

Creative principal a master of funding

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Hip-hop dance teacher Laya Barak shows moves to kids in her class at Middle School 223 in the South Bronx. With money tight, the school got creative, using grants to help fund art classes.

During his first few years running a [South Bronx](#) middle school, [Principal Ramon Gonzalez](#) knew he had to focus on literacy, test scores and other basics.

Art classes would have to wait their turn.

"We were all in survival mode," said Gonzalez, who has headed Middle School 223 since 2003. "Art was low on the totem pole."

Gonzalez soon realized his charges needed an artistic outlet, so he got creative, applying for grants and finding instructors to teach hip-hop dance, digital music, drawing and theater.

Across the city, many principals are grappling with the same quandary - how can they offer quality art classes in the face of budget cuts and mounting pressure to raise test scores?

"It's not that they don't want the arts," said [Russell Granet](#), a senior program consultant with the [Center for Arts Education](#). "I really do believe they want the arts; they just have no idea how to keep them."

Parents and activists have been wringing their hands about the state of arts education since the dismantling last year of Project ARTS, which had pumped \$680million in city funds into schools since 1996.

This year, the Education Department released the results of its first survey of art in schools, which found that only 4% of elementary schools and 29% of middle schools were meeting state standards.

With some schools facing budget reductions as high as 6% next year, there is fear that some principals could scale back art even further.

Gonzalez acknowledged that when money is tight and students are struggling with basic skills, dance and music aren't the immediate priorities.

"I'm held accountable for test scores. If scores drop, I lose my job," he said.

Every year since the school's founding, Gonzalez and his staff have been trying to augment its arts offerings. Last year they got serious, applying for a two-year, \$50,000 grant through the Center for Arts Education for middle schools that have little or no art programs. This year, all of the school's sixth-graders took several eight-week sessions in art.

Because no teachers at MS 223 were certified in art, outside "artist teachers" were brought in to share their expertise. And staff members said they've seen a difference in their students.

"To be able to feel successful in one part of their day makes them feel engaged and successful the rest of the time," said literacy coach [Rose Greco](#).

Sixth-grader Vilma Bermeudez, 11, said she likes her art classes so much that it helps her get through trickier subjects, like math.

"When we do art, I feel like I can express myself through the drawings," she said. "I feel good doing it. I look forward to doing something when I come to school."

Despite an estimated \$52,000 cut to the school's \$3.7 million budget next year, Gonzalez still hopes to expand the arts programs in seventh and eighth grades.

"If art is a priority," he said, "you can't just go and cut it."