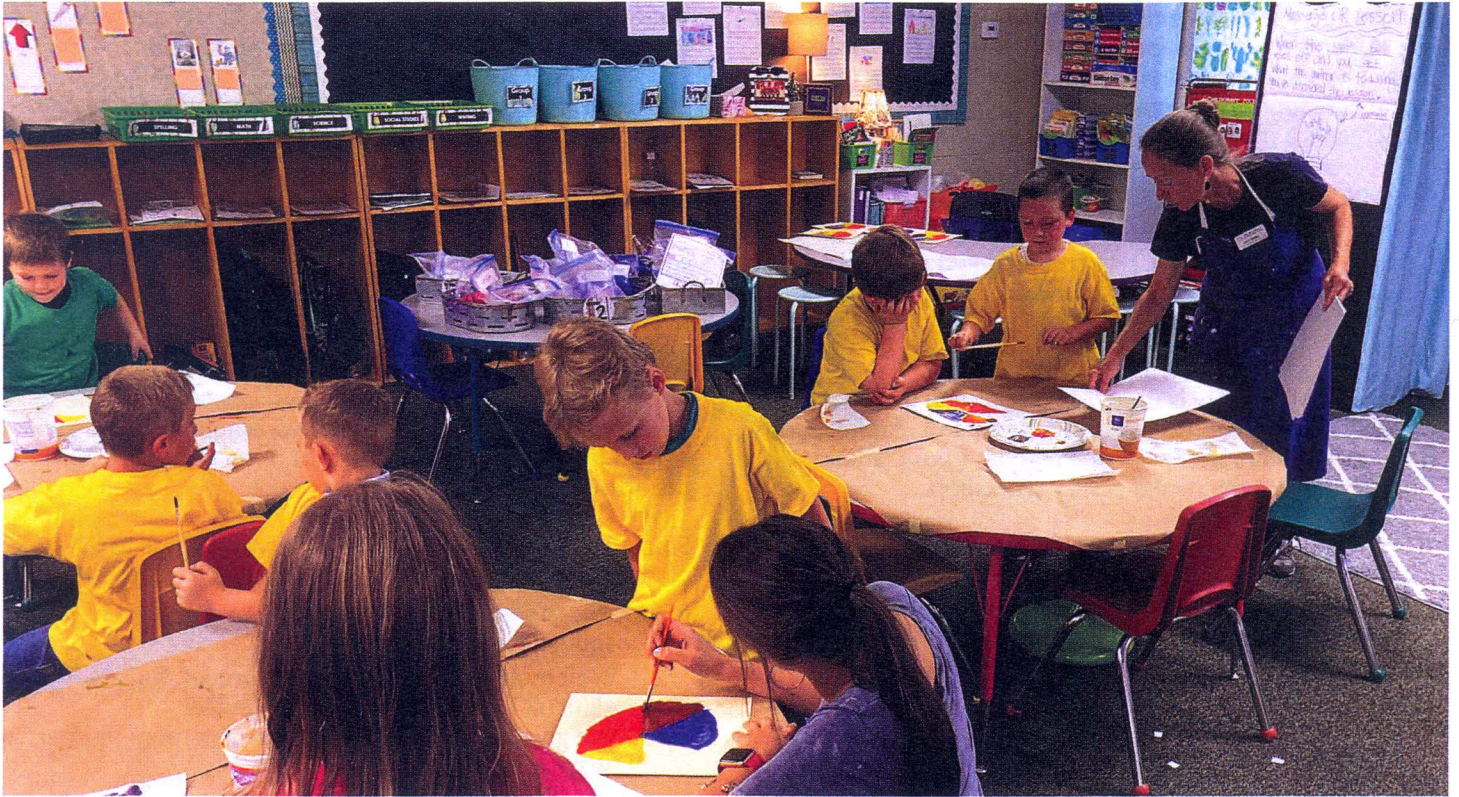




## Arkansas Learning Through the Arts Inspires, Invigorates, Excites Students



*Mountain Pine Elementary students create paintings as a part of the Arkansas Learning Through the Arts Program curriculum integrating arts into the classroom learning experience. (Photo courtesy of ALTTA.)*

When Martha Smither moved to Hot Springs Village 20 years ago, she brought experience from a Young Audiences Arts for Learning affiliate in Dallas. Her passion for integrating arts into classroom curriculum eventually led Smither to found an affiliate in our state, Arkansas Learning Through the Arts.

“Our mission is not just to put arts in the classroom but also to improve student achievement. We provide high quality dance, music, theater, poetry, storytelling, watercolor, crafts and pottery workshops in regular and specialty classrooms for schools in six counties today,” Smither says. “Our intention is to be in half the schools in Arkansas in the next 10 years. We want to concentrate on rural and underserved areas where students don’t have a lot of other opportunities for arts enrichment.”

Craig Welle, ALTTA Executive Director, was the Executive Director of Enrichment Curriculum and Instruction for the Dallas Independent School District when he met Smither. After he moved to Arkansas, Welle helped create a program

of arts education that is solidly based on the needs of Arkansas classroom teachers and students.

“Our workshop curriculums taught by teaching artists connect directly to the Arkansas Department of Education Literacy Framework, with ties to the Social Studies, Math, Sciences, Art, Music, Theater Arts and Dance Frameworks,” he says.

The first workshops were scheduled in the 2012-2013 school year, and the number of students participating has increased 20-40% annually. Last year ALTTA reached 9,225 students in 21 elementary and secondary schools. Welle visits most all the ALTTA workshops, taking photos and making sure the teaching artists have everything they need. During the early part of the schoolyear, he helps teachers choose from the arts offerings, schedule their workshops and gathers feedback from teachers.

“The ‘a’ in the STEAM movement is what we are all about, with arts added to science, technology, engineering and math,” Welle says. “In science there is a scientific method and in the arts there is a creative process. They are actually very similar. Science can be creative, and the arts require



deep understanding to master. What we are doing is adding the creative process to STEM." The most popular offering is poetry, according to Smither, who now serves as chair of the ALTTA Board of Directors.

"Many teachers find poetry difficult to teach. When poets can go into the classroom, they make poetry fun. The poets ask students to write poems and allow them to express themselves and share feelings in a way that is not often seen in the classroom. That makes students better acquainted and creates a more cohesive learning environment."

"My students are much more interested in poetry and

***"No matter the many differences between my students in any given classroom, bringing art into their learning process ignites their excitement..."***

**— Kathleen Marleneanu**

different ways poetry is used, for example in music. Also, there is a bigger interest in checking out and reading poetry from the class library," says one teacher from Garland County reviewing a recent poetry workshop.

A Phillips County educator says, "This was an awesome experience for the kids. They anxiously awaited our guest to come back each day. They showed excitement and enthusiasm each day. I look forward to being able to do this yearly and build upon what has been started."

Dance workshops also are popular, especially among young students. "One of the things schools try to do is to get kids more actively engaged. Dance gets students out of their desks and moving," Welle says. "Teachers tell us that the students are so engaged that behavior and class control is not an issue. The teaching artists tie the dances directly to what the students are reading in class and to their literacy curriculum."

Kathleen Marleneanu, one of the ALTTA teaching artists, regularly goes into the classroom to teach ballet,

modern/contemporary dance and jazz. "My experience with ALTTA workshops has taught me that no matter the many differences between students in any given classroom — like background, reading level, emotional state, maturity, test scores, physical traits or personality traits — bringing art into their learning process ignites their excitement and interest to explore the stories and workshop topics in new and deeper ways," she says.

"I believe these workshops are helpful to students because they provide a memorable way to connect what they are learning in the classroom with the joy and creative expression that inherently comes with art," Marleneanu

continues. "Teachers appreciate this, too, and are able to use what we work on during the workshops to broaden and extend their classroom discussions on the subject even after the artist has left."

Smither outlines three ways ALTTA brings value to the classrooms:

1. We change students' mindset for learning — they become more interested.
2. We provide schools arts opportunities that are difficult to find in many communities
3. We give hands-on examples for classroom teachers in ways to teach.

Schools pay \$80 for each ALTTA session, plus travel expenses for artists. Mini-grants from the Arkansas Arts Council are available to cover a portion of the cost. But to operate Arkansas Learning Through the Arts, obtaining grants and raising funds are essential. Those interested in supporting this creative and results-oriented program may visit [ALTTA.org](http://ALTTA.org).

Poet Kai Coggin speaks in an assembly at Fountain Lake Middle School sharing her experiences as a professional artist and author as a part of her ALTTA residency at the school where one of the focuses is career exploration. (Photo courtesy of ALTTA.)

