Benicia is a community that is well-known for its art, and Benicia Unified School District’s art programs have been honored by the state. However, many feel that more work can be done to take art education in Benicia to the next level, and that was the catalyst for the formation of the Benicia Arts Now Community (BANC), which had its launch event Friday at Benicia Middle School.
BANC is a coalition of stakeholders in Benicia who share the goal of advocating for art education for every child in Benicia. Some of these goals were presented at a launch breakfast at BMS, with food catered by Sprankle’s Deli and attendance by several notable figures in Benicia. The event was also a showcase for the artistic talents of Benicia’s youth. Artwork and centerpieces created by students at all school levels lined the room, and BMS students got to demonstrate their acting skills. Seventh-grader Miah Chao and sixth-grader Liam McGee performed theatrical monologues, and seventh-graders Katie Wade and Natalia Trumm acted out a skit titled “The New Kid.”

In her opening remarks, BANC Coordinator Jenny Manzo talked about her son Daniel—who graduated from Benicia High in 2017—had struggled in elementary school. One day, she suggested he sign up for a drama class. Daniel had never acted before, so Jenny said she felt very nervous.

“I remember on his first performance, I was terrified for him,” she said. “I was so scared for him. He came out, and he delivered the lines with confidence but also with this spark of joy that I hadn’t seen in him for so long. It was from that moment, it was like this path that had been opened to him that he never knew was available.”

Manzo said she believes the arts provide students with a venue to be safe and secure and allow them to be themselves. She also believes that such courses should be offered as part of the school curriculum, not just afterschool programs.

“It takes an entire community coming together to make that happen, so today is a huge day,” Manzo said.

The next to speak was Stephanie Rice, BUSD’s educational services coordinator whose daughters are involved in the arts. She went over what BUSD offers in terms of its art programs and partnerships.

“Everything we do here in Benicia Unified is rounded by our district’s vision: ‘Where all students achieve at their highest potential in an engaging, inspiring and challenging learning environment,’” she said.

Rice discussed the art programs offered at each level. The elementary schools take part in music once a week and provide fourth and fifth-graders with the option to play in a band after school, elementary choir, afterschool drama clubs, art days, talent shows and the STEAM Wheel for third through fifth-graders.

Benicia Middle School offers a variety of courses, including art classes, drama, stagecraft, photography, band and beginning music choir. Benicia High School has different levels of art, drama and band plus courses such as musical theatre, graphic design, Advanced Placement Drawing, sculpture, drawing, ceramics and AP Art History.

“These courses are highly sought out,” Rice said.
Among Liberty High School’s offerings is an after-school Art Club, which is supported by Arts Benicia where students can create art in a variety of media and go on field trips to local galleries.

In addition to Arts Benicia, Rice listed a number of other community art partnerships such as VOENA, Flying Monkey Productions, Mozart Einstein & Me and the San Francisco Opera.

The next to speak was Gethsemane Moss, the senior director of community engagement for the Visual and Performing Arts Council of Solano County. The organization meets quarterly to discuss ideas and strategies with teachers and artists about supporting art education. Moss provides updates from the California Department of Education, such as the news that the state’s art standards are being revised and will be ready in 2019.

Additionally, Moss said the council is meeting with the California Alliance for Arts Education to develop a strategic arts education plan for the county. Among the recommendations are ensuring that every student has access to real-world engagement in the arts, committing ongoing monetary resources for K-12 student learning in VAPA programs and supporting funding through the Local Control Accountability Plan.

“Our LCAP plans is really what drives our work with our districts,” Moss said. “If arts aren’t included in that, then it’s easy for it to not be seen as important. It’s a way to advocate and make sure kids have access to art education.”

Jessa Moreno, a field manager for the California Alliance for Arts Education, said that arts in schools have been well-sustained by local partnerships and afterschool programs but echoed Manzo’s point that arts should be available during the school day. She noted that prior to the ‘70s, arts programs were more accessible in elementary schools during the academic days but times have changed.

“We really have gotten down to a lot of art deserts in California,” Moreno said. “Right now, only 39 percent of students actually have access to art education during the school day in California. New Jersey has 100 percent.”

Mayor Elizabeth Patterson discussed how the disciplines of art were in line with the disciplines of politics, particularly problem-solving and risk-taking. She then introduced Terry Scott, the chair of the Arts & Culture Commission, who discussed the fiscal impact of art in the community. He presented the results of the Americans for the Arts study which was conducted in 341 regions—including Benicia—and found that 82 percent of Americans believed arts were important to the business and economy of a community.

“It allows us to think of the arts as an industry, one that generates jobs, one that generates revenue and is a cornerstone for tourism,” he said. “Bringing people into the community that can expand their understanding of what Benicia is and understanding what art is.”
Scott closed by noting that the first phase of the Public Art Initiative would begin in the next two weeks with art being painted on traffic signal boxes.

For more information on BANC, email BeniciaArts4All@gmail.com.