



Summit Elementary's "Art in Transit" program, Smithfield, Utah

Beyond Our Walls

Immerse students in broader learning communities.

Some things are just too good to keep inside school walls—including children's creativity. Have you ever wondered how to bring more of the outside world into school to deepen student understanding, while simultaneously showcasing students' talents to the outside world? Many principals are immersing students in broader learning communities, while preparing them with 21st century skills.



CHAMPION
CREATIVELY
ALIVE
CHILDREN



ABOVE: Westmore Elementary student, Orem, Utah; **RIGHT:** St. Anthony of Padua Catholic School, Greenville, South Carolina

Build Support for Art

Within every community, there are partnership opportunities for schools and local entities that benefit both. Summit Elementary School principal Mark Daines explains how the

Smithfield, Utah, school approached the partnership process: “Our original objective was to build community appreciation for art education and bring student artwork into public places. But the benefits have gone beyond that,” he says. When second graders contributed their artwork to the Cache Valley Transit District’s Art in Transit program, the project made the students feel proud and deepened their understanding of the community. Passengers enjoyed students’ creativity while traveling in public buses, and gained deeper appreciation for why art in schools matters.

Summit Elementary students’ art posted on the buses was created in response to literacy lessons during which they made “story souvenirs”—butterfly paintings, watercolor flowers, and collage fish—that they designed

for their literature response journals. The original artwork was transformed into vinyl placards that circled the interiors of 10 public buses. Knowing their artwork is traveling along the bus routes provides students with a personalized lesson in community geography and math as they consider how far their art will travel. As teacher Michelle Daines says, “Kids are visual learners. What started as a literature response journal deepened student learning about our community.” Whenever the children spot their artwork on a bus, they are overjoyed. One student even said, “I didn’t know I could be so creative.”

Bring History to Life

Making history relevant can be a creative challenge—one that community resources can help solve. St. Anthony of Padua Catholic School in Greenville, South Carolina, wanted to enliven its Civil War study and focus on the roles of Native Americans and blacks in that conflict. Third through sixth graders spent the year weaving visual arts, storytelling, and poetry into their social studies lessons.

Every school has a unique connection to local history. This school reached within its community to find rich links to a war that was fought on

the same land 150 years ago. Working with a visiting artist at the Greenville County Museum of Art, students learned about slavery through historical paintings and the stoneware made and inscribed by David Drake, the subject of the Caldecott Honor-winning book *Dave the Potter*.

After a pottery demonstration, students made pots themselves. To relate the past to their 21st century lives, the children worked with a professional writer on journals in which they recorded their thoughts about learning history through art. They also interviewed and sketched a personal family history project. For the school’s year-end arts festival, the students created a 3-by-4-foot collage featuring their thoughts on the lessons of history and a portrait of President Barack Obama, a reproduction of which was sent to him in Washington, D.C.

This hands-on art infusion brought Civil War history to life. Taking students into the community and bringing storytellers and crafters into the school “definitely brought deeper understanding and a dimension of creativity the children wouldn’t have had without the arts infusion,” says Donna Barkey, who teaches a combined fifth- and sixth-grade class.

St. Anthony's principal, Catherine Noecker, agrees. "Arts infusion must be a schoolwide commitment, opening a door that can be linked to achievement of curriculum standards," she says. "While art as art is important, and art lessons meet with children's enthusiasm at all grade levels, arts infusion offers teachers the opportunity to channel that enthusiasm into all their subjects. This requires a significant involvement from teachers. But it is worth the effort."

Make It a Small(er) World

Preparing students to be global citizens can feel abstract until principals figure out how to make the connection with other countries feel personally relevant.

Valley Park Elementary School in Valley Park, Missouri, brought its study of China to life by swapping artwork with students in Yunnan Province in southwest China. The entire school (pre-K to fifth grade) was introduced to Chinese culture through art,

music, reading, history, language, and writing in both English and Chinese.

Throughout the year-long immersion, they enjoyed lessons about Chinese artists, writing, scratch board techniques, and the famous Terra Cotta Warriors. Schoolwide assemblies included Chinese acrobats and an end-of-year Chinese Cultural Day. A highlight for the students was creating artists' trading cards that they exchanged with a school in Kunming, China. They also sent drawings of the St. Louis Gateway Arch and shared some of the Crayola supplies the school received with their grant.

But global exchange can bring challenges. Plans to Skype with Chinese students were scrapped because of time zone conflicts. A set of artists' trading cards featuring students' self-portraits got lost in the Chinese postal service. Even so, the Chinese school's delighted principal described the gifts that did arrive as "food for both students and teachers." The Valley Park faculty emerged convinced that "student excitement shines between the two countries." And the overall lesson was clear, says principal Bryan Pearlman. "Today's children live in a global society. Let's prepare them for their global future," he says.

Westmore Elementary School in Orem, Utah, also engaged in an international exchange. It adopted a sister school in Mexico and shared students' handmade artwork. In September 2012, Westmore art specialist Wendy Cope introduced students to the Oscar Gutierrez School in Puerto Penasco, Mexico, a community so impoverished that their school library consisted of only one box of books.

Throughout the year, visiting artists helped the children handcraft gifts through lessons in watercolors, basket weaving, tie-dyeing, and puppet making. In addition to helping their new Mexican friends, the infusion of art projects broadened the children's skills and confidence, engaged the teachers, and impressed parents. Principal John Shelton explains that many

More Than the Sum of the Parts

Tips for creating community partnerships

Gigi Antoni, president of Big Thought, one of the nation's leading nonprofits devoted to arts education through community partnerships, has the following advice for principals in building partnerships:

1. Collaboration with community members could be key to expanding and sustaining your school's arts program. There are "unlikely partners" everywhere that you can develop into strong advocates or contributors, when you figure out what motivates them and how you can get them closer to their goals.
2. Listen to them to determine why this matters and what they need. Don't do all the talking or expect them to understand what you do. What is their spark? Tailor the conversation to understanding what excites them. Land on common language so you understand each other's vocabulary.
3. Create a powerful idea. Design something together that both organizations are excited about. Start small and let it grow to a larger scale after both sides are ready to commit more. Don't fall into the trap of complaining about tight budgets. Keep conversations focused on the vision and accomplishments.
4. What capabilities does each organization have that could help each other? Is there a mutual advantage in working together? It could be they "gain more community trust by working with us." We might "accomplish more because of their influence, resources, or expertise."
5. Most importantly, how do we get along? Are our values aligned? No partnership is sustainable if there isn't trust and joy in working together. What is "the deal breaker" for each side? Say it out loud, so everyone knows the boundaries. Articulate what success looks like. Then go do it together.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Westmore Elementary, Orem, Utah; Valley Park Elementary, Valley Park, Missouri; Traverse Mountain Elementary, Lehi, Utah

of the students attending Westmore come from low-income households. A key insight they learned from this experience is that no matter how difficult their personal financial situation feels, there are other children in this world who live in even more extreme poverty. “This exchange helped our kids to be well-rounded and deepen their understanding of others,” he says.

After the school exhibited the works at its art show and the Orem Public Library, Cope traveled to Mexico to personally deliver the gifts of watercolor paintings, wooden hand puppets, ceramic bowls, earrings and necklaces, and tie-dyed T-shirts. She saw the students in Mexico light up when told to choose an object of their very own to take home. Westmore Elementary hopes to build on the art projects—and maintain the relationship with the Mexican school—in the future.

Involve Local Universities

Many elementary schools are located near universities, which can be strong community resources. Principals and professors should align their objectives to make sure there is a compatible, win-win outcome. For example, Traverse Mountain Elementary School in Lehi, Utah, wanted to lay the foundation for a robust art-integration program and collaborate with nearby experts who could help build 21st century readiness. The school proposed a partnership with Brigham Young University, where professors were




interested in helping their design and technology students understand children’s technology interests and capabilities. Collaborative projects between the college and elementary students began.

Like all start-ups, this one had its challenges. Originally, the plan was to work with the university’s programming and design students to create an app accessible on iTunes. When that felt overly ambitious, the university experts introduced the elementary students to existing publishing software. Using iBooks Author, they created 112 books containing 480 pieces of hand-crafted, painted, or sketched artwork.

The collaboration was a great test case for them to practice problem-solving skills as the budding writers had limited technical and typing skills. In the end, students felt like published

authors and artists—and they were. Principal David Stephenson urges other schools to explore these books, now available as free downloads on iTunes. “It was an incredible team effort that was fueled by our shared passion for the arts,” he says.

School partnerships can grow locally or span across continents. Crossing borders can transport students back in time, expose them to new careers and skills, or open a window into understanding different cultures. Just a bit of inspiration and leadership can create a powerful partnership. Where would you like to take your school? 

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