

Our Teachers' Wisdom

Teachers are at the core of the success of the district and of our children. The Fine Arts Booster Group's mission includes a focus on supporting and partnering with staff members. Teachers guide, support, lead, inspire. The boosters had the privilege of reflecting on education with recently retired elementary visual art teacher Pat Amato. Pat taught for 37 years in almost every elementary building in the district and shared her insights about art education. On our tenth year, the boosters salute and celebrate our teachers' wisdom.

What is the role of the elementary art classroom? The art classroom is a place where kids can try a different side of their brains. Students are allowed to think freely, immerse themselves in materials and allow a plan to emerge. The environment is a safe one, where students can feel relaxed enough to experiment and just enjoy. Adults forget that kids do have a "voice" at a young age, things they want to say or ways they see themselves. Art enables students to express that voice in different ways.

What does art teach? Art teaches many things...the basics, like eye/hand coordination, as well as classroom community skills like kindness, organization and safety. Art teaches how to solve problems, socially and materially. Art teaches us how to reflect and then talk about ourselves and our feelings, as well as talk about others' work with respect.

What is the ideal art room? The ideal art room is a safe place where students can find a gallery for their work, allowing them to gather and talk. The ideal art room is interwoven with the grade-level classrooms and their curriculum themes. The ideal art room helps kids connect to their experiences throughout their day. The ideal art room has a small number of students, and those students can work until they are done, not constrained by a clock, with natural light, sinks, and a mixed-age peer group. And, the ideal art room always has an open door to parents.

What changes have occurred over 37 years? Now everything moves fast. Teachers don't have as much time to pursue teachable moments. Testing takes the most focus, along with administrative duties. Teachers don't have as much time to share ideas and to teach each other. Art is still misunderstood and is often still seen as a frill, disconnected from the classroom.

What advice would you give to the brand new art teacher? Become friends with your custodian and secretary and get to know your principal. Meet all of the classroom teachers and find out what they do each week. Look to the community for resources, including volunteers and materials. Check out the local galleries and museums, and get visiting artists to your classroom. Include parents and share your newsletter with them, including vocabulary for home discussion. Take visitation days to other art classrooms and learn from your colleagues. Set up your room in a way that works for you and your students. Check out the school library to see what resources it offers and integrate literature into your art room.

What advice would you give to students? You don't have to wait until you grow up to be an artist. Think of yourself as an artist right off the bat. Keep trying things. Practice and get comfortable with new skills. Be conscious and considerate of your peers. Establish positive routines in the art classroom that can then become routines elsewhere.

What advice would you give to parents? Value art and your children will, too. Take them to gallery nights and museum openings and talk to some artists!

Final thoughts? I can't imagine doing anything else with my life. Teaching was a calling. It was a hard job, but the fabulous students gave me so much.

FABG salutes Pat and all our great teachers!