a week; teamwork and connection is a primary focus of the program. Students said they had opportunities for collaboration and connection with their classmates over the course of the program. Approximately two-thirds of students say they got along with their classmates “A lot” while making the musical (71%), and that they are proud of what their class accomplished as a group for the week (62%) (Figure 2).

2. Student connection and collaboration with each other



Students were also asked to compare their ability to work with others before and after the program week (Figure 3). Eighty-two percent of students rated their ability as “A lot” after the program, compared to just over half before the program. This is a percentage point increase of 27% from before to after.

3. Student report of ability to work with others, group retrospective



Similarly, 13% of students mentioned social aspects of participating in the program as something they learned from Musical-in-a-Week, primarily around teamwork. This was the second most common response after learning about theater generally, which was reported above.

You need a lot of people and teamwork to make [a] good play. – Student

[I learned] to always believe in each other, and that working with people is a great opportunity to make friends. – Student

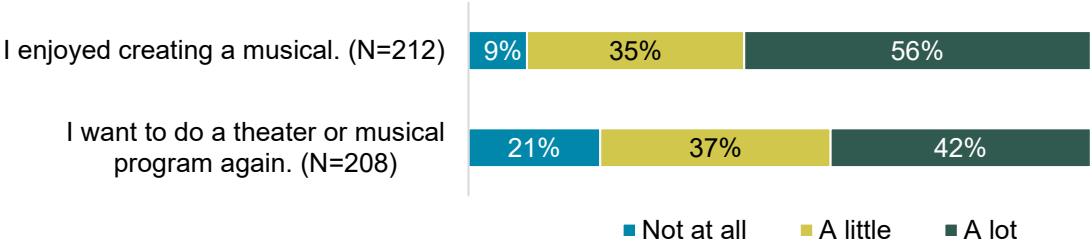
[I learned] that working as a team can have a great result. – Student

In interviews, teachers echoed findings around collaboration and connection. One teacher noticed groups of students working on choreography together or practicing lines during downtime without having to tell them to. Another teacher said Musical-in-a-Week can help “people find their people,” noting that the program helped students connect with others with similar interests they otherwise might not have connected with.

Youth were engaged by the program and show some interest in future theater opportunities.

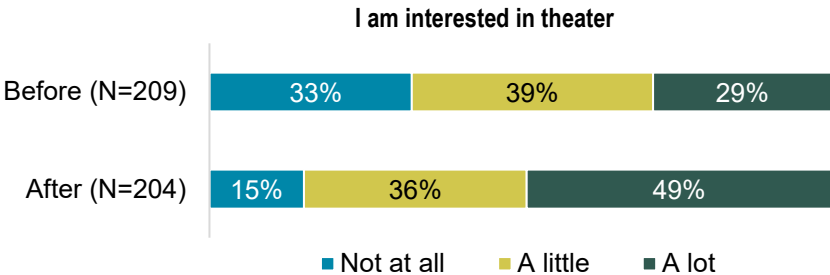
Over half of students said they enjoyed creating a musical “A lot” (Figure 4). In terms of future engagement in theater, about 80% of students indicated some interest while 1 in 5 said “Not at all.” This may be a reasonable expectation; theater is not for everyone. In teacher interviews, some teachers likewise mentioned that some students weren’t interested in theater, but that they still engaged with Musical-in-a-Week to some degree.

4. Student report of enjoyment and future interest in theater



Similarly, when comparing themselves before participating in the program to after, a higher proportion of students indicated interest in theater after Musical-in-a-Week (Figure 5). One-third of students reported being “Not at all” interested in theater before, compared to 15% after.

5. Student interest in theater, group retrospective



Students schoolwide show engagement and connection with theater through Musical-in-a-Week

In addition to exploring youth outcomes for the students that participated in the week-long program, the evaluation explored outcomes or benefits at the broader school level. The program culminates in a schoolwide performance where other grades watch the musical.

Students were given a sticker and asked to place it on one of four statements that they liked most about the musical. Figure 6 shows the results. Most commonly, students shared that they thought the musical was fun to watch (37%). Almost one-third of students said they liked seeing their school friends on stage and that they are excited to do a musical themselves in the future.

6. Sticker voting results (N=403)

What did you like most about the musical?	%
The musical was fun to watch.	37%
I want to do a musical myself some day.	28%
I liked seeing my school friends on stage.	28%
I connected to the story of the musical.	8%

In the interviews, teachers talked about benefits of the program for their school. One teacher echoed the sentiment that younger students show excitement for doing a musical themselves after seeing the performance. Other teachers spoke on the value of bringing an enrichment opportunity such as Musical-in-a-Week to the students, since field trips or going elsewhere can be challenging and because some students may have never seen a theater production.

We invite the 3rd and 4th graders to come and watch it [the final performance] ... [T]his year in particular, during our goal setting at the beginning of the year, there were a few [5th graders] who were excited to participate and play in the [musical]. It was one of those things they were looking forward to. And so schoolwide, it's something that's becoming like just an annual event that the kids really like and they want to do.

– School teacher

Teachers report overall satisfaction with the program, with minimal suggestions for improvement or additional partnership

When asked, teachers were pleased with their experience with Musical-in-a-Week, emphasizing GREAT's communication and adaptability. Teachers overwhelmingly had positive comments to share. Recommendations for improvement were minimal, but included having a smaller ratio of children per GREAT staff, confirming part selections with teachers for feedback or suggestions before announcing to students, and creating outreach templates or boiler plate language for teachers to send out to parents with information about the program, such as what students can expect during the week.

It was awesome. They [GREAT] were very good at communicating with us. They were very flexible in asking, 'What would be best for you?' I so appreciated that piece, knowing that we could say what we needed. – School teacher

Once I knew [the students] were in the hands of GREAT, I was confident with what was going on ... It was very communicative. I felt like the kids were in a safe environment." – School teacher

Conclusion

Overall, the evaluation shows that Musical-in-a-Week taught students about theater, built engagement and interest in theater, and supported youth development in developing confidence, leadership skills, and social connections. Further, the program supports theater engagement for schools as a whole, not just the students who directly participate in the program. Lastly, school teachers involved in the program report positive experiences with GREAT and look forward to the program each year



For more information

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