



Cultivating Creativity

Schoolwide collaboration and commitment leads to successfully integrating the arts.

By Susan B. Herrera



during art class at that time as well. This sort of parallel teaching, or arts-integration, has been present at PHES for quite some time. The CCAC grant pushed art-infusion and creativity out of the art room and into the regular classroom. We collectively made a commitment to allow students to learn with art as the catalyst, thereby infusing art throughout the school day.

Getting Started

To provide connectedness throughout the school, we began our journey into arts-integrated learning by choosing buildingwide themes: "Dreams Under Construction" and "Greece Is the Word." These themes provided a much-needed thread of commonality for all of our instruction and served as an umbrella for our focus on arts-integration.

We began the school year with the construction theme. Staff wore construction-worker costumes, an excavator was parked on the front lawn, and each student was provided a construction hard hat. This not only generated an air of excitement, but created an atmosphere of anticipation. Throughout the first semester, we encouraged building, designing, painting, drawing, creating, and researching with the idea that our PHES scholars could "construct" knowledge each day.

Teachers worked collaboratively with the art teacher to create opportunities for art to connect the standards to the themes. In one classroom, students researched adaptations in nature and then demonstrated their knowledge by creating

Sometimes a school's mission statement is crafted to reflect a current reality. Ours was written to capture our belief that the students we serve are capable of greatness in areas that are not reflected on high-stakes tests. "We foster confident and creative children by honoring students' individual strengths and abilities." This phrase from our mission statement was the catalyst that moved us toward an arts-integrated approach at Pleasant Hill Elementary School (PHES) in Pleasant Hill, Missouri. We hope to create a school environment in which all students could be celebrated. Additionally, we believe that the arts and core subjects are not mutually exclusive, and that when integrated can provide opportunities for an enriched learning experience. Arts-integration, fueled by NAESP and Crayola's Champion Creatively Alive Children (CCAC) grant, allows us to infuse creativity, music, movement, and research throughout the learning experience while highlighting students' talents in "non-tested" areas.

Our art teacher has always had the desire to align art instruction with the state standards that were being taught in core classrooms. For example, if third-graders were learning about the water cycle in science during the month of March, then students could create a water cycle





a bird out of paper mache and paint, which represented those adaptations. Another class studied Greek architecture and used cardboard and chalk to construct replicas of Greek structures. A third classroom constructed paint pendulums as a culminating activity for their study of motion and Newton's Laws. Visitors to our school noted that student work displays foreshadowed the art-infused learning that was occurring in classrooms and that the building began to feel like an art gallery in which students had become curators of their own learning.

We culminated first semester with an Elementary Extravaganza Night, during which we showcased all the art-infused learning that had occurred with the construction theme. The guests also created art as a family and constructed their own learning at interactive stations found throughout the building. Stations included Google Sketch, snowball catapult, holiday card design, guest speakers from the field of engineering, a tallest structure challenge, and the writing café. The community response was overwhelming; our school was vibrating with excitement as we filled the halls and classrooms to capacity with parents, students, and extended family.

Second semester was equally successful. Art-infused learning continued in all areas of instruction, but was driven by the Ancient Greece theme. Staff donned Grecian garb for our launch in January and students used the Greek alphabet to select "fraternity-like" names for their classroom. Classes participated in various research projects on Greek architecture, mythology, and art while creating vases, sketches of buildings, and Greek columns. These research skills helped students learn to cite textual evidence and build fluency, and pushed students to analyze and respond to complex texts. Our year-end "Greece Is the Word" Extravaganza showcased students' work, ranging from art work to green screen technology.

Outcomes

Unexpected outcomes of our decision to integrate the arts include an increase in parent involvement, cross-curricular collaboration, and a significant increase in the number of students performing at the proficient and advanced level on the state assessment. While it would be inaccurate to say that arts-integration alone was responsible for these unexpected successes, we believe that it was indeed a contributing factor.

Parent participation improved as we invited more families into the school to partner with us through various events. We used newsletters, fliers, blogs, and Facebook to communicate with parents and to create a buzz about what we were doing with arts-integration. Some of the events that were well-attended included family art nights, PIE nights (Partners in Education), and the "extravaganza" events. It was not uncommon to have standing room only for these special nights because the increase in attendance was substantial.

Collaboration between the arts instructors and classroom teachers also increased as we integrated art-infused learning. Our art teacher and librarian collaborated monthly with each teaching team and provided valuable professional development at staff meetings throughout the year. This level of collaboration began as an expectation and grew into a teacher-driven initiative. All teachers began to see cross-curricular collaboration as a way to ensure that art, movement, music, and research were being purposefully integrated into the classroom. All core teachers, special area teachers, and the librarian created positive interdependence because the art and science of teaching were woven together.

Finally, our state assessment scores improved as well. Third-grade scores increased by 29 percent in English-language arts, and fourth-grade scores improved 21 percent, resulting in 72 percent of our students performing in the top levels on the Northwest Evaluation Association's MAP test. Math scores also improved; third-grade scores increased by 10 percent and fourth-grade scores increased by 20 percent, resulting in 57 percent of our students performing in the proficient and advanced levels in math. This was dramatic for our school and solidified our commitment to art-infused learning.

Success Factors

During the year-long project to integrate the arts into the curriculum, three factors led to our suc-



WEB TOOLS

Want to implement the ideas in this article? Access the following resources to deepen your knowledge.

- **NAESP's** Arts in Education resource page features information about Crayola's Champion Creatively Alive Children grant program, as well as *Principal* magazine issues on arts-integration and free professional development training modules. naesp.org/arts-education
- **NAEA.** The website of the National Art Education Association features various resources for arts-integration, including curated lesson plans. arteducators.org



cess: schoolwide themes, teacher collaboration, and a commitment to creativity.

1. Themes. Buildingwide themes guided us all toward a common goal and drove much of our collaboration and professional development. The themes made it easier to build enthusiasm and involve the community. Buildingwide themes were chosen by a team that included the art teacher, librarian, music teacher, and physical education teacher. These educators were tasked with choosing a broad topic that could foster research, creativity, vocabulary development, art, and active engagement.

Through trial and error we learned that the broader the theme the better. It was also important to begin with the end of the unit in mind and work our way backwards. Teachers needed a clear picture of what we wanted to display at the Extravaganza and what essential questions should drive our learning.

Themes can be as simple as “Transportation” or can be more descriptive such as “Around the World in 90 Days.” Once a theme is chosen, it is important to launch the theme with the staff before you officially launch it with the students. The staff launch should be a celebration of sorts that includes props to fit the theme, such as passports or construction hats, and should provide time for teams to collaborate. During this initial launch meeting, teachers identified vocabulary and began to brainstorm possible research projects for the semester.

2. Collaboration. Another vital step in planning was allocating time in the master schedule for our art teacher to collaborate with teaching teams. We devoted staff meeting time each

month to professional development and collaboration between the art teacher and the classroom teachers. Professional development days were also set aside for art-infused learning and planning for buildingwide themes. On occasion, release time could be given to the art teacher so that she could be available for each teaching team during their regularly scheduled plan time. I was also able to flex the schedule one day a week so our art teacher was able to devote time to collaboration and co-teaching with classroom teachers as they integrated art more frequently.

This process has changed the climate of our building. Teachers have willingly improved many of their instructional practices and their approach to planning. This experience has facilitated their journey from good to great and has created momentum for years to come.

3. Commitment. Finally, the most gratifying lesson of all was to learn that when we stopped focusing on the state assessment preparation and committed to fostering confident and creative children, test scores took care of themselves because we were doing what was best for kids.

Our staff and school community continue to embrace art-infused education in the 2015-2016 school year in which we concluded our first semester theme, “Cultivating Creativity Through the Great Outdoors.” For the second semester, we’ve launched the theme “Around the World in 90 Days.” It is an exciting and rewarding time to be a part of the educational experience at Pleasant Hill Elementary School. 

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