

# Dancing with the Children @ Edgewood ISD

by Gloria Almaraz, reporter

R

emember when you were in elementary school and you were selected to be part of a school program that featured a dancing segment? In my case, I was in the fourth grade; and I was part of a group that was taught square dancing. Not only was I supposed to

learn how to square dance, I also had to touch a boy's hand! Yuck! Anyway, week after week, we practiced the different dance movements until the big day arrived. Somehow, the four couples selected to perform before our parents, teachers, and student body survived the ordeal—and we were not scarred for life.

Fast-forward to today's school programs in San Antonio's Edgewood Independent School District—the only school district currently teaching ballroom dancing to third-graders in six of its elementary schools. Can you imagine being nine years old and learning how to dance the tango and merengue? Many of us, as adults, can only dream of trying to learn how to execute the intricate steps of the tango and to move our hips to the merengue beat.

The program, *Dancing With the Children*, that is responsible for ballroom dancing in the school district, has been in existence in Edgewood for several years. The Executive Director is Jorge Alonso Pérez. The two dance directors who dedicate their time to teach the Edgewood elementary students are: Adriana Araujo Bruton and Robert Ramírez. Ms. Bruton teaches at Roy Cisneros, Gardendale, Henry B. González, Loma Park and Stafford Elementary Schools. Mr. Ramírez teaches at Las Palmas Elementary School. If you wonder about the expertise in ballroom dancing that these two instructors have—both are professional ballroom dancers who taught and competed for major dance studios. While Ms. Bruton still maintains an independent dance business, Mr. Ramírez retired from dance to practice law full-time and is still considered one of the best ballroom dancers in San Antonio.

To participate in the dance program, students are nominated by counsellors and teachers with their parents' consent. Two dances are taught each school year. The students meet one hour

per week for their dance lessons and are taught proper dance form (dance posture and frame), dance patterns, timing, etc. An average of 30 students per school participate in the dance program for a total enrollment of 182 students this year (2015). The group is comprised of third graders, although there are some second and fourth graders. Their ages range from 8 to 11 years old.

This school year, 2014-2015, the dances being taught are tango and merengue. The dances are selected by the Executive Director and the two dance directors who determine a standard curriculum at the beginning of the year to insure that all students are taught the same material. Among the dances that have been taught in past are salsa, cha cha cha, and swing to name a few.

Near the end of the school year, competitions are held during the first week of May at the participating six elementary schools with six couples per school advancing to the district-level competition. The elementary school competitions are not open to the public; however, the district-level competition is open. This year it was held on Saturday, May 23, at 8 am at The Neighborhood Place, 3014 Rivas Street.

Students are evaluated on their performance in the two dances and receive a cumulative score on both dances. They are judged on dance posture and frame, execution of dance patterns, timing, partnership (leading and following), footwork, and interpretation. Community leaders judge the competition and select first, second, and third place winners with winners being awarded trophies and gift certificates. So far, District Attorney Nico LaHood and his wife, Davida, and U.S. Congressman Joaquin Castro have agreed to be celebrity judges. Certificates of participation and smaller trophies are given to all competitors. In addition, the school of the first-place winners gets to display the large district championship trophy for the coming school year.

Where one might question the significance of teaching ballroom dancing to elementary students, the benefits of participation in such programs go far beyond merely learning how to dance. Dancing classes include activities designed to promote ease in public speaking, express creativity, teach social responsibility and plant the seed for college and career plans. As a result of participation in these dance programs, parents and



Gardendale Elementary



Las Palmas Elementary



Las Palmas Elementary

teachers have seen marked improvement in the students' school attendance; self-esteem; sense of self; discipline; pride in one's appearance, posture, and demeanor as well as greater participation and expression in school activities; an expanded vocabulary; and an appreciation for teamwork.

The competing couples and their parents take this competition seriously, and the couples dress up for the event. You may see the girls wearing fancy sequined dresses while the boys wear suits or tuxedos with matching color

shirts to match their partner's dress. Think "Dancing with the Stars" but with younger competitors.

Students interviewed for this article affirmed that they have a greater appreciation for attending school and derive many benefits from participating in the dance program. This reporter was especially impressed with these students' self-confidence and their ability of self-expression at such a young age.

What other school program can offer such benefits? A new school year will see new students and the process begin again.



Henry B. González Elementary

*At this printing, 3 of the 6 schools in Edgewood I.S.D.—Las Palmas, Henry B. González and Gardendale competed to advance to the district-wide dance competitions. The next issue of La Voz will follow-up with the finalists and winners!*