TheatreWorks' Oskar Assembly for Schools: Modeling empathy through live theatre

Palo Alto, United States
Amy Cole-Farrell

Year Founded:
2005

Project Stage:
Established

Budget:
$10,000 - $50,000

Website:
http://Theatreworks.org

Twitter:
https://twitter.com/TheatreWorksSV

Facebook:
https://www.facebook.com/TheatreWorksSV

- Behavioral issues
- Education
- Youth development

Project Summary

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

Helping to build inclusive classrooms where all children feel safe, TheatreWorks’ new interactive stage play for grades K-5 tells an engaging story of diversity and empathy. Oskar, the namesake character, learns lessons that spark change-making dialogue as students ask, “What would Oskar do?”

WHAT IF - Inspiration: Write one sentence that describes a way that your project dares to ask, “WHAT IF?”

What if live theatre could model empathy for elementary school students in a way that builds a safe and inclusive environment for all children and sets the foundation for continued pro-social behavior throughout their teenage years and beyond?

About Project

Problem: What problem is this project trying to address?

An empathy-based classroom supports the educational growth of all students. This might include a child whose family structure is nontraditional, a child with a differentiated learning style, or a child who is gender nonconforming. While studies show that empathy predicts a child’s academic success better than test scores, curriculum standards do not address this social need, leading to feelings of exclusion and acts of bullying amongst students.

Solution: What is the proposed solution? Please be specific!

Theatre is transformative, changing a child’s perspective as they experience another person’s story brought to life before them on stage, and research has proven that theatre education increases empathy. In partnership with the Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD,) TheatreWorks has brought the Oskar series to Silicon Valley schools for nearly a decade, addressing social issues through live theatre. The next play in the series finds Oskar encountering new people whose experiences are different than his own. Oskar models how acting with empathy results in new friendships, a better understanding of self, and an environment where everyone feels included. A study guide and student Q&A are components of each 45-minute assembly.
Example: Walk us through a specific example(s) of how this solution makes a difference; include its primary activities.

Magdalena Fittoria, Principal at Barron Park School wrote the following after an assembly of The Last Straw, “Last night I was at a school fundraiser and my teachers were still talking about its impact on the students. They enjoyed watching their students interact with the story and its characters! We are engaging in many conversations about resilience. We have kids with some incredibly challenging life situations, and we try to get them to focus on the pieces they can control and provide strategies and a supportive community to assist them. Being able to reference the story and its messages will be very helpful in continuing to foster these life skills. Weaving these very heavy themes into a comically entertaining story was genius!”

Impact: What is the impact of the work to date? Also describe the projected future impact for the coming years.

Since 2005, Oskar assemblies have played to over 100,000 students at over 180 schools in Silicon Valley. Others in the series, Oskar and The Big Bully Battle and Oskar and The Last Straw, were created in partnership with PAUSD in response to current issues in the schools. “Bully” toured at a time when cyber bullying began to appear in our middle and high schools. “Straw,” which teaches resiliency, addressed a rash of teenage suicides in our community. TheatreWorks’ new Oskar play adds empathy to the skills modeled by this familiar character as he navigates diversity in the world around him. Given interactive nature of live theatre, Oskar’s lessons are not just heard, but experienced. Studies show that experiential learning has a greater and more lasting effect than cognitive learning and will enable students to reference Oskar’s example of active empathy beyond the elementary years.

Spread Strategies: Moving forward, what are the main strategies for scaling impact?

TheatreWorks’ Oskar assemblies have always been created in response to the needs of our Silicon Valley community. TheatreWorks will continue to listen and be an active partner to the PAUSD, addressing current issues through live theatre, creating new plays in the Oskar series as needed. With this growth, TheatreWorks is committed to securing funding for districts in need so that every interested school can experience Oskar (in 5 years) and eventually allow Oskar to be a free service to all Silicon Valley schools (10 years.)

Sustainability

Financial Sustainability Plan: What is this solution’s plan to ensure financial sustainability?

The new Oskar assembly will be part of the larger TheatreWorks’ Education program, which is supported by a number of foundation and corporate grants as well as gifts from individuals. Funding is being sought from additional sources; however, lead funding from Building Vibrant Communities will have immediate impact on the project’s development and inspire other organizations and individuals to support this vital school resource.

Marketplace: Who else is addressing the problem outlined here? How does the proposed project differ from these approaches?

Michelle Winner’s Social Thinking “Super-Flex” curriculum has addressed Social Emotional Learning, including empathy, in K-5 classrooms throughout Silicon Valley since 2008. This pro-social method has also been used to analyze characters in language arts or help with written expression. TheatreWorks’ Oskar assembly addresses the same pro-social skills but uses live performance to model this behavior in the empathy based medium of theatre. TheatreWorks’ Oskar series remains the longest-running live performance tour addressing social issues in Silicon Valley K-5 schools.

Team

Founding Story

In the past, the Oskar character had addressed bullying through making pro-social choices. The next step for Oskar is to address the root of pro-social behavior: Empathy. A child who practices empathy is aware of their own feelings in contrast to others, can take another’s perspective, and can regulate their emotional responses. The increasing number of nontraditional family structures, differentiated learning styles, and gender nonconformity in Silicon Valley K-5 schools requires a more empathy driven, inclusive classroom that can support this diversity. Theatre has been likened to a “gym for empathy” making Oskar a uniquely effective tool in teaching this social emotion—and the creation of a new Oskar that addresses empathy, a timely one.

Team

TheatreWorks has brought professional theatre to Silicon Valley since 1970 and provides arts education to 35,000 students yearly; Amy Cole-Farrell, Education Dir. holds an MFA in Theatre has been an arts educator in Silicon Valley and beyond for a decade; PAUSD is an innovator in arts integration and creating social change; Prince Gomolvilas, Playwright, wrote the Oskar series and is Assoc. Dir. of the MA of Professional Writing Program at USC.

About You

First Name
Amy

Last Name
Cole-Farrell

Twitter URL

Facebook URL
Organization Name
How long has your organization been operating?

Project
Organization Country
, CA, Palo Alto
Country where this project is creating social impact
, CA, Palo Alto

What awards or honors has the project received?
Funding: How is your project financially supported?
Individuals, Foundations, Businesses.

Supplemental Information
On which of the following California counties does your project focus its impact? (check all that apply):
San Mateo, Santa Clara.

How does your idea help cultivate empathy skills to strengthen communities and equip young people to become leaders of change?
Oskar models active empathy through an engaging story of how similar our differences can be. The experiential nature of live theatre makes the Oskar series a uniquely effective tool for social learning and provides a common language for children to talk about issues surrounding diversity and empathy. Theatre compels action and in the case of Oskar, students are encouraged to respond empathetically when they see this familiar and likeable character do the same. The increasing diversity in Silicon Valley schools requires a more empathy-driven, inclusive classroom. The shared experience of the Oskar series supports such a community and encourages pro-social citizenship through high school years and beyond.

Needs/Offer

Tell us about your partnerships
TheatreWorks and PAUSD is a partnership of the Kennedy Center, pairing arts organizations with school districts for the professional development of teachers in arts integrated practice. This partnership was founded with a commission by PAUSD for the creation of The Big Bully Battle by TheatreWorks and has grown to include The Last Straw as well as a new Oskar assembly currently in development, all addressing current social issues in the schools.

Challenges
Our main challenge is funding the development phase of the project, expected to cost a minimum of $35,000. Expenses include playwright’s commissioning fees, set and costume creation, actors and stage manager salaries, and the creation of study guides. Timing this new empathy-focused performance in response to the growing diversity of our community is crucial to its impact on the social health of our schools—thus development must begin shortly. We’ve identified several potential funders, but a significant lead gift is needed to launch this project.

Does your project use any of the following approaches to cultivate community members as empathetic and collaborative leaders?
encouraging philanthropy, creating a safe space, developing emotional competency, building leadership skills, group play, storytelling, immersion, collective problem-solving, identifying shared values and differences, instilling courage, enabling action.

Target Age Group(s)
3-5, 6-12.

Source URL: https://www.changemakers.com/packardempathy/entries/theatreworks-oskar-school-assembly