Leading your school’s transformation to become an art-infused hub of creative energy is not for the faint of heart. It takes a visionary spokesperson who knows why creativity is a critical 21st century skill—a leader who knows when to simply stop, look, and listen, and to find gems of creativity that should be recognized and showcased. It takes a keen observer who knows how to spot evidence of extraordinary creative teaching in ordinary places, such as classroom walls and hallway displays.

Listen to the Walls

A creative, collaborative culture is not an invisible enigma. It is tangible and can be seen on display throughout a school. In an era of increased accountability, evidence of promising practices isn’t always buried in spreadsheets and data. School walls reveal what is valued and what people are being held accountable for throughout the building.

“Before providing professional development in a school, the first insights I gather about the current culture and pedagogy come from walking the halls and seeing what teachers choose to display,” says Laura McBain, director of Leading Schools Programs, HTH in San Diego. “That quick snapshot tells what is valued in this school... But principals have the enviable advantage of seeing a fuller story unfold throughout the year as they walk their halls with an observant lens.”

While conducting walkthroughs in your school, in addition to observing how teachers and students interact, also pay attention to what is on display. Ask yourself these questions:

- Is original student work hung prominently and does each piece reflect individual thinking? Or are walls filled with cookie cutter images baked from a follow-the-teacher’s-recipe pedagogy?
- Are descriptive essays or reflective responses displayed that show how the art-making process deepened student understanding? Or is art hung simply to beautify the space without documenting the thinking process?
- Does the display show what students are curious about and how their inquiry dove deeply into the subject? Or does it show a formulaic, teacher-driven approach to content?
Maryland. “We want every visitor to our building walkthrough to see if our creative leadership team does a faculty? And among classrooms? Is creative collaboration inspires a new way of teaching. McBain finds it works best project culminated in designing and 3D printing innovative bat houses. Teachers planned team explorations that paralleled the student learning process, and discussed how curiosity shapes the direction of projects and scaffolds learning.

2. Create: Complete art-infused, cross-curricular projects. Empower teacher teams to personally explore projects fueled by their collective curiosities. This deepens their understanding of how art-integration impacts learning.

“We provided teachers time to be coached by the art teacher to build their own creative capacity. This process renewed their energy and validated the project-approach to learning,” Ceschini says.

3. Curate: Communicate priorities. As teachers plan their exhibits, they realize the power curators have in communicating processes and priorities. Curation questions teachers ask each other include, “Where is the evidence of deeper learning?” and “Does the display document the learning process?” In staff meetings, teachers analyze the curation process and extract epiphanies.

4. Reflect: Teacher teams become reflective pools. After teachers complete their own projects, they can better understand the potential to deepen student learning. A group of peers who serve as a reflective pool can act as a mirror that can be held up to face tough questions. The ultimate question is, “Was that lesson worth teaching?” When that question is honestly addressed, it changes how teachers engage in the decision-making process to determine what is applicable and has value.

“Students sifting through a plethora of online content, they decipher what has significant meaning and is applicable to their project. As they reflect on their creative work and engage peers in a critiquing process, their ability to evaluate against criteria strengthens. When students are involved as members of the curator team, determining what is displayed, they develop decision-making skills. The school’s learner-centric values are whispered or shouted, by the walls,” Rosenstock says.

Helping Teachers Listen to the Walls
Once teachers become attuned to the ways walls talk, they’re ready to fine-tune their observation and listening skills. Seven Oaks Elementary has created a walkthrough observation tool to help teachers gather pedagogical evidence. “They can see how peers exemplify high-quality project-based learning that is art-infused and transdisciplinary. This tool helps them evaluate what they are seeing and share insights with each other,” Ceschini explains. Excerpts from the tool outline three areas in which teachers can gather evidence during peer observations.

Real-world problems that matter:

What is the real world problem or driving question of this project?

Who is solving the problem—the teacher or students?

What role is the teacher playing to help students establish potential solutions?

Engage students in in-depth inquiry:

Are students engaged in a rigorous, extended process of asking deeper questions, using resources, and developing answers?

Are students given opportunities to use multiple resources to develop and present answers to deeply probed questions?

Reflection and revision:

How are students reflecting on their ideas?

What opportunities do students have to evaluate and revise their work by challenging themselves to see if they have discovered the best answer?

Make the Commitment

An observant eye will find that other school characteristics provide additional clues about school culture and pedagogy. Are there cozy places for children to congregate? Are displays hung at children’s eye level? Do classrooms look like meeting rooms or lecture halls?

At Seven Oaks Elementary, all the desks in the building are set in clusters because the design aligns with our philosophical commitment to collaborative learning,” Ceschini explains. A school with a collaborative culture and creative teaching is not hard to find if you know what to look for. The key is to not only look at a teacher’s lesson plan or interactions with students. Rather, evidence will evolve from the students’ work hanging on the walls, hallways, and windows throughout the school.