

PETALUMA
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Petaluma embraces Arts Now campaign



SLIDE 1 OF 3

ARTS ALIVE: A student mural was on display at the Arts Now kick-off breakfast on April 30.

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Every student in Petaluma, and across the state of California, deserves the same access to the arts. Regardless of background or past performance, no child should be denied the possibility of a quality arts education. Artistic expression and the skills

developed through acquiring artistic excellence are valuable problem solving tools, and should not be considered frivolous, unnecessary or optional.

Those are the driving beliefs behind Arts Now, a campaign launched this year by the California Alliance for Arts Education. It is designed as a way to encourage school districts throughout the state, and the communities those districts serve, to find creative new ways to invest in arts education.

That message was brought to Petaluma last month at the official Arts Now community kick-off breakfast at Hotel Petaluma on April 30. In attendance were over 100 educators, city leaders, school administrators and representatives of Petaluma's arts and music community. Appropriately enough, there were also plenty of kids, including an exuberant chorus of ukulele-playing fifth and sixth graders from McKinley and McNear Elementary Schools, led by music teacher Victoria Parks-Cochrane.

The students serenaded the crowd with a number of songs, including Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds." The instruments those kids were playing were donated to the schools by local businesses, a practical example of the kind of community support and participation the Arts Now campaign seeks to encourage more of, within Petaluma and beyond.

"One of our goals, as educators, at the end of the day, is to develop effective communicators and critical thinkers," said Gary Callahan, Superintendent of Petaluma City Schools, early on the presentation. "It's our goal to build experiences for our students so that when they graduate, they are nimble enough to do whatever they want, go wherever they want, accomplish whatever they want. And it's our belief that a well-rounded arts education program helps us to develop those nimble, effective communicators and inventive critical thinkers."

He went on to describe a number of ways that the state legislature could help, primarily through channeling more money into arts education, hopefully striking a more equitable balance in terms of how much money goes to each school. Currently, he said, some schools get thousands of dollars more money per student than schools in less affluent communities.

"But to do all the things we want to do, it's not just about receiving extra dollars," he says. "We also have to have a real comprehensive plan in place, for how to build an effective arts education program that serves every single child. That's what we're working on right now. And it's going to require the involvement of more than just teachers and politicians. It will require the commitment of everyone who cares about the arts and understands the importance of a full arts education."

Arts Now has been staging similar launch events all around the state. It's the first step toward what will hopefully become a major motivating factor in improving arts access and the educational outcomes that often come from a strong arts program in the schools. The campaign is the result of several policy changes over the last few years in California, spurring, according to a pamphlet given to all attendees of the launch event, "re-evaluation and re-investment in California public schools." Those changes include the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (Essa), boosting implementation of well-rounded education programs that include strong emphasis on the arts. In addition, there is California's Local Control Funding Formula, a set of priorities for education that includes the arts, and the California Arts Education Data Project, which has found that 39% of California

students currently participate in any kind of arts or music programs. Additionally, the project has found that black and Latinx students are significantly less likely to be provided with arts programs or instruction of any kind.

The Arts Now campaign is working with community-based arts organizations in every community in the state. In Petaluma, that's Petaluma Paints (Provides Art Integration to Students), founded by Beth Schlanker, who welcomed attendees to the event, describing the nonprofit's mission as seeking to prepare students for future challenges and opportunities by nurturing their creativity and critical thinking through an integrated arts education.

Robin Hampton, with the California Alliance for Arts Education, gave the keynote speech at the kick-off proceedings, beginning with a story that echoed the thoughts shared by Schlanker and Callahan.

"Once upon a time," Hampton said, "there was a fifth grade student who, at the end of the school year, was asked to give a report, had done his research, had practiced with his parents, was ready to give the report – and then at the last minute refused to do it. He refused to stand up and give his report."

According to Hampton, the teacher called the student's parents, who came in for a conference, and what was discovered was that the student had been seriously bullied. When it came time to stand up and give the report, he found he lacked the confidence to do it. The teacher, however, pointed out that when it was time for band practice, the student was always the first to get up, grab his trombone, and head out to rehearsal.

Said Hampton, "The student told his teacher, 'But I belong there in band. I have a place there.' So the parents took note of that, and made sure that the student had their full support when he wanted to get into band in Middle School."

A year to the date from that failed oral report, the student stood up in front of his school at a jazz concert and soloed on the trombone in front of a thousand people, including administrators, teachers, parents and his peers.

"That was my son," said Hampton, "and that's when I realized in ways I never had before that an arts education is so much more than just playing an instrument, or drawing a picture, or performing in a school play. Playing the trombone gave my son the confidence he needed in his life at a critical moment. He's now an engineer at Vandenberg Air Force Base. He gets up and presents in front of generals. And I believe that the basic, little trombone solo he gave back in middle school is part of what's given him the confidence to do that."

The purpose of the launch event, added Hampton, was to get people talking about Arts Now, and to encourage interested parties to become involved. That involvement can range from financial support of individual school programs, donations of supplies and instruments, volunteering to develop classes or extracurricular arts programs, and countless other possibilities.

"Our message today," said Hampton, "is that if you care about the arts in Petaluma, you are already part of the solution to making sure every child in this community has equal access to the arts. That's not just good for the student. It's good for the community, and it's good for the world."

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