Imagine getting to experience the arts as a child under the direction of a professional ballroom dancer, a children's book author, a theater actor and a professional musician. That's exactly what K-12 students in the Waterloo Community School District experienced for two weeks as they participated in Arts Ignite, thanks to the partnership with the Gallagher Bluedorn Performing Arts Center.

An international program, Arts Ignite aims to "transform the lives of young people through the arts." By sending teaching artists to help students in various school districts, Arts Ignite exposes students to the arts while also growing their skills in various curriculum areas. This was the second year Arts Ignite came to Waterloo.

The focus of the program is to help migrant students who have been in the country for three years or less. Over a two-week period, Waterloo students improved their English language and literacy skills through theater, dance, music and creative writing activities. Each of these activities was led by a teaching artist from New York or Los Angeles.
This year’s program had about 25 participants. Each day, students arrived on site and first had breakfast. Then they divided into age groups and rotated through each of the four arts stations.

“One of the things Arts Ignite is really, really good at is allowing space for creativity and courage,” said Jennifer Onuigbo, community relations manager for Gallagher Bluedorn. “Nothing is ever judged. Never. Nobody ever says, ‘Do it this way.’ or ‘Do it a different way’ or ‘That’s wrong.’ It’s always, ‘I love what you’ve done. That’s so creative.’ And it’s just really a healthy atmosphere for the students.”

From day one to the end of the program, Onuigbo says she saw students grow in confidence and the courage to try. The program also helped kids who are new to the area feel like they are part of the community.

“All the students in the creative writing class get a journal,” said Onuigbo. “We had one student write in her journal on the first day that she didn’t want to come because she wasn’t sure what this was all about, but she ended up being really glad she did. She was able to meet students who she’ll be going to school with in the fall, which helped her feel more comfortable thinking about school.”

In addition to Onuigbo, four UNI-affiliated interns were also able to observe changes in the students.

The interns served as assistants to the classroom teachers and teaching artists. Through interning, they gain classroom management experience and learn how the arts can be a helpful way to teach students other areas.

“I hope the students take these skills and actually get involved in the arts and become confident because they’re wonderful humans who have talents and voices that need to be heard,” said Jazz Jensen, an intern who is earning an art education degree as well as a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Photography with an art history minor.

Of course, one of the primary goals of the program is improving English skills for the students. Brad Krug, a 2022 theatre performance and theatre for youth and communities alum who interned for Arts Ignite, explained each of the activities incorporated at least one of the four pillars of language: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

“The students weren’t just feeling like they were supposed to know English in one way,” he said. “They were able to use it in all forms and actually put it in their body, which helps them remember things.”

At the end of the two weeks, the students participated in a showcase. The students performed a musical piece composed from poetry by the students. They danced, practiced their theatrical skills, played music and even read aloud some of their creative writings. Gallagher Bluedorn provided audio and lighting support to make the production an extra special experience for the students and their families who were in the audience.

“I think it was nice for the families to see the kids being happy and themselves,” said Jensen.

“Aside from the improvement of their English skills and exposure to the arts, I just hope they have had a very positive experience and know they belong in the community, in Waterloo and at school,” said Onuigbo. “That’s what it’s all about: developing a feeling of community and belonging through creative expression.”