



Valley Elementary, Eden, Utah

# Schools as Museums

Collaborative, arts-infused learning is achieved through schoolwide interactive projects.

Imagine project-based learning that's so compelling students ask for more homework and research assignments. Some principals don't have to imagine—they are experiencing it! When students are empowered as museum researchers, exhibit designers, and curators, they engage in deeper learning.

## Move Over, Smithsonian!

Valley Elementary School could give major museums some stiff creative competition when it comes to exhaustive research and dazzling displays. A yearlong exploration culminated one spring day when students, teachers, and visitors gazed upon bejeweled Egyptian queens, got an eyewitness





view of ancient Greeks at war, and even trekked up and down a three-dimensional Great Wall of China—all without leaving rural Eden, Utah.

What might have been a dry unit on ancient civilizations in the social studies curriculum became an interactive, arts-infused exploration of why these ancient cultures still matter today. Valley Elementary School's sixth-grade students transformed themselves into global-minded researchers, curators, and tour guides, as they worked together to convert their classrooms and hallways into living museums for three of the world's most influential cultures: Greece, Egypt, and China.

### Schoolwide Collaboration

The project is a vivid example of collaboration among teachers, students, librarian, principal, and PTO. It required integrating social studies, language arts, math, science, and technology, all wrapped in a spectacular display of fine arts. Guided by floor-to-ceiling murals and maps, visitors to this child-created museum entered the transformed classrooms through giant, civilization-specific portals.

The project exposed students to diverse cultures while helping them appreciate their diverse learning styles. And it developed critical thinking skills in venues ranging from an actual museum to the library to Skype. "The students' motivation," said sixth-grade art teacher Michelle Evans, "was off the charts." Teachers sustained the momentum by spreading learning opportunities throughout the year and rotating students through different activities. Students researched, wrote, and illustrated their own magazines about each culture's food, government, religion, art, and architecture.

### Innovative Learning Techniques

One of the most innovative and effective teaching tools Valley Elementary used was the "Visual Debate." Instead of words, students used art that they created and then projected on giant screens to make the case for each culture's important artifacts. This visual backdrop fueled spirited debates about which civilization had a more significant impact on today's architecture, fashion, and culture. In a mock amphitheater, onlookers voted on the most enduring contributions. Students reported they actually became the characters—they were totally immersed in being spokespersons from their ancient civilizations.

The climax was undoubtedly the day when fellow students, staff, parents, and community members—mouths agape—got to see the students' museum. This "grand opening" brought their yearlong learning to life. Working off of scripts they'd developed, costumed tour guides ushered visitors through a lowly fish market and past a regal throne. "What I liked best was that it became less of a lesson and more of an experience," said one student. Another said, "Not many sixth graders can say they've transformed their classroom into a whole other culture!"

The hands-on immersion of students building their own museum was a sharp contrast to the "look, but don't touch" rules of many museum field trips. "I would encourage principals to jump on these opportunities as often as they can," said principal Dave Hales. "You realize these kids know things about the content that couldn't have been learned in books and assessed by paper and pencil. What they take away from it is far deeper and longer lasting than what you assess on a test."

### Same Concept, Different Settings

Not all museums have to rival the Smithsonian and not all museum education experiences have to have grand openings—or feature ancient artifacts. At Emma G. Whiteknact Elementary School in East Providence, Rhode Island, a smaller-scale display showcased students' learning. The school's major objective was to engage the 300 students in math after it had been placed on Rhode Island's "warning list" for low achievement. But the school also wanted to involve families, many of whom speak English as a second language.

Whiteknact approached these varied goals with equally varied strategies. The school used a Math Around the World theme to help



children learn math concepts through the lens of art and cultural identity. Activities wove in reading, poetry, and music. A highlight of the year involved art-gallery-like displays of math-related artwork that showcased student learning while enticing parents to come and see. One of the largest of these celebrations of academic achievement and creativity was a Math-Art Exhibit in East Providence City Hall. Providing bursts of color to the government building, 300 pieces of artwork illustrated math concepts and showed the students' knowledge of everything from tessellations to tangrams. "Parents and teachers alike marveled at the sophisticated work of a student body who were now able to apply math concepts with such ease and creativity—and joy," said principal Nadine Lima.



**ABOVE:** Valley Elementary, Eden, Utah;  
**RIGHT:** Tomoka Elementary, Ormond Beach, Florida



### Carnival Built by Curious Kids

Another twist on museum education comes from Tomoka Elementary School in Ormond Beach, Florida. The K-5 school's Children's Carnival of Creative Curiosities built students' museum education inquiry skills and showcased their learning in literacy. The multifaceted project got underway when 66 students in the fourth- and fifth-grade gifted classes wrote and published hardcover books containing original artwork. The subject matter, focused on issues that affect children worldwide, such as bullying and hunger, was meant to instill empathy and inspire children to suggest solutions. The students made two copies of each book, one to keep and one for the new student-author section of the school library.

From there, the project turned into a hybrid of a children's museum and an arcade. Students worked in teams to design and illustrate 16 literacy games that were based on their books' themes and targeted especially to kindergartners. The activities ranged from large-scale board games to bean bag tosses. Then,

in April 2013, Tomoka Elementary transformed its all-purpose room into the Children's Carnival of Creative Curiosities. Dressed in mismatched clothes, clown costumes, and even a penguin suit, the students operated the book-themed games and conducted readings. The celebration of art and literature drew more than 250 participants.

The unique format benefited all. The older students had to plan, take ownership of their projects, and work as a team on the carnival—all while figuring out how to use their art and literacy skills to engage their young audience. And the younger students were thrilled to be the focus of attention, as the big kids catered to their learning needs.

The carnival was a lively reminder that "the visual-lingual capacity of elementary school children is enormous," said principal Julie Johnson. "Children lack inhibitions which might prevent them from presenting their ideas about the world through writing, painting, and drawing. Adults can learn much from children's creative expressions. If you want to solve a problem beautifully, ask a child."



### Project-based Learning

The in-depth project approach in teaching makes students real experts in the subject matter. Nothing embeds learning as deeply as teaching it to someone else. No doubt, students in these schools have gained mastery of the content. And neuroscientists explain that emotional triggers make learning "sticky"—embedding experiences into long term memory. When kids get this excited about school and feel this proud of their exhibits, imagine the stories they'll tell their kids decades from now! 

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