South Florida K-8 School Posts Major Academic Gains as Arts Education Supports Schoolwide Transformation

Case study shows sustained arts access helped strengthen student engagement, school climate and academic momentum at a South Dade Title I school



Students in the Arts Access Miami Program perform on stage at annual community music festivals, but more importantly, a recent study of one K-8 school shows they are also performing even better in classroom academics.

HOMESTEAD , FL, UNITED STATES, September 8, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A new Arts Access Miami case study shows how sustained arts education, woven into a broader school improvement strategy, helped support academic gains, student engagement and improved school climate at Leisure City K-8 Center, a Title I public school.

The case study, “A Diamond in the Rough: How a Vision for Arts Education Transformed Leisure City K-8 Center,” traces the school’s progress from the 2018-19 through 2024-25 school years as it expanded from a science, technology, engineering and math school into a science, technology, engineering, arts and math campus.

The case study does not claim arts education alone caused the school’s academic progress. Instead, it shows how arts programming, paired with strong school leadership, district support, family trust and a unified schoolwide vision, helped create conditions in which students felt more connected, engaged and ready to learn.

The case study draws on interviews with school leaders, Miami-Dade County Public Schools regional leaders, Florida TaxWatch and a parent, along with analysis of school grades, attendance records, behavior data, School Climate Survey results and Florida Assessment of Student Thinking math and English language arts scores.

By the 2024-25 school year, Leisure City K-8 had posted gains:

- Seventh graders ranked in the 94th percentile statewide for math learning gains among Florida Title I noncharter schools.

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>
> *Sammy Gonzalez Zeira, CEO of Young Musicians Unite*

- Sixth graders ranked in the 93rd percentile for English language arts learning gains among the same peer group.
- Third-grade promotion climbed from 86.8% in 2018-19 to 100% in 2024-25.
- English language arts proficiency rose from 39.5% in 2022-23 to 49.1% in 2024-25, outpacing Miami-Dade County's rate of improvement.
- Math proficiency rose from 48% in 2022-23 to 54.6% in 2024-25.
- Students in the lowest-performing 25% exceeded county averages for learning gains in both English language arts and math.

On Miami-Dade County Public Schools' annual School Climate Survey, a standard district student survey, the share of students who said they liked attending Leisure City K-8 rose from 48% in 2023-24 to 100% in 2024-25.

When Principal Walter C. Hall took over in 2019, Leisure City K-8 offered few electives and had no middle school music program. Hall and his team restructured schedules and built partnerships to expand opportunities beyond core academics. That work accelerated in 2022, when Arts Access Miami helped bring arts instruction, instructors, instruments and performance opportunities to campus through Young Musicians Unite, Guitars Over Guns, Vocal Youth Miami and Save The Music.

"Arts Access Miami gave us the instructional tools we needed, from instruments to teachers," Hall said. "Students started buying into the larger vision of the school. They wanted to come to school, participate and be part of something."

"Leisure City K-8 shows what becomes possible when arts education is treated as part of the core school strategy, not as an extra," said Sammy Gonzalez Zeira, CEO of Young Musicians Unite and president of Arts Access Miami. "The arts gave students a reason to show up, a way to belong and a chance to see themselves as part of something bigger."

Building on that momentum, the school launched Florida's first and only mariachi magnet program in 2025, centered on the traditional Mexican ensemble's blend of brass, strings and vocal harmony.

The Leisure City K-8 case study is part of Arts Access Miami's broader effort to show how coordinated arts education partnerships can support public schools across Miami-Dade County. During the 2026-27 school year, Arts Access Miami will include 31 partner organizations working across more than 88 schools and community sites, serving more than 17,000 students annually. Since its launch, it has reached more than 40,000 students.
The full case study is available at artsaccessmiami.org/impact. Photos, interviews and additional

background are available upon request.

About Arts Access Miami: Arts Access Miami is a countywide collaborative initiative that unites schools, nonprofits, funders and civic leaders to expand access to free, high-quality arts education for students across Miami-Dade County.

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