

CREATING A MOVEMENT

Two principals share their journey
toward art-integration.

Two people will not have identical experiences while watching the same movie or reading the same book because each individual brings personal background and history that shapes the experience. While there are consistent parallels in all arts-infused schools—vision, coaching, collaboration, and a culture that respects creativity—how a principal arrives at an epiphany on art-integration is always a unique, personal journey.

Principals Nina Unitas and Chad Chism reached the same destination—establishing an arts-rich school—but took very different paths to get there. Unitas brought her personal passion as a former art teacher to her principal position at Wylandville Elementary School near Pittsburgh. Her challenge was to convince her teachers of the power of art. Conversely, prior to joining Thomas Street Elementary School in Tupelo, Mississippi, Chism had never been a big fan of the arts. As a newly assigned principal, he entered this school as a skeptic—concerned about the amount of time “kids spent coloring.” Teachers were challenged to convince him otherwise.

Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “You can’t step into the same river twice”—a powerful illustration of the nature of change. Just as no two principals’ journeys toward art-infused education follow parallel paths, every day within their schools is a step into that river, renewed with a fresh flow of energy. Here’s what these two principals had to say about their journeys.



Pleasant Hill Elementary, Pleasant Hill, Missouri



Chad Chism and teachers in Thomas Street Elementary make Creative Teaching Sculptures in Body Talks workshop.

What changed your view of the power of art to transform teaching and learning?

Chism: I remember the moment I did a 180-degree shift in my beliefs about learning. One of my first days at Thomas Street Elementary, I walked into a classroom and saw something I had never seen before in all my years as a teacher or principal: Kids were leaning forward, working together, excited to share ideas and help each other, engaged in figuring out real solutions to math problems. They couldn't wait to show me what they were creating. The energy was palpable.

I walked into the room next door. I saw that same love of learning sparkling in the kids' eyes. They were building an art project in their classroom—planning together, debating which ideas to use, and were fully engaged. Wow—I had to do some self-reflection. My methods had been wrong, for all those years. Children don't get excited about worksheets, memorization, repetition, and drills. They get excited about creating something.

How did you convince teachers who were slow to embrace art-infused education?

Unitas: When I came to this school three years ago, it felt like a heavy

weight was hanging over everyone. Most conversations were about test scores. A joyous, unifying energy was missing. I knew art-based professional development would awaken teachers' creative spirits.

It wasn't difficult for me to convince teachers to integrate art across the curriculum after they experienced art-based PD. I didn't tell them to infuse art—they came to their own conclusion that art-integration works, based on personal experiences in our workshops. At first, they remarked that they couldn't remember the last time they personally created art. Soon, they were generating endless ideas on how to infuse art. It has to be a personal discovery.

Describe the collaborative partnerships you have with organizations that support your schoolwide art-infused education efforts.

Chism: Thomas Street Elementary already had a strong relationship with the art-integration organization, Mississippi Whole Child Initiative, before I became principal. I quickly came to appreciate what this statewide training organization does: provide professional development and recognition. Based on a set of rigorous criteria,



teaching observations, and sustaining that high level of art-integration for at least three years, our school has achieved "Whole Child Model School" status. It's really quite an honor. It means we're a training site, and other schools within and beyond the state observe our classrooms to learn best practices in art-integration.

Unitas: We're so fortunate. Pittsburgh is one of the most arts-rich communities in the nation. Gateway to the Arts leverages foundation funding to support our professional development and the artist residencies that supplement the incredible work of our art teacher. I urge principals to partner with community arts organizations



Thomas Street Elementary, Tupelo, Mississippi
 LEFT: Original solar dance. ABOVE: Children's sculptures inspired by Keith Haring.



and learn about matching grants and foundation support.

The second organization, Arts Education Collaborative of Pittsburgh, made a deep commitment to leadership development. They bring principals, superintendents, and district leaders together to build our creative capacity. Their Community of Learners for Arts Education program and Arts Education Leadership Academy empower leaders to be champions of arts education.

In what ways have you blended art and kinesthetic learning/movement into the curriculum and staff development?

Chism: Our teachers came up with the idea of studying visual artist Keith Haring, who expresses movement and cultural commentary in his artwork. But that was just the beginning. Our second-graders studied the solar system by painting and creating an original dance. Instead of memorizing planets, the arts brought the solar system to life—in ways students will remember for decades.

Movement is powerful. Kids learn by moving—hands-on and kinesthetic whole-body experiences. Our teachers know this, but their commitment gets rekindled when our professional development lets them be kids again

and joyously create. Too many teachers spend years in schools without picking up a paintbrush, modeling a sculpture, or creating a dance. I urge every principal to engage teachers as creators. They will instantly connect with why hands-on learning matters to students.

Research [by Harvard University's Amy Cuddy] showed that when a person holds a "power pose" or "victory pose" for a few minutes, it actually changes the brain chemistry and impacts confidence, positive sense of self, and optimism about the future. It's a leadership skill we can teach students, helping them become aware of body language and using personal power poses to strengthen confidence. The acts of sketching each other and making sculptures help teachers and kids become better observers and builds their deeper awareness.

Unitas: One of our first creative workshops for teachers involved them looking at art, moving in "body phrases" that described the art, and then using body movement to act out a story about the art. It was fantastic. Teachers then extended this to their classrooms and students were performing original dances around Matisse's artwork. Connecting whole body movement with art brings in another learning modality.

What advice do you have for art teachers who aspire to become principals?

Unitas: Art teachers are creative thinkers and artists. Creating art enables people to be self-reflective and connect with a deep personal passion, two of the most important mindsets for a principal. As artists, we immerse ourselves deeply into creative expression, an important communication skill. We visually convey messages and share carefully crafted work with others—ready to hear constructive criticism. That collaborative critique process is great preparation for becoming principals. As a school leader, I'm more empathic because I spent years as an artist in those collaborative critiques.

Artists are intrinsically motivated. That taught me how to help others motivate themselves. Artists are experts at seeing the world. Every principal must have keen observation skills. Being an artist taught me how to make sense of patterns I was seeing that others often missed.

Art teachers' expertise in the creative process prepares them to be great school leaders. Since the creative process embraces and inspires change, art educators are the change agents we need as next-gen principals. 

As told to **Cheri Sterman**, director of education at Crayola.