

Columbia Gorge Arts in Education: Art Spies

CLASSROOM TEACHERS PROVIDE INNOVATIVE ART RECONNAISSANCE



Artist Jane Essley instructs students how to roll ink during a printmaking lesson at Whitson Elementary School. Their individual pieces were combined into a collaborative work for the new Hood River hospital, helping students engage with the broader community.



IT'S A COMMON QUESTION for arts organizations serving K-12 schools: How can we give the students and schools what they want and need? Moreover, how do we even find out what they need?

For Hood River's Columbia Gorge Arts In Education (CGAIE), serving 20 schools in three Oregon counties and one in Washington, the answer varied widely from school to school. Some schools had active PTAs and frequent arts residencies and others had no art supplies and little support from the administration. Moreover, CGAIE's role in the schools' art curriculum grew.

"We realized that our role was shifting from being a 'random act of art,'" says CGAIE Director, Leith Gaines of their previous function providing arts residencies to the schools, "to now, in a lot of cases, the artists we brought in were the only art these kids were getting."

Building programs that are meaningful for the schools required identifying qualities in schools where Columbia Gorge AIE's programs worked. One constant emerged: strong relationships with teachers in those schools. "If we have a partner in a school that we know is supportive of the arts, then it's really easy to go to that school and make a project or residency work," says CGAIE grant writer Leigh Hancock.

In response, CGAIE started the Arts Advocate Program this year, recruiting fifteen advocates from twenty schools, most of whom are classroom teachers. After a training session in January, the advocates returned to their schools to complete an arts needs assessment of their school and to identify opportunities for further growth. By the next school year, CGAIE and the Art Advocates will have the information necessary to bring to the school boards and administrations to begin to craft an arts program for each individual school.

Advocates also have the opportunity to share information as a group and to build a network between schools to identify and share best practices.

By enlisting eyes and ears in the schools, CGAIE hopes to create a continuity of arts education that many schools lack. "Our goal is to serve our communities better," says Gaines. "The way to do that is to have representatives and voices in the schools to tell us what's going on and what their needs are. We can't be at every school—now we've got someone there to help."

Teaching artist Shelley Toon Height works with elementary students on a mural to be installed at the Hood River Waterfront Park. Photos: Leith Gaines