

# San Diego Unified Looks to Move Beyond ‘Art for Art’s Sake’

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Teachers, administrators and others work to develop a strategic arts education plan for San Diego Unified School District. ....

By [Kinsee Morlan](#) |  
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Educators from across the country are descending on San Diego next week to learn how Chula Vista Elementary School District and San Diego Unified School District [teach the arts](#).

But as San Diego Unified is sharing its expertise with conference-goers, the district is itself trying to figure out how make sure all of its 130,000 students get a quality arts education.

One expert on fostering creativity in schools is glad the district's undertaking the challenge, but wonders why it took so long.

From now until May, the district's [Visual and Performing Arts Department](#) is developing a strategic arts education plan that would eventually result in a new policy for arts in every school.

“One of the big pieces is definitely equity,” said [Russ Sperling](#), director of San Diego Unified's Visual and Performing Arts Department. “We have strong programs here and there, but how do we make sure every student has access to the strong arts education they deserve?”

Currently, he said, arts education in the district is spotty: Where some schools have thriving programs, others don't even provide the basic programs that can serve as a creative foundation as students progress.

“The strategic plan will fix that,” Sperling said.

Arts teachers, administrators, board members, parents and representatives from local arts organizations are hashing out the plan now, but it likely won't be in effect until 2017 or 2018.

It's still unclear what tangible changes the plan might produce in classrooms, but Sperling said it will emphasize students getting basic introductory lessons in music, dance, theater and visual art. That'll likely include partnering with local artists and arts organizations and more arts training for teachers.

John M. Eger, director of the [Creative Economy Initiative](#) at San Diego State University and author of a [blueprint](#) to make schools more creative for Create CA, a state arts education coalition, said the district's planning efforts are laudable, if late in the game.

"I think that San Diego is finally, *finally* getting with the program and not only putting more art in the schools but recognizing that arts integration - that is, teaching all the subjects through the lens of the arts in a more dramatic, hands-on way - is going to attract students, hold their attention and give them the thinking skills that kids need to survive in the new globalized economy," he said.

Eger said he hopes the plan integrates arts throughout the curriculum - using art to teach broader lessons in science or math. Teaching kids about Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, might involve role-playing important historical moments in his life.

“What the school’s got to understand is that this shouldn’t just be art for art’s sake, this would be giving students completely new skillsets,” Eger said.

Sperling said the district is introducing arts integration through its Learning Through the Arts initiative, currently serving 22 schools. He said the district’s collecting data to tweak the program and expanding the most successful elements to more schools.

But Sperling said the strategic plan isn’t about arts integration; it’s about ensuring every school provides a foundational arts education.

The latter, he said, is a necessary step before the district can even start focusing on the former, he said.

“Unless you’ve been taught how to draw and paint or taught to sing or play a musical instrument then if you go to integrate something in another subject, it doesn’t work because, wait a second, you don’t know how to draw or you don’t know about music or you’ve never done theater or dance,” he said. “So, to me, if you’re going to have a quality integrative experience ... there should be a foundation provided first.”

San Diego Unified has a record of [writing plans it](#) doesn’t really use.

Sperling said he came to the district last September to make sure that doesn’t happen with this plan. In his previous gig at the San Diego County Office of Education, he worked on five arts plans with

five different districts, but never had a role putting them into action.

“And so when the position opened I just thought, you know this is my opportunity to come here, work on doing the plan and then initiating the plan,” he said. “I know all eyeballs are on me and that’s fine – I’m very comfortable with that. I didn’t come here to be a wallflower, I came here to do something.”

This article relates to: [Education](#)



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