

Stephen F. Austin State University

Art at TJR may be here to stay

Emily Taravella - May 25, 2007

An art program at Thomas J. Rusk Elementary was so successful this spring, plans are underway to continue classes in the fall.

In January, TJR principal Dr. Delinda Neal hired Alisa Ripley, who has a bachelor's and master's degree of fine arts, to begin teaching art classes. Funding for her salary was provided through Texas Tides (<http://tides.sfasu.edu/home.html>), a program funded in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services and administered through Ralph W. Steen Library at SFA.

Ripley taught fourth graders weekly art lessons tied to their science and social studies curriculum, and their work was exhibited earlier this month in the TJR auditorium. Students made costumes, created a set and performed a skit related to what they learned about history through their art lessons.

Nacogdoches ISD superintendent Dr. Rodney Hutto described the project as "very successful."

"TJR did a great job enriching the lives of children," he said. "Music and art cultivate creativity. Art is a talent, an area of giftedness, and the fact that we've got it going at TJR is a starting point (for the district.)"

When Hutto saw the culmination of the students' work, he said he quickly realized he wasn't looking at random drawings.

"The projects were marvelous," he said. "This is worthy of pursuit."

Hutto said he's recently been reading a book titled, "A Whole New Mind," by Dan Pink.

An online description of the book says, "The last few decades have belonged to a certain kind of person with a certain kind of mind - computer programmers who could crack codes, lawyers who could craft contracts, MBAs who could crunch numbers. But the keys to the kingdom are changing hands. The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind - creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers and meaning makers. These people - artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers - will now reap society's richest rewards and share its greatest joys."

Hutto said many educators are starting to appreciate the role that the arts play in cultivating creative thinking.

At the conclusion of her semester working with fourth graders, Ripley provided teachers, parents and students with an art program evaluation form.

The form will be submitted to SFA, NISD and the grant providers, she said. It also will serve as an

introductory report for other schools to actively pursue establishing elementary art education.

Some of the comments she received included the following:

From a teacher: "The students are excited about this elective. It has really brightened the week of many of my at-risk students who have low self-esteem academically but know they can be successful in art. The Texas Tides lessons (that accompany the art lessons) have been a great extension/teaching tool that support the fourth-grade social studies curriculum. The art connections help the factual information "stick" in the child's brain. We all learn better when doing."

From a parent: "My child enjoyed the experience. He would tell me a number of things he was working on and seemed very interested."

From the community: "I thoroughly enjoyed seeing the students on stage in hand-made surroundings. Loved the exhibit. I want art included in the K-5 rotation schedule. Every child needs and deserves it every week. I especially appreciated the contrast of contemporary works with the historical set."

From the students:

* "I think art class is important because it inspires students."

* "Art class is important to me because it's fun, challenging and cool. It's fun because you can get dirty and you can learn new stuff you never thought of doing before. It is challenging because you might forget how to do it, and you might mess up, and you'll have to start all over just to make it right. It is cool because you get a whole 45 minutes to paint, draw, color and a whole lot more. It is important to me and important to many other fourth graders, too."

* "It gets you hyped up. It makes you really want to get in it. It helps you with writing, reading and math. It helps everybody. Believe me it does."

* "It helps you with courage and show off your stuff. I really need art in my life, because it just makes me want to be an illustrator."

* "For some reason, I never thought about art unless somebody brought it up. But ever since art was here, I've been constantly thinking about art."

* "Some people think that art is just drawing and coloring, but it's not! Art has more to it. It has to do with how you're feeling, texture, shapes you use and plenty more."

* "I think it would be brilliant to have art in kinder through fifth, because it is a good thing to start at an early age."

We should have art for all grades. It not only will help them in art, but in enthusiasm, quality and individuality."

* "It's fun, like supercalifragilisticexpialidocious fun!"

* Art is important because it's good exercise. So when I draw, my muscles in my thumb get bigger. Art has not just changed school, it changed my whole outlook on life. Art is fun, because no one can tell you what to draw."

Neal said she has built funding for art into next year's budget, and Ripley said she is compiling a report of the benefits of the pilot program. She will soon be exploring ways to bring art to other elementary schools.