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PHOTOS BY MARICE COHN BAND/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

**WARMING UP:** Miami Northwestern Senior High School students in Traci Young's class stretch before they begin their routines with the Alvin Ailey dancers.

## Teens take journey through dance

■ Students at Miami Northwestern Senior High learned in a workshop with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

BY LAURA ISENSEE  
lisensee@miamiherald.com

As a 14-year-old Miami Northwestern student, Robert Battle piled onto a school bus and headed to the Jackie Gleason Theater, where for the first time, he saw dancers perform live *Revelations*, a majestic journey through African-American spirituals and soulful blues.

The journey continues for Battle, now the artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, whose dancers conducted an intensive workshop this week at his former school — delving into the choreography, history and powerful emotions of *Revelations*.

Later this month, Battle will return home to Miami, in his first official season as artistic director of Alvin Ailey, one of the most successful modern dance companies in the country. Battle, 39, who grew up in Liberty City and learned his first plié at Northwestern, will share the experience with his family.

And the Northwestern students will see *Revelations* live — similar to how Battle got his firsthand encounter with the dance epic.



**IN SYNC:** Brittney Mejia and other students move under the direction of Alvin Ailey dancers.

"Dance is important," said Misha Michel, a 14-year-old freshman. "Dance is our lives."

On Wednesday, she and other students learned the beginning choreography to the *Revelations* gospel solo, *I Wanna Be Ready*. They curled up on the floor, reached their arms out and rolled over in a prayerful pose.

"It is about someone preparing for death. It's very solemn, it's very introverted, and it's slow," called out Nasha Thomas-Schmitt. She danced with Alvin Ailey for 12 years and now directs the AileyCamp and workshops around the country. She is leading the workshop also at Charles R. Drew Middle School this week with sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders. The

residency was sponsored by JPMorgan Chase, as part of its ongoing partnership with Northwestern and programs in Liberty City.

Thomas-Schmitt explained the workshop built around *Revelations* incorporates more than just dance moves, but also language arts and social studies. Students learn the biography of Ailey, who was raised by a single mom in the Great Depression in a small Texas town. They learn about how he made *Revelations* during the civil rights movement. And they work on their own interpretation of dance and words.

"A lot of students think it's just about dance, but they use dance as a tool to learn about writing, English and creative thinking," said Traci Young, the artistic di-

rector of Northwestern's PAVAC dance program and a former Miami Heat dancer.

Later in the week, the students will write poems and then choreograph the words and emotions to music.

Battle, who was not at Northwestern on Wednesday morning, urged aspiring dancers to enjoy the journey.

"The part of it you do the most of is working toward that performance, working toward that goal that you want so badly," he explained in a phone interview. "If you don't enjoy the work, you won't enjoy the journey and, therefore, the product will not be sufficient."

He added: "Know that along that journey, another door might open."

His own path changed from dancing to choreography. That first time he watched *Revelations* at the Jackie Gleason, Battle felt an emotional connection. In some ways, he saw the world he grew up in: His mother played piano at church, his great-uncle was a deacon.

"I had an emotional connection to something larger to myself," he recounted. "The dancers for me represented this majesty, this grace and eloquence, all this beauty right there in front of me."