A leader’s job, first and foremost, is to get people on board with one unifying vision. When they align their focus on a common goal, all team members can contribute, with clearly defined roles and one united purpose. When that vision is articulated consistently and explicitly, an enthusiastic effort becomes tangible. For many principals, the vision is centered on using the arts to engage students as successful 21st century learners.

Executing such a vision can be challenging, but school leaders who are committed to integrating the arts throughout their schools can fulfill their goals by learning from the successful actions of other principals.

Ignite Imagination
Take, for example, Donna Jackson, principal of Jackson Elementary School in Jonesboro, Georgia. On her office door is a Pablo Picasso quote that she hand-painted: “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.” This statement concisely summarizes Jackson’s plan: to help the grown-ups in her school think and feel like artists.

“To embed arts-infused education schoolwide, I knew we needed a creative leadership team (CLT) that would help shape our strategic plan and coach their teacher peers,” Jackson explains. “This team is key as we build schoolwide creative capabilities and commitment to arts-enriched learning.”

The school is steeped in its mission to make the arts integral to every child’s daily learning. As visitors enter the school, they can readily see the results of Jackson’s vision. A sign towering above the entrance announces: “Ignite your imagination through arts integration.” Featured in a nearby display case, alongside children’s art, are handcrafted Model Magic creatures made by teachers during a recent...
her team “focuses on articulating our arts-infused vision, mapping out our arts-integration strategic plan, tackling new challenges that emerge, running or arranging the creative professional development workshops, and coaching colleagues.” She recommends three essential steps to build teacher buy-in:

1. **Provide professional development to build awareness;**
2. **Encourage arts specialists to co-teach a lesson with classroom teachers to build arts-integration confidence; and**
3. **Schedule time for specialists to coach teachers, helping them reflect on the arts-integration lesson and plan next steps.**

“Once they see ‘why to’ and ‘how to,’ they embrace arts-infused teaching,” says Jackson. “As a principal, first I inspire, then I require. Arts-infused teaching is not optional in our school.”

Although it took time to gain buy-in from the school’s teachers, two years into the school transformation process all but two were onboard. In conversations with those two teachers, Jackson realized that she “just wasn’t able to ignite their passion for arts-infused teaching.” As a result, she helped them find different schools where their teaching styles would fit, “instead of letting them drag my team down with their resistance.”

**Established Expectations**

Sandra Kent, principal of Jane Phillips Elementary School in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, shares a similar story about her vision of an arts-infused school. As part of the Oklahoma A+ Schools network, teachers receive significant arts-integration professional development. But training becomes most relevant
when teachers know they are expected to apply it and make arts integration evident in their classrooms.

“[Teachers] are learning that arts-infused literacy lessons align with Common Core standards, so this type of integrated teaching is going to be the new norm everywhere. They feel a sense of pride that our arts-infused program puts us ahead of the game,” Kent says. “The entire faculty has really taken our arts-infused vision to heart.”

The school’s CLT includes Kent, the art teacher, various classroom teachers, the literacy specialist, and the school librarian. “Setting our schoolwide vision of being an arts-integrated school made us work more closely together, created a shared language, fostered stronger communication, and focused us on what we need to accomplish,” Kent explains. “We have always believed in the power of arts-infused education, but forming a team dedicated to our school vision gave us the focus to nurture it and document the impact on student success.”

Tips for an Art-Infused Journey
At Cherry Valley School in Polson, Montana, schoolwide arts integration is based on a simple belief: Teachers can successfully implement art-infused lessons if they know what is expected of them and they coach one another to build their creative capacities. When principal Elaine Meeks first became a school leader, she drew from the talents of like-minded classroom teachers and their shared belief in the power of art to transform everyone. She offers six simple tips to other principals who embark on the arts-infused journey.

1. **Deepen Understanding.** Articulate the goal—to use art to increase creative thinking in both faculty and students, not just to decorate the walls.

2. **Set Clear Expectations.** Make sure classroom teachers know that arts-infused teaching is an expectation, not an option. Start with something simple, such as science-art murals or story character portraits. Every teacher needs to try this, customize it for what they are teaching, and display it.

3. **Share Leadership.** Identify a teacher leader or a small cluster of teachers who are ready to serve in leadership roles. Empower them to make decisions. Be their sounding board. Give them your ear and your time to think together.

4. **Build Visual Literacy Skills.** Many teachers don’t bring artistic knowledge or vocabulary with them when they start to teach. Provide them with resources and assign art-based curriculum projects that every teacher must share with colleagues.

5. **Be Relevant and Reflect.** Urge teachers to select art experiences that are relevant to your community. “Teaching on a Native American reservation with a population that has historically felt disenfranchised from public schools, we have found that bringing the tribes’ traditional art into all subjects has made school more compelling for our students,” Meeks explains.

6. **Take Risks.** Acknowledge teachers’ discomfort, but don’t let them dwell on “I can’t.” Making mistakes is a natural consequence of teachers stretching beyond their comfort zones.

Cherry Valley School has been enriched by following these six steps, which empowered the collaborative teams to teach each other. “I love watching the teachers’ talents and artistic interests emerge as they start to build on each other’s ideas and rely on their Collaborative Art Teams for creative problem-solving,” Meeks shares. 

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