ASBJ SPECIAL REPORT: A RICH PICTURE

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**Arts at the Core**

**How six school districts integrate arts education into the curriculum**

**RUTH E. STERNBERG**

The performing and visual arts challenge students to use reasoning skills—both concrete and abstract—to draw conclusions and formulate ideas. They encourage creativity and imagination, from concept to process to completion. And in districts both large and small across the United States, they enhance learning for students and adults alike, as these six programs demonstrate.

**BEAUFORT COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT**

**WWW.BEAUFORT.K12.SC.US**

Students at South Carolina’s Beaufort Middle School are learning about cell structure from an artist who draws for scientific journals. The artist, Melba Cooper, is also their classroom teacher.

“She takes the lab notebooks and coaches [students] to employ artistic principles to make their drawings more accurate,” says Kristy Smith, arts coordinator for the Beaufort County School District. “A cell or a riverbed or the texture of a flower—the kids love it. Some kids get the science concepts, but they are not excited about doing a lab. Yet they love drawing the lab.”

Another class prepares for a complicated project by taking a drumming break, guided by Dianne Hemmings, a teacher who learned the art form in Nigeria. “It’s not written; it’s observation and responding,” Smith says of Hemmings’ project. “It’s important to note eye contact and body language, so you know when to come in and pull out. It teaches students how to follow directions.”

Approaching subjects from various viewpoints is the mission of the district, which serves the fastest growing county in

South Carolina. This affluent coastal community spends $5 million annually to support more than 100 specialists in art, music, dance, drama, band, and voice and in such high school specialties as ceramics, photography, painting, and welding.

Some activities are supported through partnerships with the South Carolina Arts Commission, state and National Endowments for the Humanities, and the federal Title V program, but the rest are paid for with local tax dollars. Visiting artists from the local community also donate their time, bringing with them expertise and real-world perspectives.

By integrating the arts throughout the curriculum, teachers have found new ways to assess student gains and losses beyond the state’s traditional testing system. Visiting artist/educators train teachers to use the arts as a measure of success in all core subjects. Each teacher has a “statistical studio”— also known as a data wall—that displays student progress along with visual art, writing, photographs, or videos.

“Teachers might give a pre- and post-test, and since they used the arts to teach the unit, the evidence might be the arts interaction activities on display,” says Smith. “It could be about Shakespeare. Do they know the story lines and what Elizabethan language is? What do they know before I go too far?”

Beaufort County’s success, Smith says, proves that the arts can be a valuable tool for all school districts.

“You’re preparing them for the world,” she says. “The core subjects are a given. We shouldn’t even be having that conversation anymore. We should be talking about the next couple of centuries and how our students are going to be creative problem solvers. It’s no longer about one set of skills.”

**CLEVELAND MUNICIPAL SCHOOL DISTRICT**

**WWW.CMSDNET.NET**

Gloria Doering might have been embarrassed. Her fourth-graders entered the galleries at the Cleveland Museum of Art and headed straight for a Vincent Van Gogh painting of cypress trees. While the docent stood there openmouthed, the youngsters began talking, telling him the meaning of the piece and details of the painter’s troubled life.

“I could tell he was upset,” Doering says of the guide, who usually taught rather than listened. “But I realized these kids had learned so much.”

At Cleveland’s Newton D. Baker School of the Arts, the district’s only K-8 school with such a focus, children are pushed to explore history, language arts, culture—even math and science—through visual art, music, and writing. They can take a “superchoir” course and join the art club. Visiting professionals from the museum and the Cleveland Opera teach students to paint and compose their own arias.

Grants from local corporations and from the Annenberg Foundation have paid for supplies, stipends, and culminating performances, including a year-end festival showing off student work.

Teachers learn an approach known as discipline-based arts education, which wraps core subjects in artistic endeavors.

Curriculum is built on the relationship of artwork, objects, and performances to history, social values, and beliefs and to the

state’s academic standards in reading, science, and math.

Doering’s students have studied heliotropism using real sunflowers and those in Van Gogh’s paintings. They have traveled the Underground Railroad through quilt designs from the Civil War era, which were often used as a secret means of communication, and looked at American history through the eyes of writer Laura Ingalls Wilder and painter Grandma Moses.

Each year, projects center on a theme. This year it’s the United States and Ohio. “One of our big things right now is the Ohio flag,” says Principal Julie Shepherd. Students have rendered it colorfully on several lockers dedicated as a corridor gallery.

Baker students are among the top scoring in Cleveland on statewide tests. Doering believes it’s because the arts-integrated approach teaches them how to take a question apart. “It expands the vocabulary,” she says. “It allows them to think in different ways.”

Teachers often are moved. At a performance of “Madame Butterfly,” Doering’s students were on the edge of their seats. “Just before the end, where Madame Butterfly kills herself, they said, ‘She’s not going to do it, is she?’” recalls Doering. “Half of them had their heads buried in their hands. The girls were sobbing. I was crying. They got it.”

**CORVALLIS SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 1**

**WWW.CORVALLIS.K12.MT.US**

Luke McLean is only in high school, but he’s helping produce a movie—a half-hour film called *Soul Sight*, about a telepathic girl. McLean, 18, who attends tiny Corvallis High School in rural Montana, says the project is teaching him to develop, sell, and

produce a concept.

“It sure has helped my practical application, such as responsibility and management and keeping track of things,” he says.

McLean hopes to use what he has learned to get a job in the film industry after graduation. That’s part of ex-Hollywood film producer Peter Rosten’s vision. Retiring to Montana in 2001, he saw a need to expose young people to expanded opportunities, and he chose to do his work in the Corvallis School District No. 1.

“Most students didn’t have a lot of arts education opportunities,” says Rosten, who produced such films as 1989’s *True Believer,* which starred James Woods. “And employment in our state is not great. We don’t have our indigenous industries anymore, like mining, ranching, and lumber.”

When Rosten approached the school administration about creating the Media Arts in Public Schools program, Superintendent Daniel Sybrant was skeptical.

“We didn’t know who he was. He wasn’t a teacher. We had no funds,” Sybrant says. “It was totally outside the box.”

But Sybrant allowed Rosten to teach an adult-education class and include teachers, who later got their kids involved. Their students produced a short feature called *French Love*. Rosten then asked for and received support from friends, local business owners, and the Montana Arts Council. The Florence Prever Rosten Foundation, named in honor of Rosten’s mother, raised $11,000 at a local concert benefit to support the program, known as MAPS.

Rosten, now a fully certified teacher, has 50 students in grades 8-12 enrolled in Media Arts I and II. The students are making movies and videos, some of which are shown at the local multiplex, which is owned by school board member Joe McLean, Luke’s father.

The young filmmakers even have paying clients. “We just produced two public-service TV announcements for our PBS affiliate on drunk driving,” Rosten says.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer has praised MAPS for its potential to attract big-name filmmakers to Montana. A state proposal would expand MAPS statewide in 2007, funding it through a state grant matching what Rosten’s foundation raises.

“It’s a unique opportunity for these kids,” Rosten says. “When we work, we shoot Saturdays, holidays, and weekends, and each crew member gets $10 a day. The goal is to equip them with skills that are transferable.”

**NORTHGATE SCHOOL DISTRICT**

**WWW.NORTHGATE.K12.PA.US**

Every year, on the second Saturday in March, Pennsylvania’s Northgate High School teems with art. Students of all ages perform songs together. In the gym, school clubs and organizations in this suburban Pittsburgh community square off at human bowling, pierogi relays, and plunger races.

The annual Arts Odyssey attracts a significant portion of Bellevue and Avalon residents. Many are senior citizens with grown children. “It brings the generations together,” says Kathleen Gallagher, assistant to the superintendent. “And it really brings the curriculum together. It makes it alive. It takes the building blocks and cements it all together.”

Six years ago, Northgate’s arts program wasn’t faring well. A music teacher retired and the board did not hire a replacement. “They said, ‘Well, we can cut that. We don’t need that many teachers in that area,’” says school board member Shirl Reinhart.

Fearing such a decision would become a trend, Reinhart called parents and teachers together. They worked out a plan for a community event designed by the students. Today, it’s a yearlong endeavor built around a theme studied in all core classes, with assistance from the district’s three visual arts and three music teachers.

This year’s program was “Pittsburgh: Past, Present, and Future.” First-graders studied the Pittsburgh trolley cars and wrote stories about trips they could take on the trolleys. Art teacher Ted Zettle led them to create self-portraits.

“We’d talked about the proportions of the human face and how to use pastels,” Zettle says. “Then they cut [the portraits] out, and we made a 16-foot cardboard trolley and put their faces in the windows. And we mounted the stories underneath the students’ pictures.”

Second-graders made cookies, then sold them to benefit charity. Third-graders learned about Pittsburgh baseball, creating their own baseball cards with statistics and drawings of themselves. Fifth-graders studied local landmarks and wrote similes and metaphors in language arts class to describe them.

The cost, says Superintendent Reggie Bonfield, is covered by the budget, supplemented by fundraisers and donations rather than outside grants. A local bus contractor volunteers to bring senior citizens to the event. Local businesses contribute supplies. An auction raises money, and parents sell baked goods.

Bonfield says raising money locally makes sense. “We don’t have a large staff here; you’re talking to the grant writer,” he says. “You don’t need to write arts grants. You write grants for other things, such as full-day kindergarten, and that releases money for other things.”

**SYOSSET CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT**

**WWW.SYOSSET.K12.NY.US**

Students in New York’s Syosset School District take their history lessons several steps beyond the books. April marked the premiere of *Kaspryzk’s Gift: The Power of One*, a student-written, student-performed production about a Polish teenager who protected Jews during World War II. The piece is based on a 2005 *New York Times* story about Miecyslaw Kaspryzk.

“We try to teach kids how one person can make a difference,” says Michael Salzmann, the district arts coordinator.

In Syosset, a Long Island suburb, the arts are a major part of the curriculum. The district’s 10 schools provide band, orchestra, and choral music. Syosset High School has eight full-time music teachers and nine full-time art teachers. Each of the district’s 6,800 students takes music and art through the ninth grade. In middle school, students take music and visual arts courses for three years. High school students get instruction in music theory, recording technology, and theatrical improvisation.

Every year, 15 to 20 middle school teachers from every core subject area visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art for a workshop about the collection, so they can take their students on tours.

A substantial part of the arts instruction comes through partnerships with New York museums and cultural organizations. High school students receive one-on-one vocal training from coaches from the Metropolitan Opera. Fifth- and sixth-graders work with the Gilbert and Sullivan Players, and 40 of them get to perform in the chorus of an onstage production. And *Kaspryzk* is being presented through a partnership with the Spirit Improvisation Ensemble of Columbia University Teachers College.

The programs started more than a decade ago with Superintendent Carole Hankin, who had friends associated with

the opera. Today, the National Association for Music Education ranks Syosset number 14 among the country’s top 100 providers

of excellent music programs. The district gets a few grants—for instance, its sixth $1,000 award as a Grammy Signature School—and some state support through the county’s Board of Cooperative Educational Services.

But Janet Cox, Syosset’s board president, says most support comes from local taxpayers. “The arts enhance learning of academics,” she says, explaining her support for the district’s wide array of programs. “There are studies that show that math and music are connected.”

Last year, the students created a Mars project, using photos from newspapers and the Internet to imagine a trip to the red planet—even creating an imaginary Martian language.

“They created a project that involved instrumentalists, vocalists, dance, and computer animation,” Salzmann says, marveling at the creativity in his district. “The students created a language that they sang in.”

**TWIN RIDGES ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

**DISTRICT WWW.TRESD.K12.CA.US**

Hanging in the San Juan Post Office, in the foothills of California’s Sierra Nevada Mountains, are self-portraits by local artists—the 5-, 6-, and 7-year-olds of Grizzly Hill School. Other student work is on display in the Twin Ridges Elementary School District Service Center, the Nevada County Government Center, and the North San Juan Senior Center.

“We do lots of public art,” says Diane Pasquini, who coordinates the program for Grizzly Hill, one of several schools in

Nevada County, Calif. “It’s great for the kids. It empowers them as citizens. They’re capable of doing something of value and making the world a better place.”

Grizzly Hill’s program draws from an extensive network of local partnerships. Poets, painters, potters, and musicians visit for minimal cost (about $25 an hour) to lead children in writing poetry and songs, painting murals, making objects, and creating dances related to the California region where they live. Children have made bas-relief maps of California, fashioned pottery imprinted with local flora, and learned about Native American beadwork and music by threading and singing.

Students have also shadowed local environmentalists, then created performances describing their work. And they raised funds for Hurricane Katrina victims with a series of original “Messages of Hope” note cards.

The projects began in the mid-1990s, after budget cuts targeted the arts. Local artists heeded the call for help**,** and the Annenberg Rural Challenge provided a seed grant to pay a program coordinator. Pasquini came to the district and now is part of the staff.

Today, classroom teachers learn ceramics and painting. In Grizzly Hill’s HeART room studio, students use the arts to interpret lessons in social studies and science using their own voices and ideas.

Funding has continued locally through the school board, though some grants—including $15,000 from the California Arts Council and $6,000 from the Liocha Fund of the Tides Foundation—have paid for specific projects. The students also raise their own funds; last year, they recorded and sold a Christmas CD that brought in $1,500.

Sixth-grader Violet Navarrete, 11, says making art is her favorite activity. Her recent peace poster featured the earth “and it had a big tree on it—a mother tree,” she says. Violet also learned a more technical kind of drawing. “We had a student teacher and she majored in art, so we did some urban landscape drawing.”

The projects, Violet says, are an enjoyable way to learn. “It’s like a break from all the work; time to be yourself,” she says.

In other words, it’s another benefit the arts provide.

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