

Stephen F. Austin State University

Texas Tides intent on reintroducing art in public schools

Emily Taravella - April 5, 2007



Alisa Ripley, art teacher at Thomas J. Rusk Elementary, reclines on a pile of fabric samples surrounded by her fourth graders, who are using the material to make a quilt. Ripley is part of a project funded by Texas Tides at Stephen F. Austin State University, that is seeking to bring art back to the public schools.

An old locker room in the gym at Thomas J. Rusk Elementary has been transformed into a studio for budding artists, as part of an initiative by Texas Tides to reintroduce art in Nacogdoches public schools.

Texas Tides is a program initiated in September 2005, through an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant that was awarded to Ralph W. Steen Library at Stephen F. Austin State University.

Four days a week, Alisa Ripley teaches fourth graders art lessons that are closely tied to the curriculum they are studying in class.

Texas has a state curriculum for art classes, but Ripley said poorer school districts can ill afford supplies.

"We started talking about this last fall," she said, of the effort to offer art at TJR. "The school board agreed to pay for the supplies, and SFA agreed to provide the rest of the funding."

Approximately 100 students began attending Ripley's art class once a week, beginning in January.

"Most of these children, unless they previously attended private school, have never had art lessons,"

Ripley said. "So I had to start with what is usually taught in first and second grades. Because of their eagerness, they've quickly caught up to where they're supposed to be."

On the most basic level, art education supports learning lines, spaces and shapes, Ripley said. Art also helps students develop better handwriting skills and math computation skills and it serves as a foundation for some of the situations students will later encounter in science labs, Ripley said.

"Art is also an excellent outlet for children with discipline problems," she said. "Those who act up learn to express themselves in a healthy manner, and it helps to reduce problems throughout the school day."

It's important for students to have a structured part of each day that is set aside for personal expression, through music, theater or art, Ripley said.

"Without these outlets, they don't learn how to express themselves in a healthy way," she said. "Studies have proven that students who attend schools where art is taught have higher test scores and fewer discipline problems."

Ripley has both a bachelor's degree and master's degree of fine arts, and she taught art in Kentucky public schools before such programs began seeing major cuts, nationwide. She said she was one of the first casualties of these funding cuts.

Ripley has continued to teach art, privately, and for years she has taught at Nacogdoches Recreation Center. She said she prefers to work with elementary school children.

"I've set up art programs for national conferences related to home-schooling, and I've lobbied in Texas to get art education secured in the elementary schools."

Ripley is a working artist, as well, but she said she spends most of her time focusing on the students she teaches.

In an effort to demonstrate the value of art in schools, Ripley said her semester at TJR will culminate in an exhibition and performance at 7 p.m. May 10 at TJR.

Her students have been studying the Father of Texas, and they are going to work on developing scripts and art related to that topic.

SFA art students will build a set and create costumes for the children, for the public performance.

"This performance will utilize theater, music and visual arts," she said.

Ripley said that parents who learned she was teaching an art class in a public school were enthusiastic.

"Their level of interest has been phenomenal," she said. "They all want their students in art classes."