



Leadership Starts with Vision: Make a School-Wide Commitment to Art

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Leaders, first and foremost, build a unified effort around a shared vision. Aligning a professional learning community around a common goal enables all team members to contribute—with clearly defined roles and a united purpose. When that vision is articulated consistently and explicitly, an enthusiastic effort becomes tangible. For many schools, the vision is centered on using the arts to engage students as successful 21st century learners. Creating a shared vision can be challenging, but school leaders who are committed to integrating the arts throughout their schools share successful strategies.

Ignite Imaginations

Donna Jackson, principal of Jackson Elementary in Jonesboro, Georgia has on her office door a Pablo Picasso quote: “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.” This summarizes Jackson’s plan—to help the grown-ups in her school think and feel like artists. “To embed arts-infused education schoolwide, I knew we needed a creative leadership team (CLT) that would help shape our strategic plan and coach their teacher peers,” Jackson explains. “This team builds schoolwide creative capabilities and commitment to art-enriched learning.”

The school is steeped in its mission to make arts integral to every child’s daily learning. As visitors enter the arts-infused school, they can readily see the results of a carefully crafted vision statement. The sign towering above the entrance announces: “Ignite imaginations through arts integration.”



A Unified Effort

Jackson Elementary School’s vision began three years ago, when the School Improvement Team began a Creative Leadership focus. “Based on the outstanding success our students have with arts-infused learning, we decided to turn this into an arts-based school for all 1,040 students,” Principal Jackson explains.

What is Jackson Elementary School’s magic? Second-grade teacher Jessica Mercado says, “It is our united vision focused on arts integration that has built our camaraderie, capabilities, and commitment. Before our creative leadership team formed and focused on embedding arts integration schoolwide, I lacked the know-how. I wish I could go back five years in my career. Now I know how much better my teaching is with this lens of thinking and seeing like an artist.”

Molly Knowles, the fine art lead and member of Jackson Elementary CLT, did have the arts know-how—but until the school adopted this vision she wasn’t sharing her expertise routinely with her colleagues. “The real magic is our principal’s commitment to making sure the arts specialists share arts-integration ideas with the entire faculty. We not only teach children, but we are responsible for making sure our classroom teacher colleagues build creative skills and confidence to use the arts throughout their daily teaching,” she explains. “Our principal made the commitment and gives us time to collaborate with each classroom teacher.”



Different schools will develop unique vision statements and embedment plans based on their specific situations and needs. Jackson says her team worked with the faculty to articulate their arts-infused vision. They mapped out an arts-integration strategic plan, tackled new challenges that emerged, ran or arranged the art-based professional development workshops, and coached colleagues. “Once teachers see ‘why to’ and ‘how to’, they embrace arts-infused teaching.” Jackson continues, “As a principal, first I inspire, then I require. Arts-infused teaching is not optional in our school.”

Established Expectations

Sandra Kent, principal of Jane Phillips Elementary School in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, shares a similar story about her school’s vision of being arts-infused. As part of the Oklahoma A+ Schools network, teachers receive significant arts-integration professional development. Training becomes most relevant when teachers know the expectation is to apply it and make arts-integration evident in their classrooms.

A Common Language—Artistically Presented to Convey Meaning

The faculty at Jane Phillips School collaboratively and illustratively crafted a schoolwide vision statement—mindfully choosing the words that articulated their vision of being an arts-integrated school. Teacher-leaders facilitated a hands-on creative session where faculty contributed key words and sentiments they'd like included in the school vision statement. The arts experts shared basic information on how art elements and principles of design help to convey meaning. Kent reports the process “helped us work more closely together, created a shared language, fostered stronger communication, and kept us focused on our aligned vision,” Kent explains. “We have always believed in the power of arts-infused education, but collaboratively crafting our school vision gave us the focus and alignment we needed.”

Art Elements and Principles of Design—Visual Literacy

Small groups used artists' communication elements and principles to document the emphasis, patterns, unity, balance and contrasts in their thoughts. Ideas took shape as lines and colors conveyed the meaning in draft vision statements. Through this collaborative process of contributing ideas and conveying thoughts visually, the professional learning community reached consensus on what belonged in their school vision statement.

Art Elements:

- ▶ **Line**—the marks that define a shape or outline, physically or implied. Artists use lines that can be bold, blurred, straight, spiraling, energetic, delicate or connecting. Consider how choice of lines adds meaning to the words in your vision statement.
- ▶ **Color**—can be warm or cool; intense or muted; monochromatic or clashing; opaque or transparent. Color sets a mood, radiates or sparks emotions. Color can convey a sense of urgency or calmness; set a tone for your vision or key words within it.
- ▶ **Texture**—is the tactile quality of art, either literal or implied, created by various media and dimensionality. Textures can be smooth, slick, rough, bumpy, fuzzy, soft, goeey, grainy, and shiny as they are felt or sensed.
- ▶ **Shape**—is a flat two-dimensional line that forms a geometric or organic area. Negative space (areas left “open”) can be as visually powerful as defined shapes. Use shapes to create focus or perhaps animate key words.
- ▶ **Form**—is a three-dimensional area that has depth and volume or an illusion of 3-D implied by the use of shading and light. Establish perspective, give a sense of distance, far away or close—within reach—using forms and shadows.



Principles of Design:

- ▶ **Balance**—the distribution of weight or equilibrium felt in art. Balance can be formal (symmetric, radial) or informal (asymmetrical) as artists intentionally create a feeling of equality or inequality.
- ▶ **Emphasis**—determines the center of interest, the area that is most dominant, and attracts the most attention. Use emphasis to draw viewers' eyes to specific areas of your vision statement, communicating what is dominant or most important. Emphasis can be achieved by contrast of colors, amount of detail, convergence of lines or visual pointers, focal placement, size/scale, or boldness.
- ▶ **Movement**—art has a visual flow that guides the viewer into and around the composition. Movement can also be implied in an illustration. Movement can be bold and demanding or subtle, suggesting where eyes might look next. The placement and size of words, use of line and color can determine the movement as viewers first glance at your vision statement.
- ▶ **Rhythm...Repetition...Pattern**—art can repeat visual symbols or elements like a musician uses beats in music. Regular recurrences establish a pattern that conveys meaning, shows relationships and gives parts of the art a regular or disruptive order. How could repeat symbols and patterns help readers anticipate what might be next and to add meaning to your vision statement?
- ▶ **Proportion**—refers to the relationship between the parts and the whole visual design. Consider the size, quantity, frequency, and weight of everything in your illustrated vision statement, with an aesthetic eye to how the visual composition communicates with the viewer.
- ▶ **Unity—Harmony**—brings together the art into one holistic composition so the viewer senses its completeness. You could achieve harmony by clustering, overlapping, interlocking, opposing, or implicitly uniting the parts into a whole. You could add intrigue and focus by visually creating disharmony.
- ▶ **Variety—Contrast**—varying the art elements increases interest in the composition. Use variety in size/scale, texture, or colors to create the discord that urges viewers to take another look. This contrast can pique curiosity in the reader and sustain their interest in the illustrated vision statement.



Embedding the Vision School-Wide

At Cherry Valley School in Polson, Montana, schoolwide arts integration is based on a simple belief: Teachers can successfully implement art-infused lessons if they know what is expected of them and they coach one another to build peers' creative capacities. When principal, Elaine Meeks, first became a school leader, she drew upon the talents of like-minded classroom teachers and their shared belief in the power of art to transform everyone. She offers six simple tips to schools that can help embed this vision school-wide:

1. **Deepen understanding.** Articulate the goal—use art to increase creative thinking in both faculty and students—not just to decorate the walls.
2. **Set clear expectations.** Make sure classroom teachers know that arts-infused teaching is an expectation, not an option.
3. **Share leadership.** Identify a cluster of teachers who are ready to serve in arts leadership roles. Empower them to make decisions.
4. **Build visual literacy skills.** Many teachers don't bring artistic knowledge or vocabulary with them when they start to teach. Provide resources.
5. **Be relevant and reflect.** Urge teachers to select art experiences that are relevant to your community.
6. **Take risks.** Acknowledge teachers' discomfort, but don't let them dwell on "I can't." Making mistakes is a natural consequence of stretching and growing.

Cherry Valley has empowered collaborative teacher teams to teach each other. Meeks proudly shares, "I love watching the teachers' talents and artistic interests emerge as they start to build on each other's ideas and rely on their Collaborative Arts Teams for creative problem solving."

