

# Art in Action: Social Justice Issues

## Students Address Relevant Issues

Written by Cheri Sterman

**A**rt is action-based. Whether sketching, sculpting, singing, dancing, or dramatizing, artists are active. Art integration does not permit students to be passive receivers. Instead, they must create, present, and respond to others' work. While art can soothe, it can also instigate and incite.

Throughout history, art has captured snapshots that reflect societal values and challenges. Artists use the power of art to convey messages and persuade or provoke others. Exploring public art invites discussions about what is revealed and concealed. Studying art through a social justice lens connects to literacy and social studies curricula while demonstrating that art is intentional, representational, symbolic, and symbiotic. Art empowers students to create and hone personally relevant statements about issues that matter most to them. Teaching students to read others' artwork deepens their ability to interpret social justice issues. Art is a universal language.

### Addressing Deep Issues and Critical Questions

Exploring experiences is at the core of The Experiential School of Greensboro, grades K–6, in North Carolina. “We know the power of arts integration and social justice to stir students' minds and actively engage them in creating, presenting, performing, and addressing the big issues in today's education,” co-director Melissa Bocci explains. Social justice is woven throughout



this school's entire curriculum as students explore deep issues such as Immigration Now and in the Past, Neighborhood Displacement, Human Impact on the Rainforest, and the current schoolwide project Change Makers—a study of people who have changed the lives of others. Bocci continues, “Our community is our classroom. Many civil rights battles were fought here, including the 1960s Woolworth lunch counter sit-in and the 1970s Greensboro Massacre. These units

tackle tough stuff. Part of what we teach students is how to channel their emotions into artistic expressions and how to have civil dialogue when discussing complex topics.”

Co-director Heather Moore adds to the explanation of their approach: “Inquiry. We expect students to articulate critical questions and figure out how to find answers.” This emphasis on inquiry guides their arts-integration projects that are steeped in history and social justice context.



## Exploring Social Justice Themes With Community Artists

Schools can draw upon the expertise of community artists whose work might elucidate social-justice issues. Students gain a broader context and make new connections when they see how professionals such as dancers and sculptors express their thoughts about these complicated issues.

Many community and state arts councils provide a roster of artists-in-residence who bring their talents into schools to supplement the arts educators on the faculty. Bocci and Moore outline suggested guidance for working with artists-in-residence:

**Connect.** Make sure the residency plan includes time for the community artists to establish relationships with students before they teach them.

**Co-plan.** While community artists have great ideas about content and the art form, some are less familiar with curriculum standards. Ensure that the experiences tie to learning objectives and are not “just interesting to do.”

**Co-teach.** Community artists should collaborate with, rather than replace, other teachers. It is essential for faculty to stay in the room with the artists-in-residence so they can learn from each other.

**Continuously improve.** Accept the learning curve that community

artists, school faculty, and students face in this process. Classroom management and understanding school norms are two key areas where community artists benefit from guidance, practice, and feedback. Reflect on each residency experience to identify areas for improvement and add those insights into the next plan.

## Students Guiding Teachers

Social justice has been an overarching theme for Oakland Mills Middle School in Maryland. The arts are essential to the school’s deep commitment to “Building, Maintaining, and Repairing Community”—a mantra that guides daily practice. Principal Megan Chrobak humbly explains her role in the school as “championing the voices of students. They are the experts, and I learn from them every day.”

Chrobak’s thought leadership as a champion of student voice is clear as she describes the Student Council of the Arts. This group of students is charged with guiding the school’s arts integration and social justice programs. They are currently editing the school vision to ensure that equitable access to the arts, social justice, and student voice are woven into the school’s guiding statement.

Another one of the council’s roles is to provide feedback to teachers, helping them improve lessons

## Where to Start for Social-Action Art

- 1. Talk about art.** What is art? How can we infer the artist’s intent? How does public art affect a community?
- 2. Talk about social justice.** What is justice? Why does injustice matter? What are examples of people’s rights being ignored or disrespected?
- 3. Ask students to describe fair, equitable, and accessible.** How can the arts help students understand universal human needs and emotions?
- 4. Make thinking visible.** Share examples of how posters, murals, theater, music, and dance express ideas that transcend what is possible to express with words alone.
- 5. Inspire students, then leave the big decisions up to them.** For example, ask students how they might use art to express the school’s Zero Indifference policy and show that passive bystandering is not appropriate. Or use art to explore history lessons where “just because it happened doesn’t make it right.”



Cierra S., Whitehouse, Texas



a problem. “We moved away from traditional discipline to restorative discipline. We start with asking the student whose behavior was disruptive, ‘How are you feeling and why?’” Chrobak says. “When a student harms the community, discipline is used as a positive teaching moment. Our creative solution is to have a *restorative reset* that includes helping others and doing service to the school.” Often, students who have not been assigned a restorative discipline session choose to attend. “It helps to think about our feelings and how what we do impacts others,” one of the students admits.

Chrobak continues, “Extremely unkind actions need to be addressed, but since the root cause is usually trauma in their personal lives, adding more trauma and disruption and excluding them from the school community won’t help. So, we offer less punitive options than suspension or detention. The student can have a parent, guardian, family member, or designee (often one of us) join him or her for a school day, when other schools might have suspended that student.” The commitment to social action reaches deep within their personal interactions, while at the same time touching on universal issues.

continually. Joshua Konick, the faculty member who facilitates the Student Council for the Arts, comments, “Teachers are quick to assess student work, but we need to hear students’ assessments of our assignments. As teachers, we do our best work when we step back and let the students lead.” Oakland Mills is committed to bringing this authenticity to the school’s goal of student-centric pedagogy.

### Listening to Learn

“Listening” is the way principal Chrobak describes her job. In fact, when asked for an interview, she deferred to the seven-member Student Council of the Arts. “I’d like to listen to how the students respond to the interviewers. Then, if there are any other questions, I’ll see if I can round out the story.”

Students shared advocacy statements and vignettes of why art matters to learners. They plan to shift public perception of art and increase appreciation of how art brings communities together. They are drafting “We believe” messages about art to inform others of the role the arts play in individual and societal well-being. Seventh-grader Paris explains, “Students are very opinionated, but as 21st century citizens, we need to do more than speak our minds. Art is a forum for us to act upon what we believe.” Eighth-grader Kimberly described the school’s *Female Empowerment Group* as “a group of strong women studying other

strong women. We better each other, uplift everyone, and figure out how we matter.”

Listening to and learning from each other is the reason Oakland Mills decided to be an arts-integration school. “The most important lesson from the arts is that when we listen to others, we learn. Every piece of visual art and every dance speaks volumes. For many of our students, the arts are the way their voices rise,” Chrobak asserts.

Listening to learn is demonstrated at Oakland Mills when staffers address behavioral issues by getting to the social and emotional roots of



Elise N., grade 7, Carmichael, California. Title: Unity

## Shifting Perspectives to the Big Picture

When students create art or thoughtfully explore art that was made by others, emotions are stirred. Art often addresses the prejudice, pain, loss, fear, and humiliation that they and others have felt. Be prepared to have conversations of consequence: “Now what?” “What can we do about this issue?”

Dara Nix-Stevenson, a teacher in The Experiential School of Greensboro, passionately shares examples of what her fifth- and sixth-grade students are doing. “Civic engagement starts by showing them big-picture social issues that awaken student voice. Our students are advocating for a proclamation that April 10 become *Dolores Huerta Day* to commemorate the co-founder of the United Farm Workers. They question why Cesar Chavez is more well-known than his female counterpart, although they worked on the same social justice issues.”

Nix-Stevenson continues, “When students learn about social justice leaders, they realize that they, too, have the capacity to make a difference. My class studied water flow at



Che D., grade 7, Newark, New Jersey.  
Title: Marching to the Freedom Land

**Whenever artists create, they infuse a part of themselves into the work.**

**Students begin to see themselves and other artists as knowledge producers with valuable gifts to share.**

a local state park and asked social justice questions such as, ‘What happened to the water in Flint, Michigan?’ and ‘Why is South Africa running out of water?’ Students develop new identities as advocates and global citizens.”

Whenever artists create, they infuse part of themselves into the work. Students begin to see themselves and other artists as knowledge producers with valuable gifts to share. This arts-integration approach changes perceptions of where learning occurs. Student voice in both of these schools has resulted in a series of high-interest, rigorous projects. Students work alongside teachers as co-developers of curriculum, and together they serve as passionate social-justice advocates.

Thought leader Daniel Pink states in *A Whole New Mind*, “The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind—creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning-makers. These people—artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big-picture thinkers—will now reap society’s richest rewards and share its greatest joys.” Preparing students to be those big-picture thinkers who can channel their empathy and creativity into bettering the world is the most rewarding part of educators’ work.

*Cheri Sberman is the Crayola director of education and vice chair of the Partnership for 21st Century Learning.*