

ENGAGE

Beyond the Canvas — How Art Can Improve Learning In the Classroom

By Kim Dishongh



Patricia Carreras spent the week talking to second graders about how colors can be used to convey emotion and how movement can help tell a story. She stood on the chair so every student could see, and called out different emotions. The whole class responded with movement to convey different feelings.

Arkansas Learning Through the Arts (ALTA) founder Martha Smither is drawing a path to higher levels of student achievement in Arkansas.

Smither, a long-time supporter of the arts, has seen the value of using various forms of art to engage students in lessons about social studies, math, science, literacy and more.

A songwriter, for example, might teach first and second graders about descriptive words, sequencing and stories and work with them to write a story that becomes a song. A theater artist could help with high schoolers to read, understand and perform Shakespeare's *Othello*.

The scientific reason this interlocking of art and academics can be more successful than traditional classroom teaching alone is complex, according to Smither, involving stimulation of the "right brain" and sparking creativity and problem-solving. The simpler explanation is that it keeps kids interested and engaged.

Based in Hot Springs, ALTA serves schools all over the state, offering links to Arkansas Department of Education frameworks standards for social studies, math, science and more — for each of the workshops to make it easier for

educators to decide which would work best for their students.

"Our primary goal is to bring the arts in to teach literacy and academics," said Dan Breshears, ALTA's executive director and a retired school administrator.

But, he said, ALTA's programs can go beyond academics. A poet encouraging middle schoolers to write poetry and share it with the class might be a bonding experience that ultimately helps with student behavior.

"Kids get to know each other better, and they have a more cohesive classroom," said Smither. "The teacher says, 'Oh my gosh, who would have known that this would have such an effect on social emotional learning?'"

Artists working with ALTA typically spend 45 minutes to an hour each day during a three- or four-day session.

"To the extent that we can take the arts into the classroom and inspire students to learn better," Smither said, "it's a tremendous contribution, not only to their personal lives but also to the creative workforce. As they become better educated they have more creative problem-solving. Long term, it has a very significant effect on the life of the community."