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Webster 4th-graders work with PUSH Theatre

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You wouldn't expect the average fourth-grader to be familiar with neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran's laws of art.

But at Schlegel Road Elementary School in Webster, 75 students are learning these concepts and putting them in motion, literally, as part of PUSH Physical Theatre's monthlong residency at their school.

Theater company founders Darren and Heather Stevenson and fellow performers are teaching the fourth-graders to express ideas through pantomime, coordinated body movements and improvisation. Teachers say the students love it.

Part of the program's success has to do with where the fourth-graders are developmentally: They're physically strong and capable of self-control, but they haven't yet fallen into the self-consciousness of adolescence.

"I think they're really starting to feel comfortable expressing themselves," said enrichment specialist Tracy Nail, who has helped coordinate the residency. "The kids are in that area where they trust each other enough to try things out."

They now understand principles such as symmetry, metaphor, generic viewpoint, isolation and grouping, which are among the eight laws of art put forth by Ramachandran and philosopher William Hirstein in a scholarly paper from 1999. The rules help explain why art appeals to the human brain.

One class of Schlegel fourth-graders has come up with a complete routine illustrating each concept with their bodies. To show contrast, for example, half the group reaches over their heads on tiptoe and the other half crouches low. Then half the group runs in place, and the other half moves in slow motion.

Each of Schlegel's three fourth-grade classes has its own routine.

The students will perform in front of the entire school Friday afternoon, and for their parents that night. PUSH will perform as well.

Fourth-graders Noah Cardella and Adrianna Visca, both 9, showed off some the moves they've learned in the past month: leaning on an imaginary table, being dragged away by a helium balloon, and putting their hands on an invisible wall.

Noah says his balance has improved, but only after working at it: "Practicing one night in my bathroom, I fell," he said.

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