

Young locals shine in ballroom dance

BY NATALIE STEWART

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Ten local fifth-graders waltzed and chacha'ed their way into the winner's circle at a ballroom competition in Baton Rouge.

The dancers — Dasia May, Korey London, Reginald Larkins, Dasha German, Lacie Zigler, Ty Bowers, Walter Joubert, Brianna Smith, Ethan Anderson and Carly Tarberelli of the Whistle Stop's Dancing Classrooms program — also danced the rumba, East Coast swing, fox trot and tango at the Gumbo Dancesport Championships competition.

Dancing Classrooms director Nancy Vallee said the couples won 45 medals and ribbons, including seven gold medals, 13 silver medals and nine bronze medals.

"They did great. They pretty much won in most everything they competed in," Vallee said. "They were out of this world."

Vallee said the students, who competed in the program for about a year, were chosen for the Baton Rouge competition because of their dancing skills.

"They love to dance. You can tell they love it," she said. "They were so exhilarated and excited about this competition ... It is obvious they are having a wonderful time doing this. They are always asking where we are going to go next, and what we are going to do."

As part of the Dancing Classrooms program, fifth-grade students from 19 schools in Calcasieu and Jeff Davis parishes learn how to ballroom dance in twice-weekly, 45-minute classes.

Vallee said the program helps students excel in academics, gain confidence and develop better social skills.

"I know that it helps students," she said. "There has been a study done at the University of Texas at Arlington showing the benefits of Dancing Classrooms. It was found that students that take Dancing Classrooms score higher on their LEAP test than students that don't.

"They gain confidence because they have learned something new. They feel better about themselves, and kids that are initially shy really start to blossom. Their confidence and self-esteem really grow as they go through the program."

Vallee said students learned the merengue at the beginning of the program and then moved on to the fox trot, rumba, tango, swing and waltz.

"They learn the basic skills of social dancing in the program. The boys learn to lead, and the girls learn to follow," she said. "These kids will have this with them forever. They are going to be able to go into any social situation."

Vallee said teachers and principals at participating schools have noticed a difference in students because of the program.

"They say that the whole class has changed. They work harder and are more serious about their school work, and they also get along better with their peers," she said.

Vallee said the program's instructors — RoseMary Pimentel, Delaine Babineaux, Lauren Morris and Angela Reeves — teach in a way that makes it easy for the students to learn and understand.