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.
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.”

**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

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-dying, 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...
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 handcrafted, 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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