

Art Club members learn by doing with mural project

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Courtney Carpenter is on a mission to boost her students' confidence in themselves and pride in their school. As the art teacher at the Tallahassee School of Math & Science, she is building the school's first ever art program and creating innovative ways to beautify the campus.

She was brought on the faculty last year and since then, she's been working to introduce the students to art both during school, though her classes, and after school, through the newly formed art club.

"Due to hybrid learning last year, our art program could only grow so much. This year, we are determined to see it blossom. Our students are excited for art and can't wait to share it all over our

school," said Carpenter.

Carpenter's grand plan includes several murals which will be designed and painted by the students themselves. To realize this vision, Carpenter applied for and received an Art Education Grant offered by the Council on Culture & Arts, made possible this year through philanthropic support from the Duke Energy Foundation's Powerful Communities program.

Art Club in action

Carpenter's Art Club is comprised of 4th, 5th, and 6th graders who kicked off the project by studying murals from all over the world.

"We talked about the artists and looked at different collections of street

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Sixth-grader Blake Thompson (center) paints the mural along with other art club members. COURTNEY CARPENTER

Mural

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art and neighborhoods that have been renovated using public art. We watched a video about how public art can bring a community together and we made that the core of why we were creating our murals.”

After working in teams to conceptualize and revise mural designs, the students got to work painting the first one.

Sixth grader Blake Thompson explained, “the mural is the word ‘learn’ painted in the school colors of red and blue. Inside each of the letters, we painted the word learn again but in different languages.”

He added, “Ms. Carpenter used a projector and then we traced it on the wall and then started painting. There were two tall students that got the part up high. Everybody in our art club worked on it.”

‘Part of their school’

Because of the community building focus of the art club, it was essential that everyone participate.

Carpenter said, “it is so important, with this mural concept, for students to feel that they are a part of their school. It’s not just a place for them to come and then go home. This is their community.” The group is currently working on a second mural concept that will highlight that philosophy.

“The design is of a bunch of kids of all different sizes and colors, all wearing different flags that say we are creators, explorers, learners, and lots of different things,” explained Carpenter. “We want to see ourselves on the walls and in the halls. I’ve put bulletin board strips everywhere so we can put our artwork up so it’s a space that’s theirs. It’s so important to help them feel valued in their community.”

Learning how to paint

The mural project has been an additional opportunity for the students to learn and grow in their own artistic abilities. “Before I got here, most of the kids had not held a paint brush,” said Carpenter. “That was an extra thing that we had to learn, how to hold your brush and painting lightly, using the tip to get nice crisp lines and then using the flatter part of the brush to fill in larger spaces.”

“It’s been really awesome to step back and see that the students now know what they’re doing and I can just let them do it. I am learning how to trust in them because they’re so brilliant and they can do it.” Blake echoed those sentiments and shared, “I feel way more confident now after creating this mural.” He also expressed his pride in being part of the collaborative effort and that’s exactly what Carpenter was hoping for.

“It’s their space,” she said, “and though these murals, they’re making it unique to them and they helped make it that way. That’s how we can help build those relationships with our kids. It can be so impactful and take their education to another level. I want them to feel seen and comfortable because the space around them reflects them and makes them feel included.”

“I want this to be theirs and I want them to feel like they get to leave this legacy here. These murals will positively impact student achievement and can stand as a building block for students, teachers, and all others who enter our doors.”

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).