

Education

Chula Vista schools making \$15M investment in arts education

Mary Plummer

August 27 2015

Chula Vista Elementary School District launched an arts education expansion and teacher hiring spree this summer unlike any that local arts educators have ever seen.

The district serving 30,000 students has hired about 65 new art teachers for this school year, and 3 music teacher spots still remain open.

"I was looking for teachers in the Midwest and on the East Coast and programs coming out of New York and Chicago and Michigan," said Lauren Shelton, who is overseeing the district's major arts expansion.

Shelton, a visual and performing arts resource teacher, personally recruited more than 40 teachers over the summer. "It was a very big search," she said.

The district's unprecedented investment in arts instruction was made possible by \$15 million in funding approved by the Chula Vista school board in June. The allocation flowed from Gov. Jerry Brown's state [local control funding formula](#) that shifted education spending decisions to the local level and targets disadvantaged students.

While other districts have used the funds to [shore up operating budgets](#) heavily cut during the recession, Chula Vista Elementary's ambitious

arts education expansion has turned heads. The goal is ambitious as well: to raise student engagement, boost attendance and improve academic performance among students who are struggling.

Joe Landon, executive director of the California Alliance for Arts Education, said he knew of no districts in California that have acted as aggressively to expand the arts.

Landon praised Chula Vista for living up to the standards set by California's own education code, which [requires districts to provide access to all four art forms](#): dance, music, theater and visual arts.

"It's a courageous and visionary commitment that they've made," he said, adding he hopes other districts will see Chula Vista as an example of what's achievable.

Landon also said that he knows of about 40 other California districts that have also invested in the arts through new local control funding.

Fast-tracking teacher hiring

One of the district's new hires is 23-year-old Zoe Kumagai, a music teacher at Veterans Elementary School in Chula Vista. Shelton recruited her while Kumagai was still a master's degree student at Longy School of Bard College.

"It was just a straight shot," Kumagai said. "Graduated in June and then got hired — I think it was two weeks later here."

Kumagai said her hiring has been a whirlwind. She's one of more than 10 first-year art teachers joining the district and she's now in charge of teaching music to 900 kids.

Mattie Jackson, one of Kumagai's kindergarten students at Veterans Elementary, is learning rhythm and singing.

"Music is fun and I like it," she said. "I think we're learning about something that's cool."

The district's heavy recruiting came as schools across California report [growing teacher shortages](#). As baby boomers retire and enrollment in teacher preparation programs decline, fully credentialed, experienced teachers are harder to recruit and some districts have opted for interns and substitutes to fill their openings.

Expansion with big ambitions

The arts transformation underway in Chula Vista is one that many in the community thought would never happen.

The district had incorporated arts into the school day in the past. Until the 1970s, the schools had an arts coordinator, according to district spokesman Anthony Millican.

But in recent decades, arts instruction had all but disappeared. Last school year, the district had just a small handful of full-time art teachers, Millican said. The district emphasized testing and focused heavily on teaching students the language arts and math.

Sylvia Echeverria, Kellogg Elementary's principal, remembers the days when even bringing out crayons was frowned upon in the district.

As an educator, she knew something was missing.

"We saw that kids were struggling with creativity," she said. "They didn't feel that freedom to just explore."

Then the [San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory](#) started an after-school program in 2010 and things began to shift.

Along with partners that included the [VH1 Save the Music Foundation](#) and [La Jolla Playhouse](#), the symphony worked with the district and slowly

increased music instruction in the schools. Dalouge Smith, the youth symphony's CEO, describes the rapid increase in arts as a cold turkey change.

"I think it's one thing when a school district has had some visual and performing arts and they're rebuilding," he said. "To me, what's remarkable is this is a school district that really was starting from zero."

John Nelson, the district's former assistant superintendent for instructional services who retired this summer, said the expansion of arts education required support from parents and buy-in from district educators.

"People were not receptive to it in the beginning," said Nelson, who championed increasing arts education in the district. "The mindset was all about English language arts and math."

When the symphony's after-school programs started showing improvements in areas like student achievement — fourth graders, for example, had reading scores more than 10 percent higher than their peers — minds began to change.

'Now they get into it'

One recent weekday, fifth-grader Azul Diaz stuck around after school at Kellogg Elementary to practice the violin. The sessions are part of Community Opus Project, the after-school program run by the symphony that complements the arts instruction Azul receives during the day.

Ever since her school ramped up the arts, Azul said her classmates have changed.

"We're starting to get more people to like music, 'cause a lot of people didn't really like it at first. But now they get into it," she said.

Carol Castanon, a parent who has an autistic son, said funding for the arts

has been like winning the lottery.

"I was very amazed because I didn't think that they were going to give this much money," she said.

Castanon said music in school has changed her son's life and helped him interact with his peers in a way that wasn't possible before. "I think it's the best thing that could happen to him," she said.

The district designated the \$15 million for the arts over three years, at \$5 million a year. After that, district officials hope to implement a long-term plan that will permanently restore arts instruction in the schools.

In the meantime, the districts operating San Marcos and Ventura schools have been calling. They said they want to bring back the arts, too.

This story has been updated to reflect new numbers as of Nov. 12, 2015.



Zoe Kumagai, 23, a new music teacher at Veterans Elementary School in Chula Vista, California, instructs a group of kindergarten students. Kumagai is one of more than 10 first-year teachers hired by the Chula Vista Elementary School District. Due in part to the teacher shortage in California, the district is still trying to hire 16 additional art teachers. MARY PLUMMER/KPCC



Student artwork is displayed at Veterans Elementary School in Chula Vista, California. This year, the school added four visual and performing arts teachers. Many students in the Chula Vista Elementary School District have never had art or music instruction until now. MARY PLUMMER/KPCC



Students at Kellogg Elementary in Chula Vista, California, practice music after school. MARY PLUMMER/KPCC



Visual arts teacher Joanne Mathes points to her students' artwork displayed on the wall of a classroom at Veterans Elementary in Chula Vista, California. She spent 18 years as a classroom teacher before switching to arts instruction this year when the district opened a slew of new positions: "I'm hoping that this brings the joy of learning back to all kids." MARY PLUMMER/KPCC