

Song and dance

Little dancers Georgia Wegener, 8, and her five-year-old sister Taylor. Picture: TOM HUNTLEY



THESE KIDS REALLY DO ROCK-IT

A performing arts school in Mount Barker is blazing a trail in special needs education with an ambitious charter to boost wellbeing and bring communities together.

ANNA RANDELL

The stage is set, the theatre hushed. Seven-year-old Georgia looks around, turns, and stretches her arms, grinning from ear to ear, as if to say: "I'm here!". It's a moving moment for the family and friends who have come to watch Georgia and her peers perform.

These are kids who just a few years ago may not have had the chance to be on stage, proud to share their achievements.

They're members of Rockit Performing Arts, a Mount Barker school that is blazing a trail in special needs education with an ambitious charter to boost wellbeing and bring communities together through dance and the arts.

At this school, kids with a range of learning and physical disabilities, from autism and sensory disorders to low muscle tone, anxiety and epilepsy, learn and perform alongside mainstream peers in an environment that promotes acceptance and the importance of self-worth.

Mother-of-two Molly Wegener says being part of the school has changed her family's life. She enrolled her daughter Georgia, now 8, in Rockit's

Dance for Disabilities Launch Pad class three years ago. Georgia has Down Syndrome and is set to undergo her fourth open heart surgery within the next two months. Younger daughter Taylor, 5, who had been part of the studio's Pockit Rockit and ballet classes, joined the same class this year.

"For the first time, we had something that the three of us could do together," Ms Wegener says. "It wasn't that Taylor shouldn't be there because it was for Georgia, or the other way around. "We could take a deep breath and not feel like we didn't fit in. Georgia's complex medical needs, her therapy, none of that mattered – this was a place where I didn't have to be a carer, I could just be a mum, and have fun with my girls."

Since Georgia started at the school, her speech, mobility and confidence have blossomed. "It's brought music and dance into our lives – when she's at home Georgia will put music on and she'll practise her dance moves, which helps with her control," Ms Wegener says. "We have more beauty and more opportunity in our lives that we ever thought (could) be possible living in the world of disability."

School founder Noni Vassos, a dancer and arts manager, had a personal reason to integrate special needs students into a mainstream dance school. Two of her three boys are affected by autism, severe sensory disorder and severe speech disorder.

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