

High School Program

Each year, special education students leave behind the security of high school to enter the adult world. While preparations for that transition from school to adulthood are difficult for everyone, they are especially so for young people with disabilities. Successful transition plans empower students to become involved in guiding their own supports, and to contribute as equals in the life of their communities. Key to this empowerment is the ability to speak up for oneself; to define one's own goals and to take action to achieve those goals; and to tell others about one's needs and choices.

VSA Vermont (VSA VT) presents performing arts and mixed media residencies at public and private high schools to support this transition. Creative expression is at the forefront, culminating in a student-led community sharing of artistic work derived from participants' own experiences. Communication, civic engagement, preparation for employment, participation in cultural venues, and social relationships, among other self-advocacy topics, are addressed through an arts-based process.



Image description: a young black woman in a wheelchair holds two drum sticks, each over a large drum. Her aide looks on.



Image description: a dreadlocked instructor crouches by a large hand drum, at the feet of a young man smiling with a finger held to his lips.

"Seeing a student who had been withdrawn get up and do a pretend hoola-hoop, I could see her thinking, 'If I can do this, I can do anything!'"

- Teacher describing a student's progress

"Last year my student was non-verbal. This year he is on stage having a conversation. You don't know the possibilities with these guys."

- Deb Baker Moody, teacher, South Burlington

Our History

VSA VT's high school program began in 2003 as Self-Advocacy Theatre. Students learned theatre and improvisation games, wrote scripts, and performed "Cantastoria" style theatre for the culminating sharing, in which stories are told while referencing related images. As the program grew, it encompassed more diverse theatrical forms, and added dance to its performing arts repertoire, alongside drawing, writing, and musical forms of expression. This intensified effort of the last four years has served seven schools in two Vermont counties.



Image description: a young man in a power wheelchair with head controls holds a red-and-blue striped woven bell.

Our Future

In 2016, VSA VT initiated an arts-based mentoring program with a strong foundation in community partnerships. This program, by and for people with disabilities, matches our high school students to volunteer adult mentors who are also people with disabilities. Mentoring pairs have supported opportunities to develop their artistic engagement and creative expression by working together and with local cultural venues, studios, and artists. This system of role modeling and arts engagement weaves mentees and mentors alike more deeply into the cultural fabric of their home communities while creating intergenerational bonds and personal connections. We hope to offer this unique program alongside our classroom program in towns throughout Vermont.



Image description: a young woman in pink raises her hands palm-out in front of her, eyes closed, mouth open, as other students look on from the background.



Image description: two young women in the foreground have their arms extended, and two young men behind them have their arms lifted as if questioning.

Structure

Interested schools can contract with VSA VT for 8 to 16 weekly sessions of an hour or an hour and a half, taught by Vermont teaching artists. Schools provide meeting space, student aides/supports, and transportation as needed, and organise the final sharing; VSA VT provides teaching artists, a range of assessment strategies, and programming materials. For fee schedule or other info, contact Toby MacNutt, program manager: toby@vsavt.org

Testimonials

From Ann Carol Moffett, Special Educator, Colchester High School:

“[One former student] is a resilient, funny, and positive young man who has conquered many challenges, including serious medical issues. He participated in [VSA VT's high school program] for all four years of high school ... Through the years his confidence grew.

There is one particular moment that we all remember however, that wraps it all up. In his final year of high school he applied for a job at a local business with the support of the school's employment specialist. He answered all of the interview questions like a pro and by the following day he was employed. His unsolicited (and heart-warming) comment after receiving the news was 'Boy, I couldn't have done that without doing theater. I could just think about what I had to do.'

All of the participants have gained confidence, expanded their interests, and developed leadership skills. I will venture to say that some of the lessons they learned [working with this program] have been far more important to their success as adults than any academic subject.”

From the parent of a former student, after a final performance:

“All of the kids performing were so proud of themselves and full of self confidence. Wonderful! My son has been able to carry over his self-advocacy into his life ... It is heart warming to see him expressing himself and I know that the program with VSA has helped him tremendously (as well as the classmates!). This is such a worthwhile program and I *hope* he can benefit from this kind of self-esteem building program next year!”

From our students:

“Somehow I pulled myself together. I just knew I had to do it. ... Everybody said I did an incredible job. ... I was surprised, too, but in a way, I always knew I could do it. The night before, alone in my room, I knew that I would surprise everyone, no matter what, because even though everyone still thought I was really shy and self-conscious, I'd decided to myself that I didn't have to be what people thought I was any longer. ... This is what I say: 'If you are trying to be something you are not, stop and think “that's not me.” Then try to find your self.’”

“Thank you for all of your support to build my esteem up. I have felt more confidence than last year. I hope to speak up for myself whatever challenge I might face in the real world. Someday I want to be a dancer in New York and I will remember how you taught me to keep my head held high. And plus to have self confidence in my self.”



Image description: a young man, seated, plays bongos while a young woman in pink tie-dye and another in silver sparkles stand onstage nearby. Instructor Elizabeth gestures to the students.



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National Endowment for the Arts: Art Works.



Mobius: Vermont's Mentoring Partnership



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The Kennedy Center



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