



A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

How a Vision for Arts Education Helped Transform Leisure City K-8 Center

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SECTION 01

LETTER TO OUR STAKEHOLDERS

As someone trained to study systems, data, and community impact, I know that numbers matter. They help us identify patterns, measure progress, and guide decisions. But numbers alone do not tell the full story. Behind every data point is a student who feels valued, a parent choosing a public school for its opportunities, a principal strengthening school culture, and a community seeing what is possible when children have the resources to thrive.

Arts Access Miami's Impact and Storytelling strategy includes a series of data-driven case studies. Through videos and reports, these case studies share real stories supported by data, showing how Arts Access Miami is transforming student experiences, building the capacity of arts and music organizations, strengthening schools and communities, and enhancing the arts ecosystem across Miami-Dade County.

Our first case study focuses on Leisure City K-8 Center, illustrating this impact in practice. Under the leadership of Principal Walter Hall and his team—Assistant Principals Ms. Christina McCrink and Mr. Frederic Davis—the school fostered a culture rooted in love, respect, and the belief that every child has potential. With support from Arts Access Miami, the Alliance organizations, and Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the school expanded music opportunities, heightened student engagement, and evolved from offering limited electives within a STEM-focused model to establishing a STEAM identity—science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics—alongside the launch of Florida's first Mariachi Magnet program. This case study is not just an inspiring story; it provides evidence that arts education is a strategic lever for strengthening public schools, improving student outcomes, and making schools more attractive and competitive for families.

This impact is what sustained investment can achieve. As Arts Access Miami enters the 2026-2027 school year and expands from North and South Dade into the Central, West, and East regions, our goal is to reach 155 public schools, positively impact more than 40,000 students each week, and collaborate with more than 30 community-based nonprofit arts and music organizations.

We invite you to join us in building this future. Whether you are a philanthropist, foundation leader, policymaker, principal, district partner, or community advocate, your leadership matters. Together, we can make Miami-Dade a national model for what public education can be when arts, data, leadership, and community investment come together.

Investing in arts education is investing in our collective future—in the young people who will lead it, the schools that will shape it, and the community ecosystem that will sustain it.

With gratitude,



Andrea Botero, PhD

Director of Impact & Storytelling, Arts Access Miami

SECTION 02

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public schools across Miami-Dade County are facing a defining challenge. In 2025–2026, Miami-Dade County Public Schools enrolled 13,200 fewer students than the year before, a decline district leaders described as “unprecedented.” Because school funding follows enrollment, the district faced significant budget reductions, making it even more important for public schools to offer students and families compelling reasons to choose and remain in public education. For Title I schools serving high-need communities, this challenge is particularly urgent. School leaders must not only improve academic outcomes, but also build environments where students feel connected, families feel confident, and communities see opportunity.

This case study examines Leisure City K–8 Center in South Dade as an example of how arts education can help strengthen public schools by improving student engagement, reinforcing school identity, building family trust, and creating conditions that support academic success. When Principal Walter C. Hall arrived at Leisure City K–8 in 2019, he inherited a school with limited elective offerings, a highly transient student population, and a need to rebuild culture and community confidence. Hall described the school as “a diamond in the rough,” believing its greatest strengths had yet to be uncovered.

With support from Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Arts Access Miami, and community-based arts partners, Leisure City K–8 began building a comprehensive arts education strategy. The school expanded in-school and after-school music opportunities, gained access to professional teaching artists, instruments, programming support, and performance opportunities, and ultimately transformed its identity from STEM to STEAM. What began as an effort to expand elective offerings evolved into a broader strategy for strengthening student belonging, school culture, family engagement, and school competitiveness.



WATCH THE DOCUMENTARY

As momentum grew, additional partners including Guitars Over Guns, Young Musicians Unite, Vocal Youth Miami, and Save the Music expanded opportunities for students beyond the traditional school day. These efforts culminated in the launch of Florida's first Mariachi Magnet program, establishing Leisure City K-8 as a regional leader in arts education.

The evidence reviewed in this case study suggests that student engagement, school culture, and academic performance strengthened together over time.

BELOW ARE THE KEY FINDINGS:

- School grade improved from a C in 2023-2024 to a B in 2024-2025.
- Third-grade promotion increased from 86.8% in 2018-2019 to 100% in 2024-2025.
- English Language Arts proficiency increased from 39.5% in 2022-2023 to 49.1% in 2024-2025, outpacing countywide improvement.
- Mathematics proficiency increased from 48.0% in 2022-2023 to 54.6% in 2024-2025.
- In 2024-2025, Grade 7 Math learning gains ranked in the 94th percentile among Florida Title I non-charter schools.
- In 2024-2025, Grade 6 ELA learning gains ranked in the 93rd percentile among Florida Title I non-charter schools.
- Student perception of school improved significantly, with the percentage of students reporting that they liked attending Leisure City K-8 increasing from 48% in 2023-2024 to 100% in 2024-2025.
- Minor confrontation referrals declined from 46 in 2017-2018 incidents to 24 incidents in 2024-2025.

Families and school leaders reported improvements that extended beyond academic indicators. Interviews conducted for this study describe students becoming more engaged in school life, developing stronger social connections, building confidence through performance opportunities, and finding new reasons to participate in school. One parent interviewed for the study compared multiple private schools, a charter school, and another public school before ultimately choosing Leisure City K-8 because of the opportunities available to students. As educational options continue to expand, a family's decision to choose and remain in a neighborhood public school represents an important measure of trust and value.

Leisure City K-8's progress also received statewide recognition. In 2024-2025, Florida TaxWatch named the school one of Florida's 15 most successful high-risk public schools. During the same year, Principal Walter Hall was recognized as Miami-Dade County Public Schools Principal of the Year by the Dade Association of School Administrators.

This case study does not suggest that arts education alone caused these outcomes. School improvement is shaped by many factors, including leadership, instruction, staffing, family engagement, district support, attendance, and community context. However, the findings suggest that arts education can serve as a powerful strategic lever within a broader school improvement framework. By creating opportunities for belonging, achievement, creativity, discipline, and student voice, arts education can help schools strengthen culture, deepen family confidence, and create conditions in which academic success becomes more likely.

The larger lesson extends beyond a single school. Leisure City K-8 demonstrates how sustained investment, strong leadership, district partnership, community-based organizations, and access to arts education can work together to strengthen public schools from the inside out. As Arts Access Miami continues expanding across Miami-Dade County, this case study offers a practical example of what is possible when schools, nonprofit organizations, philanthropists, and communities align around a shared commitment to student opportunity.

Ultimately, Leisure City K-8 is more than a story about a successful music program. It is a story about how arts education can help public schools become places where students want to attend, families want to stay, and communities can see a future worth investing in.



The Leisure City K-8 Mariachi Music Program students performing in the school auditorium.

SECTION 03

RECOGNITION & MOMENTUM

Principal Walter C. Hall, Named 2025 Miami-Dade County Public Schools Principal of the Year

Leisure City K-8's progress did not go unnoticed. As the school strengthened its academic performance, student engagement, and arts programming, it also began receiving external recognition for the work happening on campus. One of the most meaningful recognitions came from Florida TaxWatch, which identified Leisure City K-8 as one of Florida's 15 most successful high-risk public schools in 2024-2025.

For Principal Hall, the recognition affirmed years of focused work by students, teachers, families, school leaders, district partners, and community organizations. "Our school was recognized as a Florida TaxWatch School of the Year because we outperformed every other middle school with our same demographic in the state of Florida." The recognition was especially tied to the school's performance in mathematics and English Language Arts, where Leisure City stood out among comparable middle schools statewide.

The award mattered not only because it honored strong results, but because of how those results were identified. Florida TaxWatch uses a data-driven selection process to recognize high-performing principals and schools serving high-need communities. In that context, Leisure City's recognition signaled that the school's progress was not only meaningful locally, but notable when compared with schools facing similar conditions across Florida.

Additionally, in the same year, Principal Hall won the M-DCPS Principal of the Year award, selected by the Dade Association of School Administrators (DASA). For Principal Hall, the timing of these awards carried deep personal and professional meaning. "It's a dream come true. I have to pinch myself to make sure I'm not dreaming." He described the recognition as "the icing on the cake" after years of work to build the school's academic systems, expand student opportunities, strengthen the school culture, and bring new programs together.

The recognition also speaks to how families view the school. One Leisure City parent, who has lived in the Homestead and Florida City area for about 20 years, explained that he values having his children at Leisure City "because of the resources that they have provided for us."

For this parent, choosing Leisure City K-8 was not automatic. Before enrolling his child, the family explored multiple options, including three private schools, another public school, and a charter school. After visiting classrooms and comparing what each school could offer, the family chose Leisure City K-8. "At the end of the day, we ended up making the decision that Leisure City K-8 was the best decision for us."

In a moment when public schools must work to retain family trust and compete with other educational options, that statement is powerful. It shows that when a neighborhood public school offers strong leadership, meaningful programs, and visible opportunities for students, families notice.

Leisure City's recognition also points to what is still possible with deeper investment. For Principal Hall, the next phase of the school's vision is a dedicated visual and performing arts building, a space that would allow the program to move beyond adaptation and into its full potential. Today, music programs operate out of the school's "cafetorium," a shared cafeteria and stage space that makes performances possible but does not provide the same experience as a true auditorium, music room, or arts facility. As Hall explained, "If we're able to get a hold to a visual and performing arts building, I think we would see this program really transform this entire community." His vision reflects both the progress already made and the opportunity ahead: with the right facilities, resources, and continued partnership, Leisure City's arts momentum could grow from a successful school-based program into a community-wide asset.



WATCH THE DOCUMENTARY

SECTION 04: THE CASE STUDY

LEISURE CITY K-8 CENTER

How Arts Access Became Part of a Broader Strategy to Strengthen a Title I Public School in South Dade

INTRODUCTION

Public schools are among the most important civic institutions in American life. They are places where children learn, build relationships, discover their strengths, and begin to imagine what is possible for their futures. They are also anchors for families and neighborhoods, connecting students to opportunity, supporting working parents, strengthening communities, and helping shape the social and economic life of a region. As Sageman (2022) notes, schools serve as key social and economic pillars. When public schools are strong, their impact extends far beyond test scores or graduation rates. They help communities thrive.

The long-term value of investing in public education is well documented. Research has found that sustained increases in school spending can lead to higher educational attainment, higher adult wages, and lower poverty, with especially strong effects for students from low-income families (Jackson et al., 2016). A more recent meta-analysis of rigorous school finance studies found that additional per-pupil funding improves test scores in the large majority of cases and increases college-going, with the greatest benefits for economically disadvantaged students attending Title I schools (Jackson & Mackevicius, 2024). These findings matter because they affirm what educators and families see every day: when schools have the resources, partnerships, and support they need, they can change the trajectory of children's lives.

At the same time, public schools across the United States are operating in an increasingly complex and competitive environment. Families now navigate a wider set of educational options, including charter schools, private schools, religious schools, virtual programs, and homeschooling. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these shifts. Nationally, public school enrollment fell by more than 1.2 million students during the first two full school years of the pandemic, while private school and homeschool enrollment increased (Dee, 2023). Early evidence also showed that enrollment declines were concentrated in traditional public school districts, while charter, virtual, and vocational sectors saw enrollment gains in some places (Dee & Murphy, 2021).

Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the third-largest school district in the U.S., is now facing this challenge directly. According to WLRN, the district had approximately 313,000 students in the 2025–2026 school year, 13,200 fewer than the prior year (La Roche Pietri, 2026). District leaders described the enrollment drop

as “unprecedented,” not only because Miami-Dade has faced financial pressure before, but because the current challenge reflects a shift in the district’s historic growth pattern. For decades, Miami-Dade could count on new students entering the system, including large numbers of newcomer families. Currently, that inflow has slowed sharply, leaving schools with fewer students and less funding per student.



Students at Leisure City K-8 watching the Mariachi Music Program perform.

The consequences are significant. Because public school funding is closely tied to enrollment, fewer students mean fewer resources for classrooms, staffing, operations, and programs. Miami-Dade’s budget was already \$100 million smaller than the prior year and was further reduced by \$89 million midway through the school year, with additional cuts possible (La Roche Pietri, 2026). District leaders have warned that continued enrollment declines could lead to difficult decisions, including staff reductions and the closing or consolidation of under-enrolled schools, which is already underway. These are not only financial concerns. They shape the daily experience of students, teachers, principals, and families.

For schools in Miami-Dade County, these pressures are especially urgent. Public schools must do more than keep their doors open. They must create learning environments where students feel connected, families feel confident, and communities see evidence that their neighborhood schools are places of opportunity. In

this context, student engagement is not secondary to school improvement; it is central to it. A school that students want to attend is better positioned to strengthen learning, build trust with families, and compete in a changing educational landscape.

This is the larger context for the story of Leisure City K-8 Center. Leisure City is not simply a school that added arts programming. It is a school working to build the conditions that make learning possible: belonging, motivation, confidence, joy, discipline, and connection. Under the leadership of Principal Walter Hall, and with support from Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Arts Access Miami, and community-based arts partners, Leisure City K-8 offers a powerful example of how public schools can respond to today's challenges with purpose and creativity.

This case study examines Leisure City K-8 Center as a powerful example of what can happen when strong school leadership, district partnership, community-based arts organizations, and sustained philanthropic investment come together around a shared commitment to students. Guided by a central question “how can arts education help public schools remain competitive, retain and attract families, and improve the conditions that support student engagement, school culture, and academic success?”, the report explores how arts access became part of a broader strategy to strengthen a Title I public school. Leisure City's story offers a hopeful and practical example for leaders seeking to expand opportunity, build family confidence, and invest in the future of public education across Miami-Dade County and beyond.

ARTS EDUCATION AS A STRATEGIC LEVER

Arts education is more than an enrichment activity. A growing body of evidence suggests that high-quality arts learning can serve as a strategic lever for student engagement, academic growth, social-emotional development, and well-being. When young people participate in music, dance, theater, visual arts, or other creative disciplines, they are not simply learning an art form. They are developing persistence, collaboration, communication, self-expression, confidence, and creative problem-solving-capacities that support success in school and beyond.

A recent report commissioned by The Wallace Foundation offers a useful framework for understanding why the arts matter for youth development. The report defines well-being as young people's present sense of holistic wellness, including mental, physical, and social dimensions of life satisfaction. It defines well-becoming as the way young people's present experiences shape their sense of future possibility (Osai et al., 2025). Together, these concepts show that arts learning can support both who young people are now and who they are becoming.

The Wallace Foundation report emphasizes that high-quality youth arts programs can create spaces where young people feel a sense of belonging, identity affirmation, joy, accomplishment, and connection. Across 35 youth arts programs in eight U.S. cities, researchers found that arts programs supported youth development in several key ways: nurturing artistic skill, creating opportunities for creative restoration, establishing safe and affirming spaces, building relationships with peers and adults, connecting youth to community resources, highlighting future pathways, affirming cultural identity, and reducing barriers to participation (Osai et al., 2025). These findings suggest that arts learning can help young people feel that they matter, that their voice, identity, effort, and creativity are seen and valued. And at the same time, arts education helps young people add value to their own growth, to their peers, and to their school.

The Wallace report also highlights the restorative role of the arts. Young people in the study described arts programs as places where they could experience joy, flow, calm, and release from stress. This matters because student well-being is deeply connected to learning. When students feel emotionally

safe, supported, and engaged, they are better positioned to persist through challenges and participate in classroom life. Arts education can provide an important space for this kind of restoration—not by lowering expectations, but by giving students a meaningful and motivating context in which to grow.

National research points in a similar direction. The National Endowment for the Arts' report found that arts engagement is consistently associated with stronger social-emotional development, academic achievement, communication skills, problem-solving skills, and long-term educational outcomes (National Endowment for the Arts, 2025). The report found positive associations across developmental stages. For young children, arts-related activities were linked to stronger social skills, confidence, and early learning. For elementary students, participation in out-of-school arts programs was associated with stronger interpersonal skills, greater willingness to learn, fewer behavioral problems, and higher reading, math, and science scores. For high school students, arts participation was associated with higher GPAs, stronger math outcomes, higher graduation rates, and stronger first-year college performance.



An after-school music program offered at Leisure City K-8 by Guitars Over Guns, part of the Arts Access Miami Alliance.

Emerging data from Arts Access Miami (AAM) are consistent with this broader body of evidence. In the 2024–2025 school year, analyses of approximately 20,000 student records compared AAM participants with demographically similar non-AAM students from the same schools, using propensity score matching based on grade, gender, and ethnicity. Across elementary, middle, high, and K–8 school centers, AAM students were consistently more likely than similar peers to demonstrate stronger academic outcomes, including higher achievement levels in English Language Arts, Reading, and Mathematics. The pattern was especially notable in ELA, where AAM students were more likely to reach higher achievement levels across all school types.

The findings also indicate stronger indicators of school engagement among AAM students. Across school types, AAM students had 3.35 fewer absences, or roughly 20% lower average absences. AAM students also had significantly fewer suspension days, with approximately 32% lower average indoor suspension days and 31% lower average outdoor suspension days than non-AAM peers. These differences were statistically significant, suggesting that AAM participation was associated not only with academic performance but also with stronger attendance and fewer disciplinary incidents.

At the school level, a similar pattern emerged. From 2023–2024 to 2024–2025 school years, about 33% of schools with AAM-funded programs improved their school grade, compared to about 20% of schools without AAM programs. Statistical testing indicated that this difference was unlikely to be due to chance alone ($p = .0296$), suggesting a relationship between the presence of AAM-funded programs and school improvement.

These findings do not prove that arts programming alone caused the academic, attendance, discipline, or school-grade differences. Student outcomes are shaped by many factors, including school leadership, instruction, family support, attendance policies, resources, and broader community conditions. However, the consistency of the findings strengthens the case that arts education can be part of a broader strategy to improve student engagement, support school culture, and create conditions in which academic growth is more likely.

METHODOLOGY

This case study examines Leisure City K-8 Center as an example of how school leadership, district support, community-based arts partnerships, and sustained investment can come together to expand opportunity for students. A case study approach was used because school improvement is complex and shaped by many connected factors, including leadership, school culture, family trust, student engagement, instructional priorities, and access to resources.

CASE SELECTION

This case study uses an exemplary case approach. Leisure City K-8 Center was selected not because it represents every public school, but because it offers a strong example of how leadership, arts partnerships, district support, and investment can align around student opportunity.

One important source of recognition was the Florida TaxWatch Principal Leadership Awards program. Florida TaxWatch, an independent research organization based in Tallahassee, established the program in 2013 to identify and recognize some of Florida's most effective principals in high-risk K-12 public schools. Unlike many recognition programs, the Principal Leadership Awards are data-driven rather than nomination-based. As the Florida TaxWatch Director explained, the organization reviews student learning gains in FAST Math and FAST English Language Arts (ELA) over a three-year period to better understand a principal's effectiveness. The analysis also considers the school community context, including factors such as free or reduced-price lunch and English language learner populations. This made the recognition especially relevant for understanding Leisure City's progress in context.

DATA SOURCES AND ANALYSIS

The case study draws on both qualitative and quantitative sources. Qualitative data were collected through interviews with individuals who could speak to different dimensions of the school's story, including school leadership, district leadership, family perspective, regional context, and external recognition. Interviews were conducted with Principal Walter Hall and members of his leadership team; the Florida TaxWatch Director of the Principal Leadership Awards; M-DCPS South Region Superintendent, Rafael Villalobos; M-DCPS Administrative Director of the South Region, Martin Reid; and a Leisure City K-8 parent. These interviews provided insight into leadership, school culture, family experience, district perspective, and the role of arts access in the school's broader improvement story.

Quantitative and public-record data covering the 2018–2019 through 2024–2025 school years were also reviewed to examine patterns in school performance and student experience over time. These included school grades, attendance indicators, behavioral data from the Florida Department of Education, FAST English Language Arts results, FAST Mathematics results, and School Climate Survey results. The School Climate Surveys are administered annually by Miami-Dade County Public Schools through the Departments of Research Services and Program Evaluation, which coordinate district-developed surveys for parents, students, and staff, as well as state and national surveys. These survey data provided additional context on how students, families, and staff experienced the school environment.

The analysis also included a review of documents, media releases, and public materials related to Leisure City K-8, Florida TaxWatch, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, and Arts Access Miami. These materials helped triangulate findings from interviews and public data, ensuring that the case study was grounded in multiple forms of evidence rather than relying on one perspective or one data source.

As an exemplary case, Leisure City K-8 Center is not intended to represent every school. Instead, it offers a grounded example of what can become possible when strong leadership, district partnership, community-based organizations, and philanthropic investment align around student opportunity.



A student playing the bass during an after-school music program at Leisure City K-8.

CASE STUDY UNIT: LEISURE CITY K-8 CENTER

THE SCHOOL

Leisure City K-8 Center serves students from Pre-K through eighth grade in the Leisure City community of South Dade. Located in Miami-Dade County School Board District 9, the school served 1,037 students in the 2025-2026 school year and reflects the rich diversity of the surrounding community. Most students are Hispanic, representing 60.7% of enrollment, followed by Black students at 37.3%. The school also serves smaller percentages of White students, Asian students, Islander students, American Indian students, and multiracial students. The student body is almost evenly split by gender, with 49.9% female students and 50.1% male students.

Leisure City K-8 is also a Title I school*, meaning it serves a high-poverty student population and receives federal support to provide additional educational resources. In 2025-2026, 78.3% of students were identified as eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 72.2% were directly certified for lunch. These figures indicate a school community in which many families face economic challenges that can affect attendance, stability, and access to enrichment opportunities.

When Walter C. Hall became principal in November 2019, he saw both the challenges facing the school and its potential. Before assuming this role, Principal Hall had been an educator at M-DCPS for two decades. He described Leisure City as “a diamond in the rough” that needed “a vision.” In his words, the work was about “uncovering a buried treasure.” At the time, the school faced significant barriers. Principal Hall recalled that there were dropout issues and that the surrounding community was “very transient.” Many families were farm workers who followed available work, which meant students could move in and out of the school during the year. This instability made it harder to maintain consistent attendance, build long-term relationships, and achieve steady academic progress.

*Title I funding is designed to help schools close opportunity and achievement gaps by providing supplemental support in areas such as reading, language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. At the school level, these funds can support instructional staff, materials, parent engagement, wraparound services, and other activities aligned with the school improvement plan.

Leisure City's challenge was not only to raise test scores or improve school indicators, but to create a school environment where students wanted to attend, families felt welcome, and staff could work from a shared sense of purpose. Under Principal Hall's leadership, and with the support of Assistant Principals Ms. Christina McCrink and Mr. Frederic Davis, the school began strengthening the systems, relationships, and expectations needed to support students more consistently.

ARTS EDUCATION

When Principal Walter Hall arrived in 2019, the school had very limited elective offerings. For middle school students, the main elective available was physical education (PE). This created a real challenge for a school trying to strengthen student engagement and broaden opportunity. Students needed more than the basic academic schedule. They needed courses and experiences that helped them connect to school in new ways.

With support from Title I resources, the school transitioned from a traditional six-period schedule to a 4x4, eight-period day. At the same time, Leisure City was developing its identity as a STEM school. The school had received a bronze STEM designation, but Principal Hall saw that something important was still missing. "The thing that we were missing was the A in STEM, and the A stood for the arts," he explained. Adding music and arts education was not only about creating another elective. It was about moving the school toward a fuller vision of learning—one that included science, technology, engineering, math, and the creativity, discipline, and expression that come through the arts.

The challenge was that vision alone was not enough. The school needed teachers, instruments, materials, and the financial resources to launch and sustain a music program. As Principal Hall described it, the infrastructure was finally in place, but the school still needed the tools to bring the vision to life: "How do we find a teacher? And then how can we afford a teacher to teach music? How do we get the instruments? And then how do we afford to purchase instruments that are very, very expensive these days?"

That is where the partnership with Arts Access Miami became pivotal. Leisure City K-8 was identified as a priority site because it served a large student population in South Dade, lacked a middle school music program, and was working to provide more meaningful electives and enrichment opportunities for students. For Arts Access Miami, the school also presented an important opportunity to better understand and serve the deep south of Miami-Dade County, where access to arts education had historically been limited.

With this partnership, the school began building a music program. Through Arts Access Miami, the school gained access to resources it could not easily secure on its own: instructors, instruments, programming support, and opportunities for students to perform. As Principal Hall remembers, “Through that partnership, we were able to build in the A to our STEM program and became a STEAM school. And so now, we are successfully a STEAM-designated school.”

A turning point came during a school assembly in 2022, when students performed, and the potential of the program became visible to the broader school community. The performance was more than a showcase. It helped clarify what arts education could mean for Leisure City K-8 Center. Principal Hall shared his vision for transforming the school into a Music Magnet and expressed his desire to pursue it with the support of Arts Access Miami and the district. In that moment, music was not simply an activity for a small group of students. It became part of a larger vision for the school’s identity and future.

As momentum grew, additional arts and music partners became part of the school’s ecosystem. In 2024–2025, Young Musicians Unite, Vocal Youth Miami, and Guitars Over Guns helped expand opportunities for students, including programming beyond the regular school day. Principal Hall described the difference clearly: “We didn’t have after-school programs, we didn’t have those opportunities. And so now that we’ve instituted those things, with Young Musicians Unite and Guitars Over Guns, we have students who literally stay here until the sun goes down. That didn’t happen before.” Additionally, in the same year, the school received a grant from Save the Music to provide music instruction to students in kindergarten through first grade, who typically do not receive such programming.

The momentum created through these partnerships helped lead to an even larger milestone in the 2025–2026 school year: the launch of Leisure City K-8’s Mariachi Magnet program. As Principal Hall described, “the success of Young Musicians Unite and Guitars Over Guns opened the door for us to create a magnet opportunity.” Because magnet programs require schools to demonstrate a clear need and secure district approval, the school’s growing arts foundation became an important proof point. The result was the launch of Leisure City’s first Mariachi Magnet program, the first of its kind in the state of Florida. For the school, this marked more than the addition of a new program. It reflected how sustained arts investment can grow from a partnership into a permanent school identity, expanding opportunity for students while strengthening the school’s role as an arts education leader in South Dade.

The percentage of students reporting that
they liked attending Leisure City K-8

INCREASED TO
100%

from 48% in 2023-2024

CHANGES IN THE SCHOOL'S TRAJECTORY

Principal Walter Hall described the first signs of change as relational and behavioral. Students began to see school differently. “We saw changes in students’ attitudes toward school,” he explained. “Students wanted to be a part of something.” As students became more connected, the school saw fewer behavioral problems: fewer referrals, suspensions, and incidents that disrupted learning. In Hall’s view, arts programming contributed to this shift by giving students a sense of belonging and accountability. “Now you have student buy-in,” he said. “‘I have a reason to come to school.’ And it’s outside of mathematics, reading, science, and social studies. ‘I belong to something.’”

The behavioral data are consistent with that story. Minor confrontation referrals decreased from 46 in 2017–2018 to 24 in 2024–2025. Florida Department of Education discipline data also show a modest decline in total reported incidents, from 7 in 2018–2019 to 5 in 2024–2025. The school climate data point to an especially striking improvement in students’ experience of school. According to the School Climate Survey results, the percentage of students reporting that they liked attending Leisure City K–8 increased from 48.0% in 2023–2024 to 100.0% in 2024–2025.

Families also noticed changes. One Leisure City parent described how music helped his oldest child become more excited about school and more socially confident. His son, who participates in mariachi, received his own instrument and began practicing at home. “He’s definitely more outgoing now. He has more friends, he communicates better, he’s not as shy as he was before,” the parent shared. Furthermore, his son is “always excited to talk about” the Mariachi Music Program. These stories help explain what the numbers alone cannot show: arts participation can become part of a student’s identity, confidence, and daily life beyond the school building.

At the same time, the school’s efforts to increase student buy-in appear to have helped create more reasons for students to come and stay engaged. Hall described the partnership with Arts Access Miami as “a blessing” to the school and community because it helped students connect to school in ways that extended beyond traditional academics. He also noted that music brought a new level of accountability: students understood that participation in the music program required them to keep up with their responsibilities in class. In his words, students knew that “if I don’t do well in class and perform, then I may not be able to be a part of this music program.”

Leisure City K-8 students in third grade
reached a

100%

PROMOTION RATE

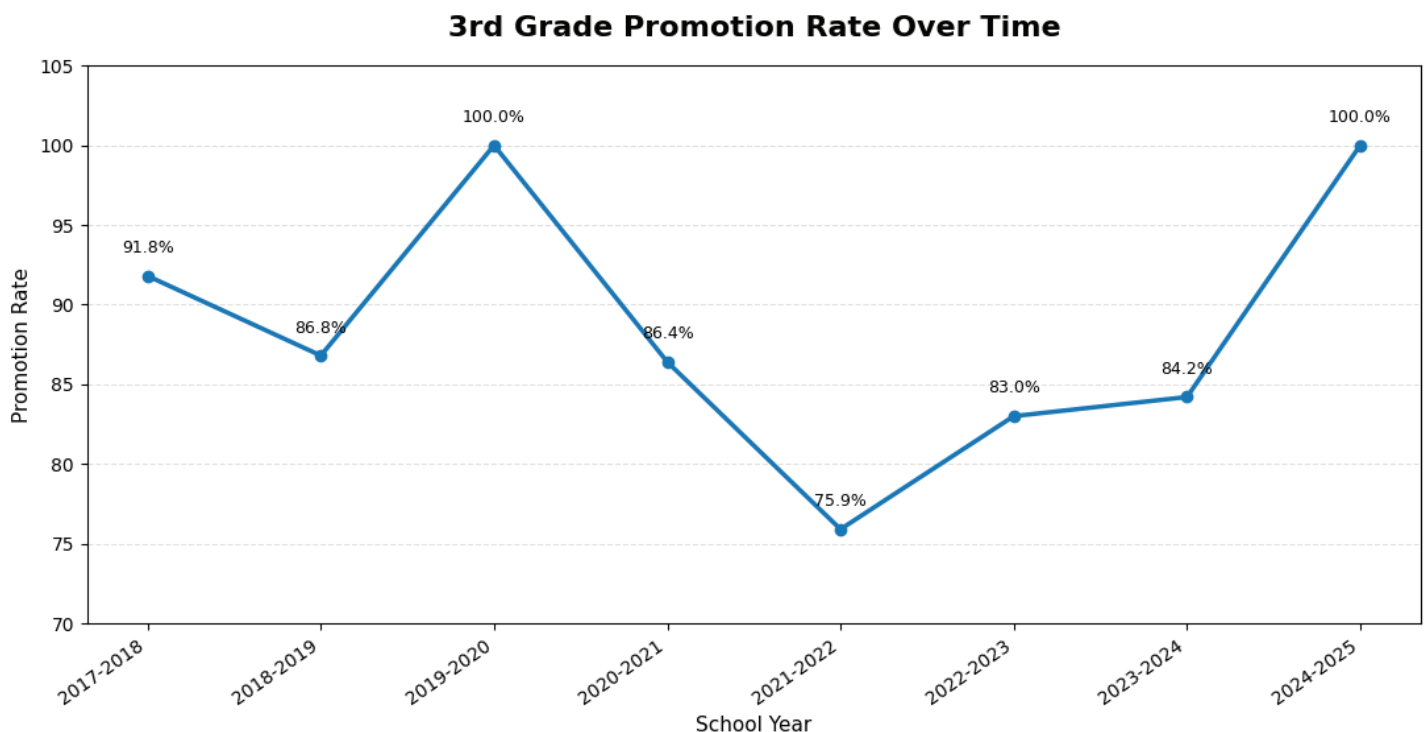
up from 86.8% in 2018-2019

Academic indicators also show meaningful progress over the period reviewed. Leisure City K-8's school grade improved from a C in 2017-2018 to a B in 2024-2025. This improvement matters because school grades reflect multiple dimensions of school performance, including achievement, learning gains, and other accountability indicators. The return to a B suggests renewed momentum after the disruptions of the pandemic and the challenges that followed.

One of the most important academic indicators is third-grade promotion. In Florida, third grade is a critical milestone because reading proficiency at this stage is closely tied to future academic success, and state policy places special emphasis on promotion requirements.

As seen in Figure 1, Leisure City's third-grade promotion rate increased from 86.8% in 2018-2019 to 100.0% in 2024-2025, meaning every third-grade student was promoted that year. The 2024-2025 result is especially notable because it followed several years of lower promotion rates after the pandemic, including 75.9% in 2021-2022. The rebound suggests that students were being more effectively supported to stay on track academically.

FIGURE 1



3rd Grade Promotion Rate Over Time, 2017-2018 through 2024-2025. Data source: M-DCPS, ARDA Non-promoted rates.

The school also improved in core academic achievement. Florida's FAST (Florida Assessment of Student Thinking) categorizes student performance into five achievement levels (Levels 1 through 5). A score of Level 3 or higher is considered "On Grade Level" mastery and is the passing score.

The percentage of seventh-grade
students scoring at Level 3
or above in Mathematics

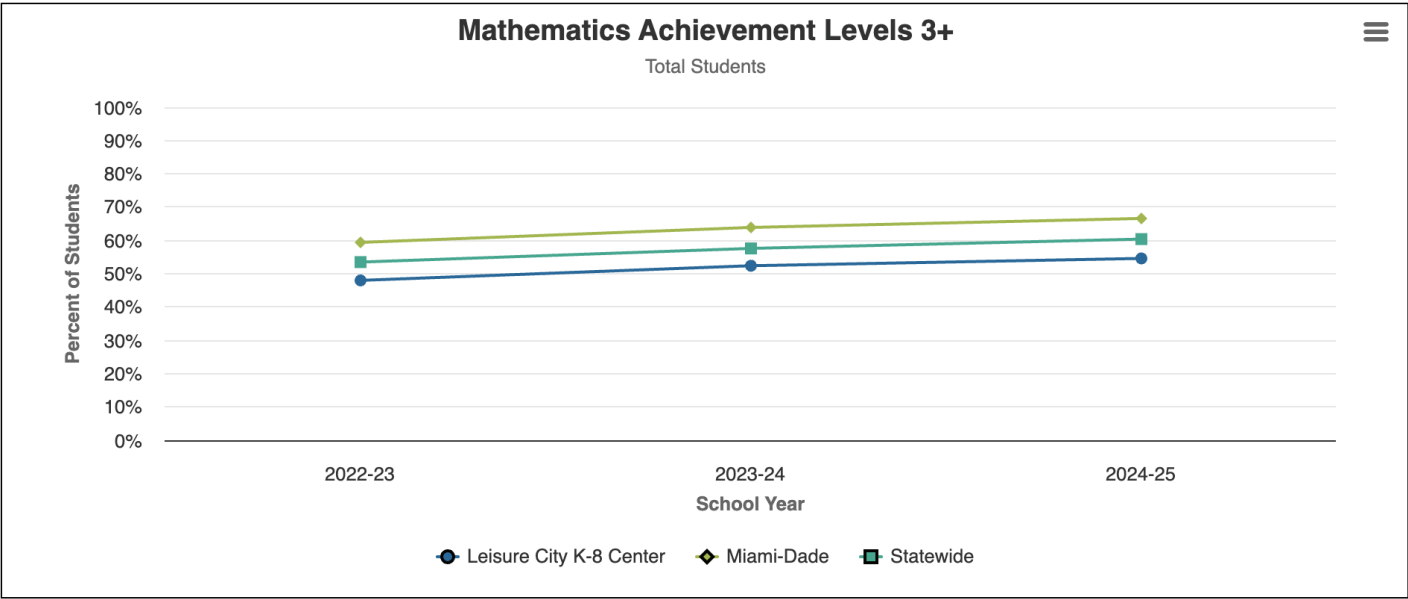
INCREASED TO

75%

surpassing both Miami-Dade County at
66% and Florida at 60%

In Mathematics, Leisure City K-8’s percentage of students scoring at Level 3 or above increased from 48.0% in 2022–2023 to 54.6% in 2024–2025, a gain of 6.6 percentage points. Miami-Dade County improved by 7.3 points during the same period, moving from 59.3% to 66.6%. This means the school’s Mathematics achievement grew at a pace close to the district’s overall. It is important to note that district-level results include both traditional public schools and charter schools.

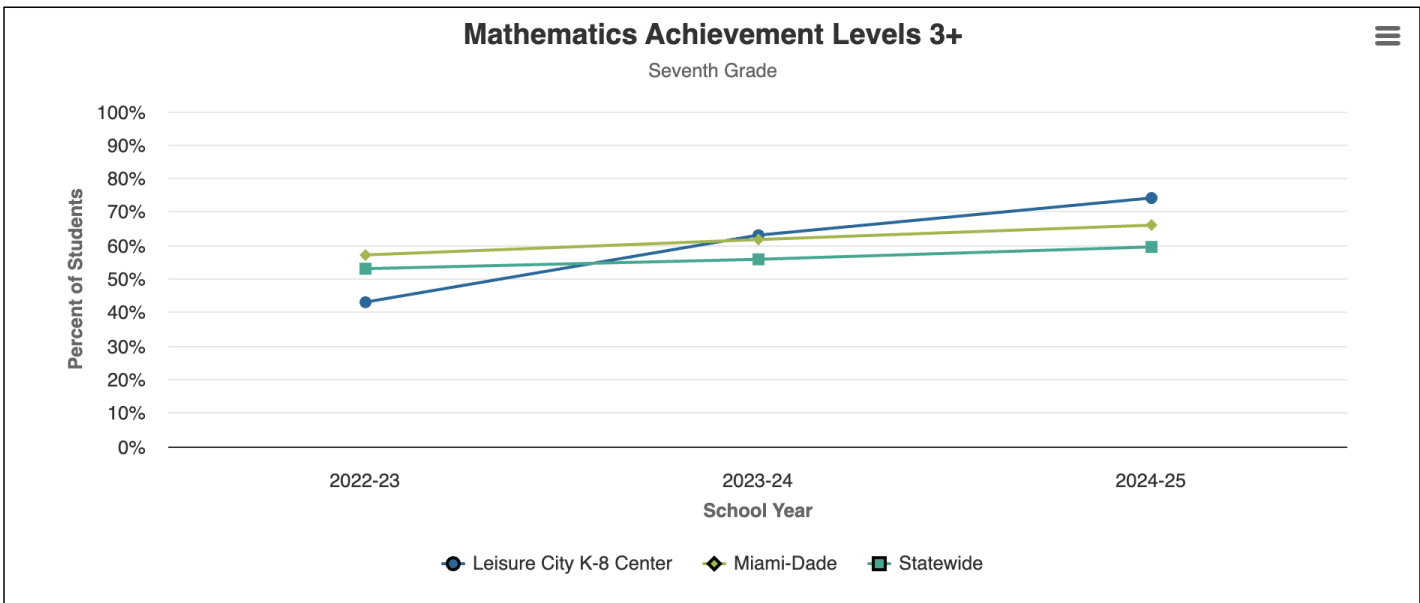
FIGURE 2



Mathematics Achievement Levels 3+, Total Students. Leisure City K-8 Center compared with Miami-Dade and Statewide, 2022–23 to 2024–25. Data source: Florida Department of Education.

The grade-level results suggest especially strong progress in seventh-grade math, where Leisure City rose from below the district and state in 2022–2023 to above both by 2024–2025.

FIGURE 3



Mathematics Achievement Levels 3+, Seventh Grade. Leisure City K-8 Center compared with Miami-Dade and Statewide, 2022–23 to 2024–25. Data source: Florida Department of Education.

The percentage of students achieving Level 3 or above in English Language Arts increased by

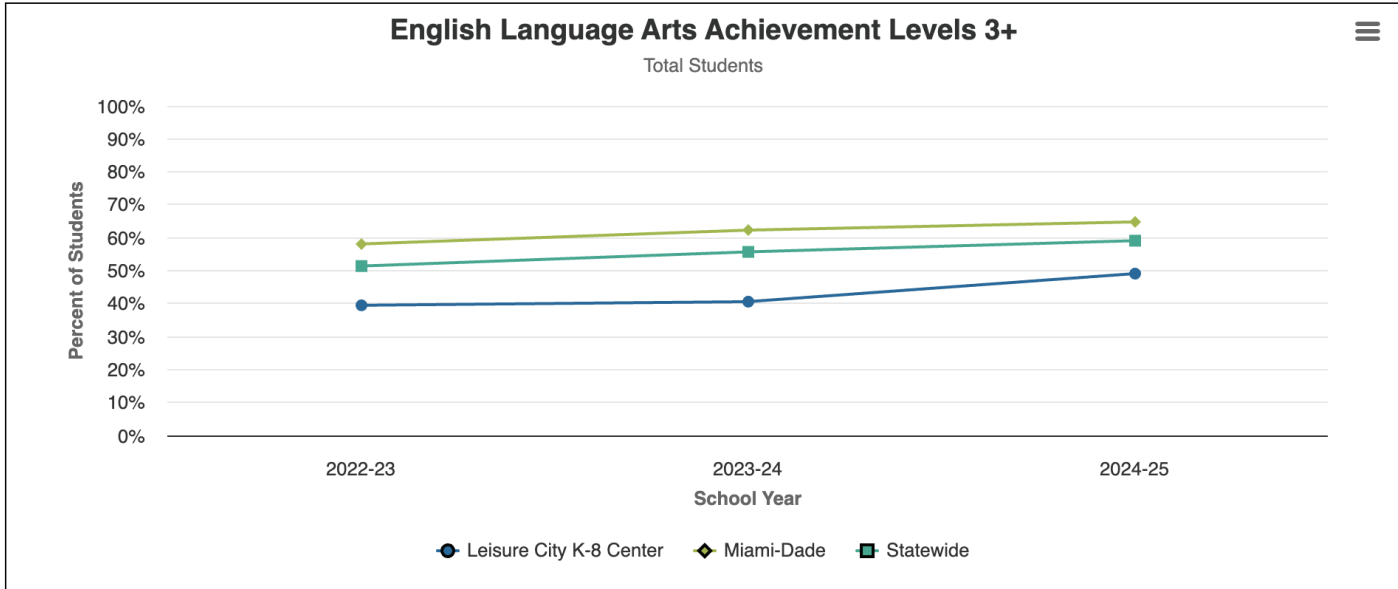
9.6

PERCENTAGE POINTS

from 39.5% to 49.1%

In English Language Arts, the school's progress was even more pronounced. The percentage of students scoring at Level 3 or above increased from 39.5% in 2022–2023 to 49.1% in 2024–2025, a gain of 9.6 percentage points. During that same period, Miami-Dade County improved by 6.7 points, from 58.1% to 64.8%. This means Leisure City improved faster than the county overall, narrowing the gap from 18.6 points to 15.7 points.

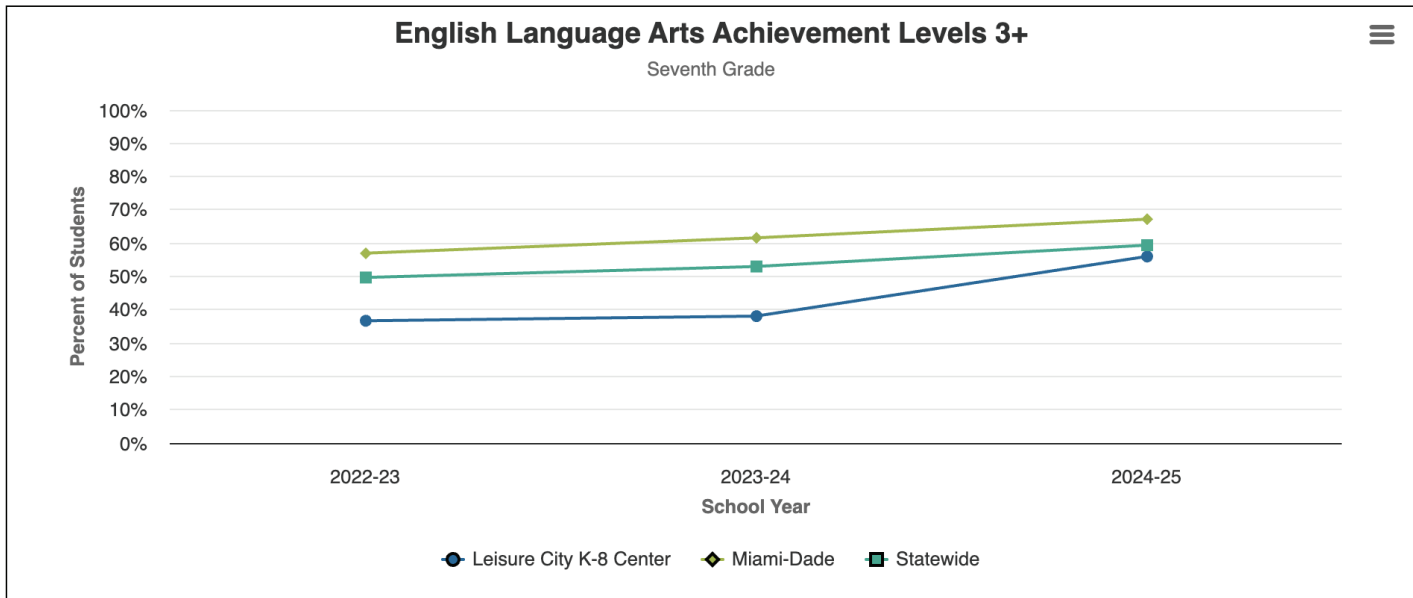
FIGURE 4



English Language Arts Achievement Levels 3+, Total Students. Leisure City K-8 Center compared with Miami-Dade and Statewide, 2022–23 to 2024–25. Data source: Florida Department of Education.

The grade-level results show visible gains in third and seventh grades, with seventh grade showing particularly strong gains between 2023–2024 and 2024–2025, as seen in Figure 5.

FIGURE 5



English Language Arts Achievement Levels 3+, Seventh Grade. Leisure City K-8 Center compared with Miami-Dade and Statewide. Data source: Florida Department of Education.

Grade 7 students ranked in the

th

94

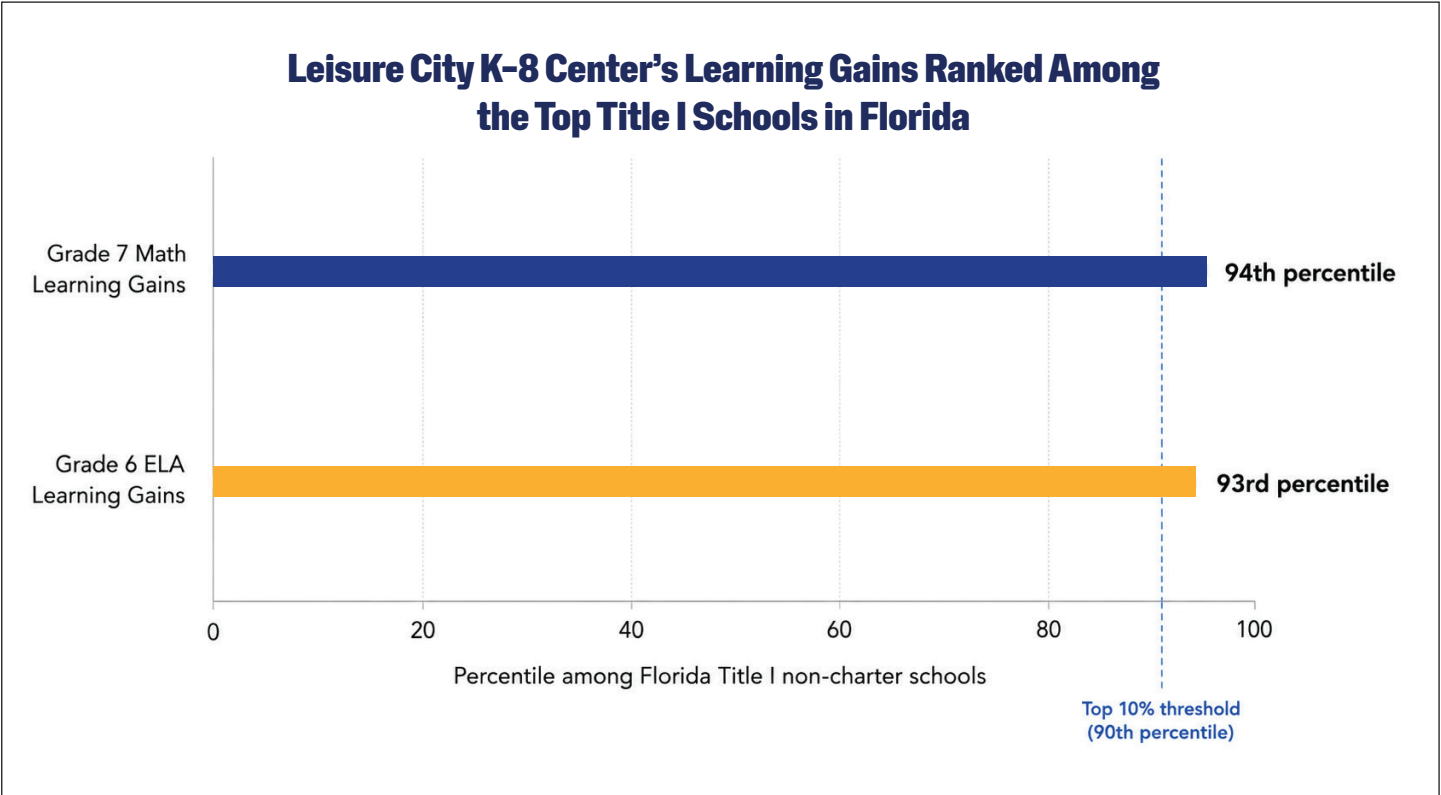
PERCENTILE

for Mathematics learning gains among
Florida Title I non-charter schools

Learning gains add another important layer to the story. Leisure City’s learning gains for students in the lowest 25% were above the Miami-Dade County average in both ELA and Math in 2024–2025. In ELA, 58.1% of students in the lowest 25% made learning gains, compared with 57.1% countywide.

In Math, 65.0% of students in the lowest 25% made learning gains, compared with 57.8% countywide. This is especially meaningful because it suggests the school was not only improving outcomes for students already closest to proficiency; it was also supporting growth among students with the greatest academic need.

FIGURE 6



Learning Gains Ranked Among the Top Title I Schools in Florida. Percentile among Florida Title I non-charter schools.
Data source: Florida Department of Education.

The school’s middle grades stand out in the statewide context. Among Florida Title I non-charter schools, Leisure City’s Grade 7 Math learning gains ranked in the 94th percentile, and Grade 6 ELA learning gains ranked in the 93rd percentile. These results place the school among the strongest Title I non-charter performers in the state for those specific measures. For external audiences, this is one of the clearest indicators that the school’s progress is not only locally meaningful but also notable when compared with similar high-need schools across Florida.

CONCLUSION

This case study was guided by one central question: **How can arts education help public schools remain competitive, retain and attract families, and improve the conditions that support student engagement, school culture, and academic success?**

Leisure City K-8 Center offers a compelling example of how this can happen. Its story shows that arts education, when supported by strong leadership, district partnership, community-based organizations, and sustained investment, can become more than an enrichment opportunity. It can become part of a school's strategy for strengthening public education from the inside out.

Public schools across the country, including in Miami-Dade County, are facing declining enrollment, increased competition from charter and private schools, fiscal pressure, and rising expectations from families. These challenges are especially significant for Title I schools, where students and families may also navigate economic hardship, mobility, and barriers to consistent attendance. In this environment, schools must do more than improve academic indicators. They must build trust, create meaningful opportunities, and give students and families clear reasons to choose and stay.

Leisure City K-8 demonstrates that arts education can help meet that challenge. Music programming gave students new reasons to engage with school, new ways to experience success, and new opportunities to feel that they belonged. What began as an effort to expand limited elective options grew into a broader school identity: from STEM to STEAM, from after-school music programs to a Mariachi Magnet program, and from a school working to rebuild connection to one that families and external organizations increasingly recognize as a place of opportunity.

The evidence suggests that culture, engagement, and academics began reinforcing one another. Students had more opportunities to belong. Families saw children become more confident, expressive, and socially connected. Behavioral indicators moved in a positive direction. Academic indicators improved, particularly in ELA achievement, third-grade promotion, and middle-grade learning gains. School progress is shaped by many factors, including leadership, instruction, attendance, staffing, family support, district resources,

and community context. However, the pattern suggests that arts access helped create conditions in which students were more engaged, more connected, and better positioned to succeed.

The school's recognition and family perspectives further strengthen the case. Leisure City K-8 is becoming a school that external organizations recognize, district leaders can point to, and families actively choose. In a competitive educational landscape, that matters. A parent's decision to choose Leisure City after considering private, charter, and other public school options reflects a powerful shift in perception: the school is offering the resources, relationships, and opportunities families want for their children.

This is why arts education should be understood as a strategic lever for public school vitality. It can help schools remain competitive by giving them a stronger identity and a more compelling value proposition for families. It can support retention and attraction by making the school experience more meaningful, visible, and connected to students' talents. It can strengthen school culture by creating shared moments of pride, performance, discipline, and joy. And it can support academic success by improving the conditions in which learning happens.

As Sageman (2022) notes, "Schools serve as important social and economic anchors, and their loss can accelerate community decline." If public schools are anchors, then investing in them is also an investment in community stability and possibility. Leisure City K-8 shows that arts education can be part of that investment. With the right leadership, partnerships, facilities, and resources, the arts can help public schools become places where students want to be, families want to stay, and communities can see the future of public education taking shape.

The larger lesson is clear: investing in arts education is investing in the future of public education. Arts Access Miami's work is not only about expanding access to music and the arts. It is about helping public schools become more engaging, more competitive, and more capable of supporting the whole child. Leisure City K-8 offers a powerful example of what can happen when a school, a district, and a community choose to build that future together.

SECTION 05

ABOUT ARTS ACCESS MIAMI

Arts Access Miami is a countywide collective impact initiative working to ensure that every public school student in Miami-Dade County has access to free, consistent, high-quality arts education regardless of zip code, school attended, or ability to pay. Led by Young Musicians Unite and fiscally sponsored by The Miami Foundation, Arts Access Miami operates through a formal partnership with Miami-Dade County Public Schools, aligning schools, nonprofit arts organizations, funders, civic leaders, teaching artists, and community partners around one shared goal: building a sustainable arts education infrastructure for Miami-Dade County.

Arts Access Miami was created in response to a longstanding systems challenge. Across Miami-Dade, arts education access has historically been uneven and fragmented. Some schools had multiple arts programs, while others had little or none. Many organizations worked in silos, often competing for resources rather than coordinating their strengths. Arts Access Miami replaces that fragmentation with collaboration, shared planning, data-informed decision-making, and collective accountability.

The work began in 2020 in the Miami Carol City feeder pattern, where Arts Access Miami brought together local arts organizations, school leaders, community partners, and funders to build a coordinated regional model. Over five years, student participation in arts education across the 12 schools in that feeder pattern increased from 27% to more than 71%, while public and private investment more than doubled. This early success demonstrated that when schools, nonprofits, and funders align around a shared strategy, arts education access can grow at scale.

Today, Arts Access Miami brings together more than 30 partner organizations through its partnership with Miami-Dade County Public Schools. The initiative supports collective leadership, community-centered programming, impact-driven accountability, and countywide arts education infrastructure. Through principal cohorts, vetted nonprofit partnerships, secure data-sharing protocols, shared investment

strategies, professional development, and coordinated program placement, Arts Access Miami is building a unified ecosystem that supports students academically, socially, emotionally, and artistically.

Arts Access Miami now reaches more than 17,000 students weekly across 88 schools and sites in North, South, and Central Dade, with expansion planned into East and West Dade as part of a five-region countywide model. Since 2020, the initiative has served more than 40,000 students and continues to grow toward a long-term vision of reaching more than 50,000 students each week across all 342 Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

What makes Arts Access Miami unique is that it is not simply expanding arts programs. It is building the infrastructure necessary to make arts education coordinated, measurable, sustainable, and accessible across an entire public school district. By aligning schools, nonprofit organizations, funders, and community leaders around shared goals and outcomes, Arts Access Miami is demonstrating how collective action can strengthen public schools, expand opportunity for students, and create a model for arts education that can be replicated in communities across the country.



Students on stage at the Principal's Honor Roll Event.

SECTION 06

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