

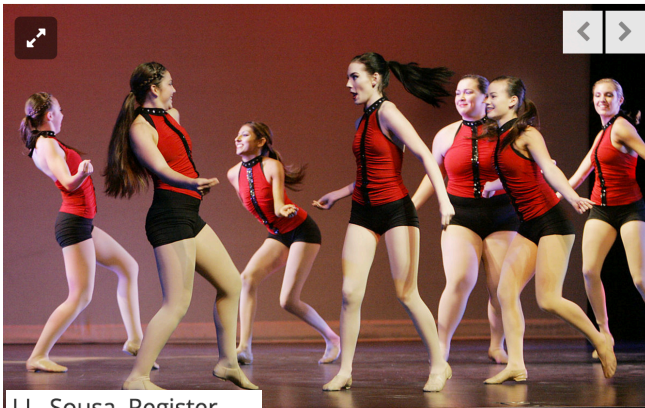
FEATURED

Expect more art in American Canyon, Napa classrooms

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The adoption of a local master plan for more visual and performing arts in the classroom has garnered statewide attention and praise for the Napa Valley Unified School District.

“They are a model for others in this region to see what’s possible when people make a commitment,” said Joe Landon, executive director of the California Alliance for Arts Education, a statewide group dedicated to giving kids more opportunities to experience artistic creativity.



J.L. Sousa, Register

Members of the Vintage High School Performing Arts Program

The school board adopted NVUSD’s arts education master plan in June. The plan, which took almost three years to craft, involved a broad range of people — not just teachers and administrators, but also arts advocates and philanthropists in the Napa Valley — to come together and work to broaden the K-12 curriculum so students could learn more than just math, English, history and science.

The plan will need to be turned into a K-12 arts curriculum and implemented in schools in Napa,

American Canyon and Yountville — a process that is expected to take years.

The district’s public-private partnership approach to creating this plan started generating buzz among education professionals and arts lovers before the formal adoption, prompting Landon’s organization to come to Napa earlier this month.

The California Alliance for Arts Education held its statewide summit on Sept. 9 at NVUSD headquarters, where teachers, administrators, and nonprofit leaders from around the state gathered to learn how the school district forged a 5-year plan to provide the arts to every student.

“Their plan will lead this district into a new era of access to arts education,” said Landon. “This is something we want to show” to educators across California, “so we were particularly interested in telling this story.”



Steve Venz, OCDOE, NVUSD School Board Member Frances Ortiz-Chavez, Sara Brothers, California Alliance, and Sibyl O'Malley, California Alliance

Summit attendees included Steve Venz, a visual and performing arts coordinator for the Orange County Department of Education, overseer of 28 school districts, nearly all of which have incorporated arts learning into their curriculums. Venz said one impressive thing about NVUSD's arts master plan is its level of detail.

“It looks good in terms of concrete timelines,” said Venz. “Most of the plans I’ve seen don’t [have that].”

Robin Hampton, coordinator for the Arts Council Napa Valley Education Alliance, was

involved from the very beginning in the master plan's development. Exposure to the arts is something every child should have because of the lasting impact it can have on young minds, she said.

The arts “aren’t just an educational value — it’s a life value,” said Hampton. “It’s not just getting up on stage and singing a song. It’s those kids now have more confidence when they do a presentation in their career.”

Two early and important players in the arts master plan were Festival Napa Valley and the Arts Council of Napa Valley. Festival Napa Valley, whose mission is to make the arts accessible to all residents, provided a \$50,000 grant to support the early planning work that went into the master plan.

Sonia Tolbert, the organization's general manager, said the “goal [of the plan] is for every student to have equal access to arts education.”

That's especially important in a district like NVUSD, which has thousands of low-income kids. “All means all,” said Superintendent Patrick Sweeney in reference to his district's goal of “equitable access to opportunities.”

“All students need the arts,” he told the summit audience.

The Arts Council of Napa Valley agrees. Its CEO and president, Olivia Everett, said they became involved in the master plan because of the need “to create curriculum that is responsive to what students are going to live through and what their lives are because that's how you engage them.”

Everett said the plan is to incorporate both well-established art forms as well as those culturally relevant to today's student body, more than half of which is Hispanic.

“That’s not to say traditional, classical arts are going out. Those are still fundamentals,” said Everett. “But how do we blend those” with non-traditional art forms, she asked. “You want to meet them [students] where they are and introduce them to new things,” she said.

Everett said the arts can play an important role in creating global citizens who can relate to others from all walks of life.

“Introducing different cultures and ideologies, that’s something the arts do really well,” she said.

Out of the mouth of babes

Those attending the one-day summit heard from local students about how important arts education has been for them. Jori Herman, a Napa High School senior and choir member, gave a speech at lunch time telling how early exposure to the arts at Salvador Elementary School — a magnet school that provides “artful learning” to kids — changed her life and those of other students

Arts programs, she said, have provided students “with a sense of family, a place of expression” as well as providing “traveling opportunities for kids to expand their worlds.”

As a member of Napa High’s renowned choral program, Herman has had the chance to perform not just in the District Auditorium, but in Carnegie Hall and in Ireland’s grand cathedrals.

“Arts programs are blessed with the brightest students on campus,” said Herman, “yet they are the silent majority” who prefer to “lock themselves in a room to work on a violin solo” or “spend nine hours on a canvas painting.”

Herman is an example of why NVUSD wants to expand the availability of the arts before kids reach high school. The district is committed to creating “sequential” learning of the arts, so children can have classes at all three levels of their public school education.

“There is marching band,” said Hampton. “Some elementary schools put on school plays, but what’s needed is sequential arts education.”

Lisa Sullivan, a visual and performing arts teacher at Vintage High School, agreed that arts learning must begin sooner, even as early as kindergarten.

“We would not expect our child to walk into a college prep class or a high school English class and expect them to write a 200-page essay or take an algebra test if they didn’t know their A-B-C’s or how to add one plus equals two,” said Sullivan.

“But that’s what we’re asking our children to do at the high school level in many visual or performing arts or the middle school levels,” she said, “but they can’t because they weren’t taught it at the elementary level.”

NVUSD has promised to make the arts a key part of elementary education in part because its top official enjoyed that very opportunity when he was a boy.

Sweeney grew up in Pleasanton, where in third grade he had instrumental music as well as visual arts during elementary school. His middle school made visual arts available for every student, allowing them to take classes in sculpture, drawing and painting.

“For many of us who grew up in California in the Sixties and Seventies, which I did,” said Sweeney, “we had arts everywhere. We had music in the elementary schools, we had robust band programs, we had drama, we had visual arts.”

But that changed in the Eighties as a result of Prop. 13.

That was then, this is now

Adopted in 1978, Prop. 13 dramatically reduced property taxes for homeowners and businesses. It also had the related consequence of reducing revenues for government programs, including education. Arts programs were some of the first ones slashed by school districts in the early 1980s and going forward.

Sweeney noted at the arts education summit that California was once in the top 10 among states for school funding. “We’re in the bottom 10 now,” he said.

But the way California schools are funded changed recently, thanks to a decision made in Sacramento. Starting in 2013, the California Department of Education was instructed by the Legislature to establish the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which replaced the existing K-12 finance system that had been around for four decades.

LCFF was music to the ears of school district administrators. It granted them more freedom in deciding how to spend the monies they receive from the state for their schools.

The LCFF did “two really exciting things,” said Sibyl O’Malley, director of communications for the California Alliance for Arts Education.

First, it allowed districts “to personalize the education they provide to students,” according to O’Malley. The second was it gave them local control over their resources.

“In the old days Sacramento created categorical funds and said, ‘You have this much for this, and this much for that,’” she said.

Now, districts can spend their state money as they see fit, as long as they meet eight priorities established by the state.

“We know the arts can contribute to many of those eight priorities,” which include improving school climate, student engagement and academic achievement, said O’Malley.

“We know it [the arts] improves school climate, we know that students come to school more when they have the arts,” she said.