

ARTS

Arts

IN THE CLASSROOM City elementary schools to integrate arts into core curriculum

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There are few topics further removed from the experience of contemporary elementary school students in Rochester than the working habits of Colonial-era apothecaries.

But, as Sadie Rolle-Knox noted: “It’s easier to remember stuff when it has a beat.”

Thus the genesis of likely the first — and last — hip-hop track about apothecaries.

“A skill you need is to be able to use / a mortar and pestle to crush the herbs for the drugs you use,” Rolle-Knox and classmate Ruweida Abdulrahman rapped over a beat by Kaden Retamar at the Children’s School of Rochester in the City School District.

Don’t expect to hear them on the radio anytime soon. They might, however, remember their history lesson, which is more the point.

Bolstered by a four-year experiment that showed huge gains in classrooms where academic subjects are presented through art, the Rochester City School District intends to

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Achaius Williams portrays the butterfly during the performance by first-graders of *The Hungry Caterpillar* at School 15.

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Tashi Dema wears an ice cream cutout as she joins other first-graders in the performance of *The Hungry Caterpillar* at School 15.

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spread the model throughout all its elementary schools over the next two years.

The district already has committed to expanding stand-alone art and music classes in all its schools. The grant-funded experiment, on the other hand, tested the premise that students learn better when art is infused into their core curriculum lessons.

The project involved three related strategies for students and teachers at 10 randomly chosen elementary schools.

» First, each classroom had 300 minutes of visits from artists in the community throughout the year. Those artists worked with classroom teachers to connect their talent to the subject matter.

» Second, all teachers had hands-on professional development in art — not in teaching it, but actually doing it. They sang songs, painted pictures and acted out stories just as their students did.

» Third, students got opportunities to visit a number of arts destinations in the community, including local museums, Seneca Park Zoo, the Erie Canal and the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra.

In Lauren Payne's second-grade class, students read the story of Pinocchio in plain prose, then got a script and acted it out. The lesson about lying comes through more clearly when someone actually has a foot-long nose protruding from his face, as Melvin Scott did.

"You get to act like characters from a movie or a fairy tale you really like, and it's really fun," he said. "I feel like if we made a ninja movie, we could do moves, and *bah, bah, bah ...*"

Those *bahs* are karate fighting noises. Melvin got a little carried away.

Making core subjects more fun is an important part of the concept, but not the only one. The study was uncommonly rigorous, with a control group of students in other schools who did not receive the arts intervention.

The results were extremely promising, not least because students who are most at risk seemed to benefit the most.

- » Kindergartners got a boost of eight months in developmental growth, with the greatest gains concentrated in black and Hispanic girls.
- » Fifth- and sixth-graders with the arts integration had dramatically higher scores on state exams in math and English.
- » Students at the lowest-performing schools posted the greatest gains.

“The learning is a lot deeper because the students are more invested in it,” said Children’s School Principal Jay Piper.

In light of the successful pilot, the district intends to expand the arts integration across all elementary schools over the next two years. That is budgeted to cost \$900,000 in 2016-17 and \$1.4 million for full implementation the following year.

“It’s research-based, it’s developmentally appropriate and effective,” said Elizabeth Hanan, the district’s arts director. “Based on the data, it makes sense.”

The only real question about the proposal is why it hasn’t been in place all along. None of the specific classroom strategies the teachers used in the pilot program are new concepts.

The Children’s School has always emphasized the arts, which is part of the reason it is one of the most highly sought student placements in the city. But Piper, the principal, said increased attention to math and reading standards made it hard to fit art into the day.

“There was such a focus on rigor, it made this sort of thing more challenging,” he said. “We’re going back to our roots. We should never lose sight of good teaching and what makes students have fun.”

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Hawa Ali next to Tashi Dema take part with other first-graders in their performance of *The Hungry Caterpillar* at School 15.

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