

Building Creative Capacity Transforms Schools

Practical tips for getting started

Public discourse on the topic of school reform quickly fills with assumptions of broken institutions awaiting external intervention to be fixed, rather than the reality that good schools continuously strive to serve students better. Strength-based school transformations occur when excellence is recognized, celebrated, and built upon. Creative teaching and learning is a powerful strategy for taking schools from good to great, from great to exemplary, and every other journey along the continuum of excellence.

In *School Reform with a Brain: The Neuropsychological Foundations for*

Arts Integration, William Stixrud and Bruce Marlowe wrote, “Reformers who view the arts as unnecessary, or peripheral at best, ignore the empirical evidence regarding how vital creativity and artistic expression are to the developing human brain—and how important they are for learning and development.”

An increasing number of principals are convinced by the compelling evidence that arts integration improves learning. School leaders who want to embrace this instructional strategy often ask, “How should we get started?” Having conversations with faculty, parents, and students within your learning

community is often the best place to start. Conducting this sort of needs assessment helps gauge interest and identifies the specific strengths of these stakeholders.

Kaiser Elementary, in Oakland, California, started with a listening tour. School staff found a strong desire to make sure “art is woven into the fabric of the identity of our school,” explained principal Dennis Guikema. As a 20-year veteran of the Oakland Unified School District, but new to this school, Guikema identified arts integration as a priority and met with stakeholders to hear their ideas for how art would elevate their achievements. They also made a conscious effort to engage fathers. The president of the Kaiser Dad’s Club informed Guikema that its members voted to partially match the Crayola Champion Creatively Alive Children grant to support arts integration.

Insights from other schools help identify pathways for this transformational journey. Professional development is key to schoolwide transformation, according to Melrose Elementary School principal Tammy Rasmussen. According to Rasmussen, this Title I school in Roseburg, Oregon, is “exploding with creative learning, for both adults and children.”

Everyone at Melrose Elementary—whether a teacher, parent, or student—has access to art-infused, active learning that deepens understanding. After teachers experience



Monett Intermediate School, Monett, Missouri



Henry Kaiser Elementary, Oakland, California

hands-on workshops, they plan weekly focal time for art-infused learning in their classrooms. The creative leadership team credits its successful transformation to the principal's commitment to professional learning and making sure the ideas are applied to classroom lessons. Parent Stephanie Poellot said, "Tammy's enthusiasm and encouragement for arts integration radiates energy throughout the building. Teachers are learning about this approach and taking ideas directly into their classrooms."

Ultimately, an educator's goal is to help students learn how to navigate life. Art-infused, project-based learning provides that preparation and practice. Creative experiences give learners experiences that parallel many of life's

challenges. The iterative creative process requires problem finding, being open to new ideas, exploring, creating, presenting, responding, evaluating, and revising. Just when students think their work is done, they hear feedback and see new inspiration that influences how they want to revise their work to make it better. When decision-making is put into the hands of students, they exceed expectations.

Sheridan Arts Spanish Dual Immersion School in Minneapolis became an arts-integration school to empower students to express their thinking in unique and powerful ways. According to principal Yajaira Guzman, "Our students each have a unique situation, [and] art allows them a pathway to shine with a different light." Sheridan's faculty

suggest these practical tips to help other schools begin integrating the arts into their curriculum:

Build teachers' creative confidence and artistic knowledge. Last year, 20 percent of Sheridan teachers had been trained in arts integration; now, 100 percent of teachers have received arts-integration training. They have become resources to each other, sharing lessons and insights. "When teachers have questions about the lessons or techniques, they can reach out directly to teachers within our school," said assistant principal Sonrisa Shaw.

Compile a directory of expertise. Every faculty member has talents and expertise that can be shared with others. Develop a simple way for teachers to indicate their interests/

expertise and, magically, hidden talents surface. “It is amazing to see who plays guitar or has special book-making techniques they can share with others,” Shaw added.

Address scheduling challenges.

Ideally, classroom teachers have collaborative planning and reflection time with arts specialists. Administrators have a tough juggling act getting schedules aligned so specialists can co-teach arts-integration lessons with classroom teachers. While that is an aspiration, at least be sure to carve out time for them to align on topics so they are aware of how their approaches build as students transition between them.

Be open to what works and needs improvement. Sheridan faculty have been honest about what parts of their plans are working and what hasn’t worked. Their culture enables reflective practice and aspires to continuous improvement. “What has not been done before allows our staff to see the possibilities of what can be done and what we will be able to do,” Guzman explained.

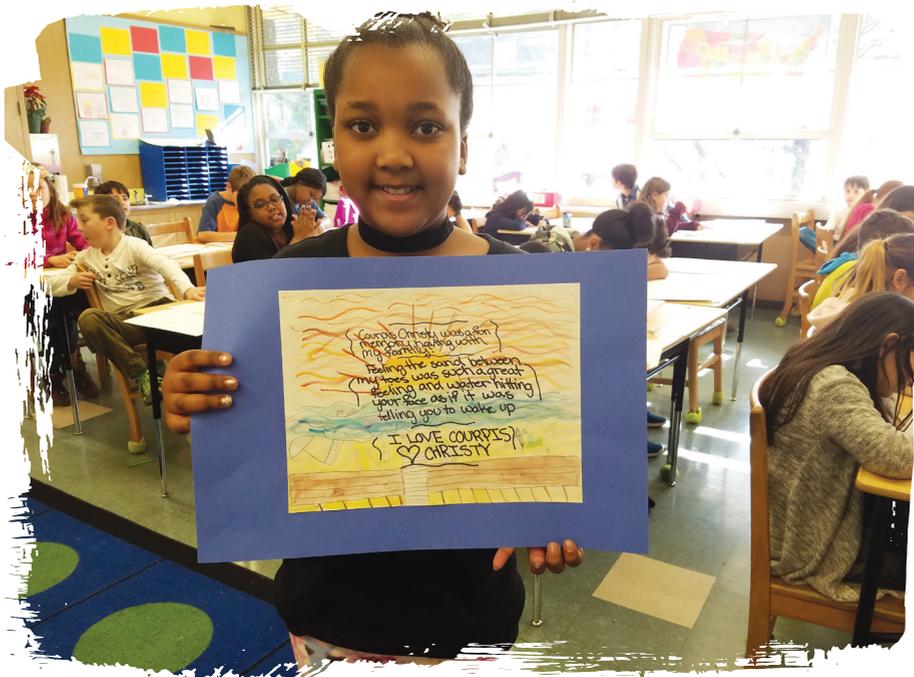
Both Guzman and Rasmussen agree that establishing a creative leadership team, evaluating the school’s strengths, and developing a mission are key in starting arts integration as a schoolwide strategy. Additionally, they urge other principals to leverage teacher leaders from within their schools rather than assuming that bringing in outside expertise is the place to start.

School reform has no magic bullets. No single strategy is an inoculation with guaranteed results. Yet the child-centered, hands-on, inquiry-based approach that arts integration provides is a method that has transformed many schools and holds promise for others eager to embark on this journey of continuous improvement. **■**

Kelly Schofield is principal of Hanawalt Elementary School in Des Moines, Iowa.



Melrose Elementary School, Roseburg, Oregon



Henry Kaiser Elementary, Oakland, California



Sheridan Arts Spanish Dual Immersion, Minneapolis, Minnesota