

Creative Leadership Starts With

Vision

Make a schoolwide commitment to the arts.

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



Principal Donna Jackson and students, Jackson Elementary, Jonesboro, Georgia

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

creative leadership professional development session. Photographs of that workshop appear next to imaginary species characters, capturing the teachers' excitement and playful learning as they linked creative art projects to the new Common Core State Standards.

A Unified Effort

Jackson's vision began three years ago, when she worked with her school improvement team to form a creative leadership focus. "Based on the outstanding success our students have with arts-infused learning, we decided to turn this into an arts-based school for all 1,040 students," she explains.

What is Jackson Elementary School's magic? Second-grade teacher Jessica Mercado says, "It is our united vision focused on arts integration that has built our camaraderie, capabilities, and commitment. Before our creative leadership team formed and focused on embedding arts integration schoolwide, I lacked the know-how. I wish I could go back five years in my career and have known how much better my teaching would have been if I had this lens of thinking and seeing like an artist."

Molly Knowles, the fine art lead teacher and member of Jackson Elementary's CLT, did have the arts know-how—but until the school adopted this arts-infused mission she wasn't sharing her expertise routinely with her colleagues. "The real magic is our principal's commitment to making sure the arts specialists share arts-integration ideas with the entire faculty. We not only teach children, but we are responsible for making sure our classroom teacher colleagues build creative skills and confidence to use the arts throughout their daily teaching," she explains. "Our principal made the commitment and gives us time to collaborate with each classroom teacher."

Different schools develop unique compositions and work plans for their CLTs based on their specific situations and needs. Jackson says



Professional development workshop led by the Creative Leadership Team, Jackson Elementary, Jonesboro, Georgia



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



Principal Sandra Kent and students, Jane Phillips Elementary, Bartlesville, Oklahoma

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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