

Art's in the bag for DeSoto Trail students

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"The start of the 2020-2021 school year has been the most challenging of my teaching career," admitted Kim Saleses, art teacher at DeSoto Trail Elementary School.

She is a veteran educator with 22 years of experience in the classroom and she has never encountered anything like this. Her number one priority is keeping her students safe as they continue their exploration and study of visual art.

To do that, Saleses knew she needed to completely rethink her pre-pandemic classroom culture where students shared supplies with one another, sat at group tables, and circulated through communal art making stations. She envisioned a new classroom culture where students sat at assigned desks and used their own set of art supplies.

Saleses applied for and received an Arts Education Grant from the Council on Culture & Arts. The grant was made possible this year through philanthropic support from the Duke Energy Foundation's Powerful Communities program.

With the grant and additional funds she accumulated last year, Saleses purchased enough materials to create 450 individual art supply packets consisting of

a large, super durable, zip-top plastic bag, a clipboard, a sketchbook, various types of paper, and an art mantra.

"Believe it or not, for that many kids, just those materials alone cost \$1,400," she said. To complete the packets, each parent received a suggested supply list which included items like crayons, markers, and scissors. Saleses made sure no student went without these additional supplies regardless of their parents' ability to provide them. "No one felt like, 'oh no, I don't have what I need.'"

Though assembling the bags was a time-consuming task, Saleses said they have saved time overall. "Because they're already prepared, it's a lot less wasted time passing materials out and it's much more streamlined for me."

Additionally, the bags are teaching personal responsibility.

Each student keeps their supply packet in their classroom desk and are charged with bringing the bags to the art room themselves. The supply bags also allow for personal choice as students can use the materials they're most interested in, depending on the project.

Another major benefit is the portability of the supply bags.

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DeSoto Trail fifth grader Victoria Whitney uses supplies from her art bag. PROVIDED

Supplies

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“We’re working on landscapes right now. Students very easily pulled out their clipboard and a piece of paper and we marched out to our nature trail so they could start sketching outside. All of that can be done quickly because they have their own materials, we’re not wasting a lot of time.”

The bags have worked so well that Salesses shared, “honestly, I might do this same exact thing next year and just supplement with paint or other materials when it’s safe to do so.” While the bags have provided many unforeseen benefits, they have also successfully met their main objective as evidenced by contact tracing. “I haven’t had any outbreaks of COVID in the art room which I’m so thankful for and I was really worried about.”

Her students are thankful too. Fourth-grader Mateo Marrero-Baez has always enjoyed art class and said, “it can stretch my imagination.” Mateo felt confident creating in class this year because his art supply bag “keeps away the germs.”

Fifth-grader Victoria Whitney is also an art lover and is grateful to use art-making to express herself

during this difficult time. She said “the art bags make me feel safe. That way other kids, if they have COVID but they don’t know it, I don’t get it from them.”

Salesses had high praise for her students who have shown incredible resilience and adaptability. “I can’t tell you how awesome our kids are. They are amazing. They’re perfectly fine with being responsible for their materials, wearing their masks, standing six feet apart in line, and following directions.”

Even still, Salesses and her colleague are working hard to make sure students are still having fun and enjoying school.

“By providing them with their own individual art kit, students can still experience the joys of art while giving them a sense of security and self-expression in these uncertain times. It’s been a hard year emotionally, so making these bags made me feel better and safer and that I’m doing the right things for the kids. This grant was literally a lifesaver this year.”

This article is part of COCA’s Creativity Persists collection and highlights how area arts educators are continuing to teach and inspire during the COVID-19 pandemic. Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).