



# Arts

Learning in Oregon

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Oregon Arts Commission  
775 Summer Street NE, Ste 200  
Salem, Oregon 97301-1280

(503) 986-0082 Voice  
(503) 986-0260 Fax  
(800) 735-2900 TDD

[oregon.artscomm@state.or.us](mailto:oregon.artscomm@state.or.us)  
[www.oregonartscommission.org](http://www.oregonartscommission.org)

Writing: Alisa Welch  
Design: Thomas Osborne Design  
Coordination: Deb Vaughn

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## Proficiency in the Arts and Beyond

A year ago, in July 2010, a team of five from Oregon participated in the National Endowment for the Arts/Education Leaders Institute (ELI) in Chicago. Their focus at the time: how can we support and strengthen the arts-based preparation of generalist classroom teachers in Oregon. That was an important question, but over the week, the ELI conversation became more visionary. When the team members returned home, their conversation had expanded beyond pre-service training requirements to a new idea of how the arts can serve as a catalyst for educational transformation.

Proficiency-based learning, a model focused on demonstrations of knowledge rather than test scores or “seat time,” is a model ideally suited to use and leverage the reflective artistic process.

Inspired by his involvement at the ELI and his subsequent participation in the Fall 2010 annual Arts Education Congress, Rep. Peter Buckley introduced HB 2220, legislation offering schools the option to use “performance-based assessment” to test students’ ability to use and apply knowledge. The bill passed the Oregon Legislature on May 12, 2011, less than one year after the ELI team had gathered in Chicago, and was signed into law by Gov. Kitzhaber on May 27.

So it’s fitting that this publication includes strong examples of performance-based demonstrations of student mastery: a field guide designed by fourth- and fifth-graders at W.L. Henry Elementary in Hillsboro; Poetry Out Loud champion Nathaniel Dunaway’s outstanding poetry accomplishments; and, most notably, the model of Springfield Academy of Arts and Academics, a school founded entirely on arts-driven proficiency learning.

There are also compelling examples evaluating the effect of arts learning on students. The federal Investment in Innovation (i3) grant awarded to the Beaverton School District in partnership with Young Audiences has brought national attention to arts literacy research in Oregon. And the cutting-edge Center for Children’s Learning, within the Opal School in Portland, is a leading contributor to understanding how children learn and develop through the arts.

But the stories contained in this monograph are also about the power of the arts to change lives. Connor Eifler shows us how a childhood steeped in arts learning leads to both educational and personal success. Architects in the Schools leverages the contributed time of professional architects to show students the complexity and beauty of the built environment. And Ethos Music Center’s project placing Americorps volunteers in rural communities demonstrates the power of artistic experience in every community, no matter the size.

Now, more than ever, students need experiences in the arts. Creative capacity and originality are skills increasingly valued by employers in the global economy. Yet schools are hard-pressed to provide them in an age of test scores and Adequate Yearly Progress demands. Arts education is about more than knowing the right answer. It is about students having the confidence to know they can solve the problem, whether that is how to communicate tempo to an orchestra of players, how to mold clay to defy physics or how to arrange bodies geometrically in space during a dance.

If the arts have touched your life, we invite you to join the conversation. Log on to [www.oregonartscommission.org/oaec/forum.php](http://www.oregonartscommission.org/oaec/forum.php), the online community committed to increasing the collective knowledge base about arts education in Oregon.

Christine D’Arcy, Executive Director

*Cover: Fourth–sixth grade students at W.L. Henry Elementary in Hillsboro worked with artists and wildlife educators to create a field guide for the Jackson Bottom Wetlands. The project not only helped students increase confidence and motivation, but it raised the profile of the school in the neighboring community. Fourth-grader Alejandro, from Mrs. Lule’s class, works on his drawing for the guide. Article, page 8. Photo: Casey Campbell*



# Nathaniel Dunaway: Central Oregon's Young Poet

## *Oregon's Poetry Out Loud Champion Has a Lot to Say*

Before stepping behind the microphone for his third try at the state Poetry Out Loud competition on March 12 in Salem, Nathaniel Dunaway is philosophical about his chances of winning. "I just want to go there and have fun," says Dunaway, a soft-spoken Prineville high school senior. His tortoise shell glasses frame curious eyes and broad eyebrows on a round face and from a certain angle, Dunaway looks a little like a scruffier version of *High School Musical* star, Zach Efron. Once behind the microphone and alone on a bare stage however, Dunaway transforms from a shy kid to a commanding performer reciting poetry from the greats: Poe, Shelley, Kooser.

"You need to remember that you are not just saying words to empty air, you're talking to people," says Dunaway about what it takes to recite poetry to an audience. "You're telling a story. A poem is capturing a moment, a feeling, in just a few words. When you recite it, you have to think that the poem is all that you have to say."

At the 2011 Poetry Out Loud state finals round, Dunaway recited "Abandoned Farmhouse," by United States Poet Laureate Ted Kooser. It's a poem about a mysterious home and its former residents featuring haunting imagery that could apply to the wide-open spaces and high desert around Dunaway's hometown of Prineville. While rehearsing for the competition, Dunaway worked the words over and over in his mind and out loud while driving Prineville's back roads.

"I didn't have any interest in poetry before Poetry Out Loud," says Dunaway. "I wanted to be on stage and read something. After reading poems to recite, I discovered that they're really interesting and I wanted to try writing poetry myself."

"Nathaniel's depth of empathy and imagination, make him mature beyond his years," says Elizabeth Quinn, Managing Editor of *High Desert Journal*. Quinn published Dunaway's original poem, "Speak, Harsh Land," in 2010 after seeing him recite his own poetry at an event in Bend. "Nathaniel is a perfect example of how High Desert Journal defines emerging authors; he possesses the talent to help us understand ourselves as westerners, as humans."

Reciting poetry and writing poetry are two very different skills, admits Dunaway, but he has found the connection between the two, citing Poetry Out Loud as the reason he's a published poet today. In the three years he's competed at the state level for Poetry Out Loud, he's honed his skills in recitation—a performance that is more public speaking than theater. "It's not an acting competition," explains Dunaway whose own on-stage presence is both earnest and engaging. "I just want people to be interested."

At this year's competition, Dunaway beat out 24 other competitors from around the state and earned the right to go on to the national championships held April 28-29, 2011 in Washington, D.C.

His love of poetry and theater came as a surprise to him but he attributes his enthusiasm and success to his theater teacher at Crook County High School, Anita Hoffman. "She's the reason I started in theater, she's the reason I'm still in theater, she's the reason I am going to college to study theater arts," says Dunaway who took his first drama class as a sophomore. "Ms. Hoffman's been a huge inspiration and support. She's realistic with me, telling me what works and what doesn't." For her part, Hoffman calls Dunaway a "terrific young man."

After winning the state competition, Dunaway returned to his senior year at Crook County High. During a pep assembly cheering on the wrestling team and the cheerleading squad, Dunaway was asked to recite "Abandoned Farmhouse" in front of 750 of his fellow students. Drama coach Hoffman said you could have heard a pin drop. As Nathaniel finished, the entire student body rose to give him a standing ovation.



*Nathaniel Dunaway recites at the national Poetry Out Loud event in Washington, D.C. Dunaway's interest in poetry and theater found an incubator in drama classes at Crook County High School. Photo: James Kegley*

*At the national Poetry Out Loud Competition in Washington, D.C., Nathaniel was fourth runner up in his region, earning \$1,000 for the placement and \$500 for Crook County High School to purchase poetry books.*

*"His performance was stellar!" reported a very proud Mrs. Hoffman. Nathaniel will be a freshman at Western Oregon University this fall, majoring in theater and English.*

*A copy of "Speak, Harsh Land" is available on the Oregon Poetry Out Loud Website:*

*[http://www.oregonartscommission.org/support\\_for\\_the\\_arts/programs/arts\\_learning/poetry\\_out\\_loud/](http://www.oregonartscommission.org/support_for_the_arts/programs/arts_learning/poetry_out_loud/)*

# Ethos: Music Across Oregon

## *How a Double-Decker Bus Launched a Community-Building Music Program*



*Ethos student Nathan Houghtelling has taken lessons in violin and piano as well as guitar and will go from Fossil to Boston to study at the Berklee College of Music.*

***“I was grateful for the opportunity. The Ethos instructors were kind, friendly, and supportive, along with having an excellent balance in curriculum. It was an excellent experience which made me a better musician and person as a whole.”***

— NATHAN HOUGHTELLING

Making a dramatic entrance requires the right kind of vehicle. In 2001, Ethos Music Center founder Charles Lewis and three AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers traveled across Oregon teaching music in a 1977 Bristol double-decker bus. Outfitted with a mobile stage, classrooms and sleeping quarters for Ethos staff, the bus and its music teachers made quite an impression on the small towns they visited.

There was one small problem, however: “The joke was we could get within 50 miles of every community in Oregon because the bus broke down so often,” laughs Lewis about the early days of Ethos’ *Music Across Oregon* program. In the ten years since the program started, Ethos has brought concerts, assemblies, workshops, instrument ‘test-drives,’ music camps, and visiting Latin American musicians to 30 rural towns in Oregon. In 2012, the *Music Across Oregon* program will grow to include ten AmeriCorps volunteers operating from permanent satellites in Fossil, Monument, Long Creek, Condon, and Elkton with additional stations at Madras and the Warm Springs Reservation (where instructors will teach traditional Native American drum and flute).

Lewis says the need for music education in rural areas of Oregon is acute as schools grapple with deep budget cuts. “Most of the schools we visit are operating on four-day school weeks to cut transportation costs,” says Lewis. “Music and arts are often the first to be cut.” Lewis believes strongly that schools should employ music specialists, but in their absence, Ethos “Rural Music Facilitators” provide intensive training for classroom teachers and ongoing lessons (both private and group) for students. Ethos also asks that each school make a commitment to bring back a certified music teacher to insure consistent music education. “Our goal is to work ourselves out of a job,” says Lewis.

In 2007, Megan Moran ventured out to the isolated Oregon community of Fossil as one of Ethos’ Rural Music Facilitators. “It was an adjustment,” says Moran who had a hard time connecting to members of the Fossil community until she started attending the high school football games and playing in the community band. One student, sophomore Nathan Houghtelling, stood out to Moran right away with his natural, albeit untrained abilities.



*Though now retired, the double-decker bus first allowed Ethos to bring music instruction to schools around Oregon. Earl and the Reggae Allstars perform in front of the Music Mobile Bus in Klamath Falls.*



*Second and third grade students in an after school class practice composing their own rhythm patterns. Instructors then assist the group in practicing the rhythms with guitar chords. All photos: Ethos Music Center*

“Nathan was struggling with school and being challenged,” recalls Moran, “But he had a lot of talent—it was just a matter of discipline.”

Over the next three years, Nathan continued with Ethos (“He has invested in the program,” says Moran), taking private violin, piano, and guitar lessons with Ethos instructors. After a while, his skills at guitar eclipsed his teachers who introduced Houghttelling to music theory, application, ear training, creativity, and he says, an appreciation for all kinds of music.

“I was grateful for the opportunity,” recalls Houghttelling. “The Ethos instructors were kind, friendly, and supportive, along with having an excellent balance in curriculum. It was an excellent experience which made me a better musician and person as a whole.”

This spring, Houghttelling was accepted into the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston.

“Having access to music, instruments, and a positive mentor in their life can focus a student’s energy,” says Moran. “To teach a student like Nathan—that’s why I was out there.”

“Music is a great equalizer,” says Lewis. “Every kid should have access to music. It’s very rewarding to go into these small communities of 100-150 people and literally bring music education back to every single kid.”

And whatever happened to that traveling musical double-decker bus? It’s been retired to Kells Irish Pub in Portland, though Lewis doesn’t sound the least bit wistful about seeing it go. “I was the only one licensed to drive the thing,” says Lewis. “It got to be a little too much.” But thanks to Ethos’ Rural Music Facilitators, the double-decker’s legacy will live on in Oregon’s small towns.



*In an after school guitar primer class, Elkton Grade School students practice counting frets in preparation for learning finger positions.*



# Beaverton Schools: Powerful Push For Arts

***With \$4.8 Million Grant, Beaverton Schools, Young Audiences Use Art to Increase Literacy***



*Sandy Messina, a third-grade teacher at Chelalem Elementary, leads a lesson on the dance concept of levels, leading to vocabulary work that will help students write poetry.*

***Arts For Learning Lessons are delivered by a classroom teacher who has received training from Young Audiences program staff, including formal training of particular art forms: theater, visual arts, music, or dance.***

***“Only one of my students started this year at grade level in writing. In our last testing we had 74% passing. That’s pretty remarkable.”***

— MARY TOWELL, TEACHER

Mary Towell’s fourth-grade classroom at McKinley Elementary in Beaverton is perfectly quiet at 9:00 a.m. on a Tuesday morning. Her twenty-five students write in their notebooks about one of three prompts: friendship, something lost, or rules. Then Ms. Towell, in her flowing dress and soft-soled shoes, claps her hands and the kids jump from their seats and stand around her in a circle. Dressed in jeans, hoodies and the occasional sparkly tennis shoe, the students reflect most of the acronyms found in education: ELL TAG, IEP. Yet it’s hard to miss the overwhelming excitement that all the students display for their writing this morning. Standing in the circle, they announce to their classmates their story ideas, each ending with a clap and a loud “Write on!”

“W-R-I-T-E.” calls out Ms. Towell, leading the class on a cheer complete with a step and a fist pump in the air. “Write on!”

A few minutes later, the students return to their groups to discuss what’s working in their own stories and listen to what their classmates think needs work. Ms. Towell reads a story about her own grade school days that she has been working on in tandem with her students.

“Some of the kids have offered to stay in at recess to help me edit my story,” says Towell with a smile. The 21-year veteran teacher is also the lead teacher at McKinley, implementing a multi-year \$4.8 million US Department of Education Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) grant.

Announced in 2009, i3 is a highly competitive grant program to expand and invest in practices that are demonstrated to have an impact on student achievements. Along with implementation partner, Young Audiences, the Beaverton School District was one of 49 applicants nationwide chosen for the grant money and one of only three successful applicants utilizing an arts-based curriculum.

“It’s absolutely significant that the US Department of Education has granted this,” says Dr. Gail Hayes Davis, executive director of Young Audiences. “It’s one of the most competitive grants out there. I think it’s significant that they have invested in the idea of integration of the arts into a literacy curriculum.”

Though Beaverton won the grant funds, they also needed to secure an additional \$800,000 in matching funds. If they couldn’t raise the matching funds, the money would go to the next school on the list.

And, they only had five weeks to do it.

“We set up our war room at that point,” recalls Dr. Hayes Davis. Donations came from parents, foundations, private citizens and corporations such as Columbia Sportswear and Intel. Even Mayor Denny Doyle of Beaverton joined the fundraising effort.

*In its grant proposal for the Federal i3 grant, the Beaverton School District set out these goals:*

- 1. Close achievement gaps in reading: Reduce achievement gaps for ELL students, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, and ethnic/racial minority students by 40% from the baseline.*
- 2. Increase the percent of elementary students meeting or exceeding benchmarks for college and career readiness (CCR) in literacy: Increase the percent of students meeting the CCR Benchmark standards to 88% at grade 4 and 5; 80% at grade 3.*
- 3. Increase fourth-grade students’ writing performance: Increase the percent of 4th grade students meeting the state writing achievement standards to 75% from the baseline.*



*Abby, a fourth-grader at Findley Elementary, acts out a moment of personal story to capture details for her personal narrative writing. This physical engagement helps Abby think about her work in a new way, engaging both sides of her brain. All photos: Allison Tigard*

Now completing its pilot year, the *Arts For Learning Lessons* project is in 16 Beaverton elementary schools. Within five years, the program will be in all 33 Beaverton third-, fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms, reaching 13,000 students a year. Utilizing arts integration (music, theater, crafts, and beyond) the program seeks to increase literacy for all students and, in particular, high-needs students including English Language Learners, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students and ethnic/racial minority students.

*Arts For Learning Lessons* are delivered by a classroom teacher who has received training from Young Audiences program staff, including formal training of particular art forms: theater, visual arts, music, or dance. Later, artist residencies provide more concentrated focus on study and direct experience of an art form, while also extending and reinforcing the literacy goals of the school.

It's still early, but Ms. Towell is a believer. "Only one of my students started this year at grade level in writing," she reports. "In our last testing we had 74% passing. That's pretty remarkable."

Back in the classroom, students collaborate within their groups, reading and critiquing each other's work while Ms. Towell checks in to listen. Soon, the whole class is back on its feet.

"I want you to make a sound and be a statue expressing how you feel about writing," Towell says to her students.

As they go around in a circle, there are moans and groans, faces twisted in frustration and happy leaps of joy, to illustrate the creative process. But every student ends with a clap and a fist in the air. "Write on!"



*In Ms. Towell's fourth-grade class at McKinley Elementary, Estephanie listens to Kendra's personal narrative writing sample and prepares to provide feedback, using peer guidance to help her improve.*

# W.L. Henry Elementary School: Future Field Guides

## *Art and Nature Provide the Perfect Backdrop for Learning in Hillsboro*



*Luis, a fourth-grader in Ms. Panayiotou's class, takes notes during a visit to the Jackson Bottom Wetlands.*

Bullfrog tadpoles, crickets, insect larvae, lily pads, and wild onions; Jackson Bottom Wetlands Preserve teams with an array of flora and fauna. Occupying 725 acres along the Willamette River in Hillsboro, the Preserve is also the backyard of Travis Reiman, Principal at nearby W.L. Henry Elementary school.

"I was trying to find a way for the kids to be involved with the Preserve," recalls Reiman who brainstormed with his school's teachers to develop a plan that blended art and science with the educational opportunities of the wetlands. Armed with a \$6,000 grant from the Hillsboro Schools Foundation, W.L. Henry's fourth, fifth, and sixth graders participated this year in a program called *Future Field Guides*.

During three outings to Jackson Bottom, students worked with wetlands education specialist Sarah Pinnock for hands-on demonstrations of everything from tadpoles to sediment. Armed with scientific knowledge, the students then took pens and pencils to their notepads and clipboards to illustrate their own observations of the natural world of Jackson Bottom.

"We try to use arts to bring the students up academically by integrating the arts with content—science, math, and writing—which increases engagement, deepens conceptual understanding, and allows students to learn through multiple modalities" says Reiman whose bi-lingual school has 55% English Language Learners and 80% receiving free and reduced lunch. "But beyond that, this kind of project increases students' confidence as they learn leadership, new technology, and design skills."

"The kids were excited about getting outdoors and interested in the process—even the kids who didn't think that had any talent for drawing," says resident artist Alice Hill who accompanied the students to on the trips to Jackson Bottom and provided classroom instruction on technical drawing skills. Hill says that some students were so inspired by the project that they brought in drawings they'd done on their own at home or on the playground. "Art matters to kids because it gives them an opportunity to express themselves

***"We try to use arts to bring the students up academically by integrating the arts with content — science, math, and writing — which increases engagement, deepens conceptual understanding, and allows students to learn through multiple modalities."***

— TRAVIS REIMAN



*Jordan, a fourth-grader in Mrs. Lule's class, blends science and art as he puts pencil to paper under the direction of artist Alice Hill and wetlands education specialist Sarah Pinnock.*





*The resources of the Jackson Bottom Wetlands provide the perfect venue for students to practice observational drawing. Daniel, a fourth-grader in Ms. Panayiotou's class, studies a muskrat to add detail to his drawing. All photos: Casey Campbell*

and learn about their cultural and natural environments," says Hill. "It makes them feel more valuable."

In the final phase of the project, resident graphic artist Carlos Horcos will help the students create a printed Field Guide utilizing the drawings completed at Jackson Bottom as well as environmental information they learned on site. Principal Reiman is particularly excited that students will be exposed to high-tech computer graphics programs and manipulation of their art when they work with Horcos, who is also bi-lingual.

By design, the *Future Field Guides* project will have a lasting effect on the W.L. Henry students when they share their knowledge with younger students on outings to nearby Turner Creek Park this spring.

Reiman, in his first year as principal at W.L. Henry, sees the Field Guide and the interest it has raised in the community and local media as an important step in raising the profile of his school and the spirits of his students as they struggle to raise test scores that are some of the lowest in the district. He credits Hillsboro Schools Foundation, funded through community and business donations, with seeing the need for an arts integrated project such as the *Future Field Guides* at W.L. Henry. "Tiny donations mean big opportunities for kids," says Reiman.

And the investment in the Field Guide program stands to provide a substantial pay off, as students pass their knowledge on to younger students while their carefully crafted illustrations continue to inform visitors to the wetlands.



*W.L. Henry Elementary School students made drawings of wildlife on field trips, then published a field guide to the Jackson Bottom Wetlands Preserve. The guide is available to the public.*

# Architects In Schools: Building Bridges

## *Program Introduces Architecture, Design while Adapting to the Needs of Classrooms*



*During an Architects in Schools residency, students in Mrs. Duty's class at Hogan Cedars Elementary in Gresham, studied Oregon pioneers and created a pioneer village complete with log structures. The students' models included elements important to a community and what elements an authentic pioneer town would have included. Their project was displayed at the US Bank Tower lobby in Portland. Photo: Sabina Samiee*

*The mother art is architecture. Without an architecture of our own we have no soul of our own civilization.*

—FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

Imagine being the architect for an anteater who likes to have friends over for ice cream cones. What if your client is a penguin that requires only non-VOC paints in his home on account of his allergies? For Portland architect Marlene Gillis and her students in the *Architects in Schools* program, these are exactly the kinds of imaginary clients that inspire students to dream big. “Almost more important than what you’re trying to ‘teach’ is the idea that you’re willing to come and listen to all the random thoughts running around in their heads,” says Gillis. Innovation and creativity are born of random thoughts, and that’s the type of thinking that the program encourages.

“Design isn’t a ‘right or wrong answer’ kind of subject, and I think a lot of kids struggle with that, especially at first,” says Gillis. “Kids are taught ‘to the test’, and for design, there really is no test, just experience and knowledge.”

Three decades ago, Oregon architect Marjorie Wintermute developed *Architects In Schools* to introduce the study of architecture into elementary schools. The program pairs professional architects with third through fifth grade classrooms throughout Oregon. Over 2,000 students each year take part in the six-week residency that includes a history of architectural styles, lessons on drawing and designing structures, fieldtrips to see structures up close, and ends with a display of student work in a public venue.

While the focus is architecture and design, every classroom tackles the material in its own particular way. “Each residency is custom designed because the architect and teacher are working together,” says Kim Ruthardt Knowles of the Architecture Foundation of Oregon that administers the program. “Some residencies are geared towards wanting

*“Making the concepts of design and architecture an approachable, tangible thing (hopefully) opens doors to a lot of other critical thinking processes, that they can take advantage of throughout their lives.”*

—MARLENE GILLIS  
Architect



*Students at Harrison Park School in Portland studied Japanese architecture and created a model of a Japanese village, which was on display at the Center for Architecture during a May 2011 First Thursday event. Photo: Steve Poland*





*Students at Willamette Primary in West Linn created a mural of different architecture they observed in their community, which was on display at the Center for Architecture during the First Thursday event in Portland in May, 2011. Photo: Steve Poland*

to expose students to architectural concepts for the sake of architectural design, and many are actually using architecture to enhance existing curriculum.”

For Monica Lagos-Anker, a Spanish Immersion teacher at Portland’s Ainsworth Elementary School, *Architects in Schools* illuminated many of the ideas her third grade students had already been exploring. “Part of the third grade curriculum is about studying Portland history, buildings, and bridges, and this program allows them to incorporate art as part of the larger project,” says Lagos-Anker.

Designing masks, measuring classrooms to create floorplans, mapping housing tracts, creating model homes for penguins—these are just some of the ways that visiting architects approach their profession in a way that makes sense to the young designers. “For some students who may not otherwise be interested in social studies or math, architecture can be a hook that makes those subjects exciting to them,” says Knowles.

“This program tends to break kids out of their comfort zone. So many kids, from early on, simply decide they’re not creative or can’t draw,” says architect Gillis. “Making the concepts of design and architecture an approachable, tangible thing (hopefully) opens doors to a lot of other critical thinking processes, that they can take advantage of throughout their lives. It’s a fundamentally different way to communicate that most elementary schools don’t have time in their curriculum to cover, so this bridges a very important gap.”

Classroom teachers also benefit from the program’s intensive orientation and an opportunity to create a specialized curriculum in collaboration with the architect. Graduate credit is also available for teachers through Portland State University. “I have personally gained more knowledge in architecture and arts, buildings, names and structures of bridges, and more architectural concepts,” says Lagos-Anker. “But beyond these tangible

concepts and terminology, I have also appreciated the opportunity to have art to express ourselves freely.”

One of the longest running architecture residency programs in the country, *Architects In Schools* continues to expand into other areas of the state including Salem, Corvallis, and Bend. Part of the success is owed to the funding model: The architects volunteer their time while still being paid by their firms. Additional funding support is obtained from entities like the Oregon Arts Commission. The economic downturn has not affected the number of students served, reports Knowles who attributes the program’s growth to continued interest in the architectural community and among teachers, many of whom request the program year after year.

“What makes this program work so well for so many teachers, students, and architects is that it adaptable to any subject matter,” says Knowles. Then again, maybe it’s the allergic penguin.

# Portland Children's Museum: Laboratory for Success

## Research Into What Works for Early Learners at One Innovative School



Susan MacKay presents at the annual school visitation day where 100 educators from across North America visit Opal school for two days.

*"Our goal needs to be that every child in Oregon will have a solid education. There can be no more excuses."*

—FROM THE APRIL 11, 2011 MINUTES OF  
GOVERNOR JOHN KITZHABER'S EARLY LEARNING DESIGN TEAM

It's story workshop time at the Opal School at the Portland Children's Museum. Twenty-five students, aged five to seven are working on a collaborative story that explains why the earth goes dark at night. They scatter around the classroom talking together, dancing, working with clay, making paper collages, or building with blocks. Soon, they come back together as a group with their teacher to discuss and refine their ideas. Watercolor paints and paper help students explore more images for the story. As the images emerge, so does a narrative: the sun has fallen from the sky and it's the job of all of the children to gather the pieces in their lanterns and return them to the sun's palace.

Creating and collaborating, moving the body and staying in one place; The Opal School is an incubator for ideas to find the best environments for kids to learn in.

"We believe in research that says that the brain is in its optimal state for learning and creativity while in a state of relaxed alertness," says Susan MacKay, Director of the Center for Children's Learning at the Portland Children's Museum and a former teacher at Opal School. "Relaxed awareness is a state when the brain is feeling highly challenged and children do some pretty big cognitive work. When kids are in that state, they are trusting that they have something significant to share."

Turns out, the Center for Children's Learning also has something to share. MacKay and her fellow researchers at the Center travel nationally and internationally, presenting their learning strategies that have come directly from Opal classrooms.

"There's a demand for what we're finding out, people want to hear our stories, they want to see our environments, they want to know what we're learning," says MacKay. "The Center for Children's Learning is about sharing that learning." The Center holds annual workshops for educators on such topics as "Supporting the Social and Emotional Intelligences of Children" and "Imagination Yoga" based on their findings. Resource guides, books, and DVDs created by the Center use actual Opal School projects, students, and teachers to illustrate their unique practices.

At the heart of the Center for Children's Learning is the understanding (reflected in the Emelio Reggio model used at Opal School) that children learn best through play within a creative context. "If you believe that children are strong and competent, then you create curriculum that reflects the belief," says MacKay of the Center's philosophy that they've put into practice. "If you give a child a coloring sheet, how does that follow the belief that the child is strong and capable? Why not give a blank sheet like another artist might use?"

"Early art exposure creates a well-rounded learning experience," says Annabelle Jaramillo, a Benton County Commissioner who also serves on Gov. Kitzhaber's Early



Preschool students use a light board and pieces of colored glass to collaborate on storytelling.

- Of the 45,000 children born in Oregon each year, roughly 40% are exposed to the kinds of risk factors (poverty, unstable family backgrounds, substance abuse, criminal records and negative peer associations) that make school success difficult.
- Oregon spends approximately \$380 million per year on services for children ages 0 to 5, not including healthcare, K-12 and tertiary human services (welfare, child protection and behavioral health treatment).
- Recommendations from the Governor's Early Education Transition Team include the following main goals:
  - A. Ensure early identification of families and children for critical, identified indicators of risk.
  - B. Share measurement and accountability across agencies, non-profits and schools.
  - C. Create an Early Childhood System Director in the Governor's Office and an Early Learning Council to consolidate multiple existing efforts, funding streams and administrative structures.

(Data Source: Governor Kitzhaber's  
Early Learning Design Team)





*Second- and third-graders study interdependence in the natural world using observational drawing and watercolor as tools to help them slow down and look closely at their subjects. All photos: The Center for Children's Learning*

Learning Design Team. "Get the kids out there and help them discover. We should never allow their creativity to be stifled."

Governor Kitzhaber's state education plan puts early childhood education at the forefront of an overall transformation of Oregon's schools. His Early Education Transition Team set out one overarching goal: Integrate state funded services, agencies and structures to ensure that every child enters school ready and able to learn, enters first grade ready to read, and leaves first grade reading.

Of course, as Oregon school districts grapple with painful budget cuts, Jaramillo asks, "How can we convince a school district to add more when they already don't have enough?"

The Early Education Transition Team addressed the delicate balance of budget and student need in their recommendations to the Governor: Our investment will be returned through productive and responsible citizens. If we wait, or fail to implement these changes, we put at risk the future prosperity of our state by failing to produce a globally competitive workforce.

"It's not just about creating kids that are good test-takers," says the Center for Children's Learning's McKay. "Opal Schools' mission is to create a holistic environment where kids are good thinkers and good people." Thanks to the Center for Children's Learning's research and documentation, the investment that Opal School is making in creativity has already demonstrated that it pays off.



*Preschool students use images of the natural world to design their own paper mache and wire trees. The lesson pictured was focused on learning about the texture of tree bark.*

# Academy of Arts & Academics: Arts Integration

## *Springfield's Only Charter School Challenges Its Students to Create and Thrive*

As a sophomore at Springfield's Academy of Arts & Academics, Raegan Weir pondered her future in higher education. "I didn't think that I was smart enough, because all through middle school I thought that I was dumb," says Weir, who studied drama at the Academy of Arts & Academics, also known as A3. "I didn't think college was an option." By senior year, however, Weir and nearly two-thirds of her graduating class began preparations to leave the nurturing environment of A3 and set out for college.

Plans for A3 began in 2004 as the result of Springfield's school community desire to create an arts-based high school. At the same time over at Springfield's Thurston High School, drama instructor Michael Fisher was feeling frustrated by the lack of student initiative that he attributed to the way schools looked at art as just a way to earn credits. He consistently watched promising students drop out of drama class to earn easier credits. "Why are we creating situations where kids could just walk away from art when it became difficult?" says Fisher. "I found it depressing."

When Fisher heard about plans for a new arts-based high school, he called the district superintendent that day. "I got jazzed, I got very stoked up about it," says Fisher, now A3's school director. "To me, it was exactly the kind of work I wanted to do."

After receiving Oregon's Small Schools Initiative grant—a project of E3: Employers for Education Excellence—A3 opened their doors in 2006 with 85 students in grades 9 and 10. In 2010, Springfield School District agreed to allow A3 to become the city's first charter school with over 200 students in grades 9 through 12.

A3's curriculum is proficiency-based and demands a great deal of active student involvement. "This type of learning

environment works because it demands accountability from students for their own learning. It's not about gaming the system anymore," says Fisher. "We've created a culture of learning where students are pushed, it's not about achieving that 100% on a test and then you're done."

"The first thing we do when we're starting a project is we're all very involved in what exactly we're learning whether it's chemistry or Beat Poetry," says student Weir. "We all find a certain aspect of the topic that we're interested in. We include all of the different art forms—drama, photography, dance." A fundamental difference in this approach, says Weir, is that "It's not about what the teacher expects the student to produce. But [rather] the whole class coming up with what we want to share with the community."

It's a rewarding environment for the teachers, nearly 40% of who are professional artists because they are given autonomy and the ability to work closely with smaller groups of students. "Teachers here act more as coaches, not referees," explains Fisher. "Our job as coaches is to find ways to allow the kids to excel."



*Raegan Weir as Sarah Norman in Children of a Lesser God. The role inspired her to develop an American Sign Language project, demonstrating her mastery of a second language. "The first thing we do when we're starting a project is we're all very involved in what exactly we're learning whether it's chemistry or Beat Poetry," she said.*





*The Carnival of Physics is more than an average science fair. Using complex, real-world problems, students are challenged to view science outside the context of a text book to see its relevance and purpose. All photos: Springfield Academy of Arts & Academics*

This type of teaching—where teachers look less to grades and more to student-centered teaching—uses a complex set of teaching skills. “Proficiency-based learning requires a lot of expertise from teachers and principals,” says Donna Accord, Project Manager at E3. “Yet it creates a learning environment where there is a great deal of student engagement and ownership in learning. It’s not just a matter of earning credits and moving on.” In the end, Accord says, “The teacher shouldn’t be the hardest working one in the room—the students should be!”

Few of the current 205 students came to A3 with the intention of becoming professional artists. The main draw, reports Fisher, is the school’s small size and focus on integrated arts and academics. But students graduate with the idea that “they are someone who expresses him or herself through their art,” he says.

The arts-intensive curriculum challenges students and they reap the benefits of the A3 model even after they’ve earned their diplomas. “A3 prepared me for college in so many ways,” says Weir who started at the University of Oregon in fall 2010. “Not just the level of confidence I gained in my art, but I am the only one in my college class who is able to problem solve. I’m totally prepared for college.”



*At the Carnival of Physics, Roth Preston demonstrates his physics proficiency through a game he created to illustrate the concept of velocity.*

# Promising Playwright Conor Eifler

## *Portland's Theater Community Fosters the Creative Impulses of an Actor and Writer*

Some folks spend a lifetime deciding what they want to be when they grow up. For Portland playwright and actor Conor Eifler, 21, his destiny became clear early, at five years old to be exact. As a young thespian in community theater, Eifler appeared in so many plays that by middle school, he was the go-to kid whenever a Portland casting director needed a “young boy actor” for a new production.

Eifler's passion for theater and acting led him to Portland's da Vinci Arts Middle School, an arts-integrated sixth- through eighth-grade school. It was there that Eifler found a supportive school environment filled with students focused on their own artistic endeavors. “That made middle school a whole lot easier,” he says.

As a junior and senior at Cleveland High School, Eifler took part in Portland Center Stage's *Visions and Voices*, a program that brings playwrights into the classroom for free, intensive residencies during which the artists spend five to six hours each week teaching students about the elements of theater and assisting each of them in writing a short play.

“Often in teaching arts education there are two types of students, the obedient, grade-motivated, (who tend to write plays that are fairly uninteresting but are in proper format), and the irreverent rebellious (who, if they get around to writing the play, write exciting but messy plays). Conor transcended type,” recalls *Visions and Voices* instructor Mike O'Connell. “He was self-motivated in the best way, from a love of the work and the passion to see his work come to fruition.”

During his senior year, Eifler's play *Hiking Boots* explored the relationship between two teenaged boys who find a *Playboy* magazine during a sleepover—the perfect dramatic set-up to explore such difficult subjects as homophobia and sexual identity. Later, Portland Center Stage showcased the work as a “Curtain Raiser” before another larger production. “*Hiking Boots* was bold, funny and heart-breaking,” says Mike O'Connell. “It was the hit of our year.”

“There is something so important in telling high school students that their words are valuable,” says Eifler, now a graduating senior at University of Portland. “Having their words read out loud and having their words read in a supportive environment means a lot.”



*In November 2010, Connor played George Gibbs in a production of Our Town, contributing to the outstanding senior award he received from the drama department upon his graduation. Also pictured: Katy Portell as Emily Webb. Photo: Steve Hambuchen*

Eifler credits his success to the opportunities afforded him by his parents and the arts education through the public schools. Playwriting especially broadened his view of the world. “Writing plays—writing dialog from multiple perspectives has made me understand people more,” says Eifler. All of his years of cultivating his craft under such great tutelage has earned Eifler a number of significant accolades: Portland's Nomadic Theatre commissioned him to write an update of *Alice in Wonderland* in 2010, he was a finalist at the American College Theater Festival, and at the University of Portland's commencement, he'll receive the Drama Department's award for outstanding senior.

“What struck me about Conor was his incredible openness to change and growth,” says Matthew B. Zrebski, a playwright who worked with Conor at Portland Center Stage's JAW: A Playwright's Festival. “His desire was never to assert his ego but rather to better his work through trusting the development process. As a Promising Playwright, he dove in with such enthusiasm at JAW, and he was very courageous with his exploration of theme. That is the sign of a true artist: risk taking. To this day, my time mentoring him remains one of my favorite memories of teaching.”

“I keep looking at stuff around me,” says Eifler of the powerful impact his arts training has had on his life. “I'm always writing and acting and looking to be inspired by plays and movies, listening to music that I've never heard before.”

For now, Eifler's post-graduate plans are indeterminate, though they might take him to Chicago or theater internships around the country. He takes with him the many years of support and foundational learning of the theater community of Portland. “I want to pursue a career in the arts and I'm happy my education made that happen.”

Not bad for the go-to young boy actor.