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## iCAN Brings a Fresh Approach to Elementary Arts Education, and It's an Incredible Story

As local network of programs nurtures over 3,000 budding artists and musicians, nonprofit's leadership aims to even out national arts disparities



iCAN executive director Jeffrey Walker, left, and California Alliance for Arts Education executive director Joe Landon, at the recent Santa Barbara County Alliance for Arts Education gathering in Santa Barbara. "In a better, brighter world, of course public education would include in its DNA ... a quality or an investment in high-quality consistent equitable arts education for all," Walker says. (Melissa Walker / Noozhawk photo)

By Melissa Walker, Noozhawk Contributing Writer | [@NoozhawkNews](#) | Published on 06.17.2015 11:40 a.m.

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A local nonprofit organization with a strong foundation has been stepping out from the background, as iCAN (incredible Children's Art Network) has been drawing attention to the bigger conversation of arts education in Santa Barbara County.

Established by philanthropist Jim Kearns in 2005, the iCAN name had remained obscure as recently as five years ago when the Santa Barbara Foundation partnered with it, helping to create a strong base of support to ensure a positive impact for the children involved in its programs.

“The iCAN story is always contextualized in the bigger sets of issues in our community, which are really about the disparity of wealth and poverty, and the disparity of the way in which resources are distributed evenly in public education,” iCAN executive director, Jeffrey Walker told Noozhawk.

“The iCAN story really started with a commitment on the part of our founder to try to address that disparity in this one important sliver of education, which is in the arts.”

iCAN offers high-quality arts programs to those students who are least likely to receive the opportunity, and has grown dynamically from last September, when it had a staff of 27. Today, it boasts 43 artists, musicians and advocates for the arts.

For more than a dozen years, the support of parents and partnerships with the Santa Barbara Unified School District, the City of Santa Barbara and other community organizations have advocated for arts education and youth development.

Additional iCAN partners include the Santa Barbara Education Foundation, which recently honored Kearns and iCAN with a 2015 HOPE Award; the Westmont College Music Department, which assists with mentors and interns for elementary school staff; and UC Santa Barbara's Arts & Lectures, which provides opportunities for educational outreach for students and families.

Visual arts and music programs are offered to nearly 3,000 students across nine sites in Santa Barbara, including Adams School, Adelante Charter School, Cleveland School, Franklin School, Harding University Partnership School, McKinley School, Monroe School, Santa Barbara Community Academy and the Westside Neighborhood Clinic.

Among the students served by more than 30 iCAN teaching artists and musicians, 89 percent are Latino and 70 percent are English language learners.

Around 90 percent of the students receive free or reduced-price meals as part of the National School Lunch Program for low-income children — before school, during school, after school and over the summer.

Part of iCAN’s objective is to be an agent to improve the conditions for teaching through more coalition building and social change.

A recent event with the Santa Barbara County Alliance for Arts Education was the second countywide assembly of more than 80 local leaders developing long-term collaborations to improve the impact of arts education in public schools and the community. The local advocacy network was formed last spring and this year’s event — held at the Alhecama Theatre in downtown Santa Barbara — served to strengthen that commitment.

“I’ve always been proud, since I’ve come to iCAN, that the ‘N’ in iCAN is for network, and the founding vision was that this would be a part of something larger,” Walker said. “Any kind of effective sustainable change is going to be affected by people working together.”



More than 80 community leaders from around Santa Barbara County recently gathered at Santa Barbara’s Alhecama Theatre to discuss ways to better leverage arts education in the community. (Melissa Walker / Noozhawk photo)

The California Alliance for Arts Education is a statewide advocacy and policy organization working toward sequential standard-based education for every student in the state. Utilizing political relationships locally and in Sacramento, the alliance gets involved when it recognizes an area that could use assistance to bring about change.

“It’s an attempt to bring together the community around arts education to make sure that the voices that are speaking up for the issue aren’t just art teachers and parents, but they’re community leaders and business folks, engaging the school district so that it becomes a value that’s shared by the entire community,” said Joe Landon, executive director of the alliance, who spoke to the crowd at the Alhecama.

Landon shared examples of advocacy work that the organization has undertaken and the lessons that could be gleaned to make change happen locally.

“We should acknowledge the role of the arts as a means of improving student outcome,” he said. “It’s that goal of we want every student to be reached and we know that the arts are one of the most effective ways, particularly of reaching students who might otherwise not be touched and engaged.”

According to the Arts Education Partnership, engagement in arts education increases student attendance rates, lowers drop-out rates and raises achievements in math and literacy skills, especially for low-income students and English-language learners.

Additionally, a 2010 study by the University of Central Oklahoma shows that arts education also leads to decreased student disciplinary problems and results in increased parent and community involvement.

iCAN also offers professional development opportunities so its staff can increase their range of knowledge and offer advanced methods of art and music education. Among the programs it has utilized are Project Zero: Summer Institute at Harvard University and the National Art Education Association National Convention in New Orleans.

The Alhecama leadership segment, in combination with the other growing attributes, has increased iCAN’s visibility and that of an evolving and integrated system of partners who are working to create a stronger future for arts education.

“In a better, brighter world, of course public education would include in its DNA, as it does in some communities, a quality or an investment in high-quality consistent equitable arts education for all,” Walker said.

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