increase the amount of time that both the music and visual arts teachers spend at the school. PEFF money pays for two days of music teacher John Manfield's time while Lawton's school site budget pays him to teach at the school for the remaining three days of the week. For visual arts, PEFF pays for two-and-a-half days for arts teacher Sharon Ernst's time, and Lawton pays for the other two-and-a-half. Then parents chipped in by raising $10,000 for instructional supplies so that all students can participate, not just ones who can pay for instruments themselves.

Acting, dancing, drawing, and constructing their way to understanding

Nowhere in the city is the practice of arts integration on more vivid display than at the K-8 Creative Arts Charter school, a parent-run school founded in 1994. Katie Clay, a Creative Arts elementary school teacher and dance instructor, provides a good example of the school's teaching approach in action. It's Friday afternoon, and she and about 20 fifth graders are talking about the kinds of activities that prospectors engaged in as they searched for gold. Clay is trying to elicit a list of action verbs from the students, which she then compiles into several columns on the whiteboard. After a while, the list includes verbs like "vibrating," "throwing," "shaking," "swinging," and "rippling."

Clay and the kids aren't in a typical-looking classroom—they're in the school's dance studio. The fifth graders are learning about the Gold Rush with their regular grade teacher, but that exploration isn't limited to the whiteboard and textbooks. They're exploring the theme through their art classes as well. In Clay's class, they're engaging with the subject matter by creating dance movements to illustrate what they're learning. Over a period of several weeks or months, depending on the project, Clay and her students will create full-on modern dance performances based on these methodical, weekly explorations of their academic studies. The dances can revolve around any theme. Second graders, for example, are spending the year with a unit called "From Farm to Table." Clay will coach her students to create a dance that will explore the roles of the workers engaged in the process of food production. Last year, another grade created a dance that illustrated the human digestive system.

"It starts with a series of essential questions, and these questions are answered by the end of a 6- to 8-week study. And it's answered through all of these entry points: dance, visual arts, music, field trips, and writing," explains Brooke Nagel, a lower school administrator who works on the school's curriculum.

The school administration has adopted a teaching framework called "Teaching for Understanding," an approach championed by Harvard's Graduate School of Education. Teachers pick a theme, and then work with colleagues in the different arts disciplines to help students explore them. The grade school teachers themselves use the projects to teach math, geography, social studies, and English language arts. If students are assigned to study the question of what makes up a community, for example, the concept could be broken down into economic, social, and geographical sub-themes. Student activities could include building three-dimensional maps of the Western Addition, writing profiles of members of the community, creating theatrical skits about community workers, and creating dances. The idea is to use the disparate activities to create nimble thinkers who are integrating concepts and using them rather than merely memorizing facts.

"They really do have a solid academic focus, but we also really love the fact that my kids get an hour every week each of visual arts, music, dance, and theater," said Jennifer Gatto (GGMS's former editor-in-chief and board vice-chair). Gatto has a second grader and fourth grader at Creative Arts Charter.

"They have 4 hours of instruction with arts specialists employed at the school, and on top of that, we have an arts director that coaches the classroom teachers on how to integrate arts into the classroom."

In addition to the themed projects, students learn the various art disciplines in and of themselves. The fifth graders in Clay's class, for example, spent half of their class learning Fruvo, a vigorous Brazilian street dance. In their music class, they're learning Samba-reggae drumming with Artist-in-Residence, Alfie Macias. And on the day I visited, I observed first graders systematically learn abstract art techniques. School just looked like a lot of fun (and that's not an accident). The fun is a fundamental aspect of the school's approach—it received the California Distinguished School Award in 2014 for diminishing the achievement gap between its socio-economically disadvantaged students and the rest of the student body. The school also received an award from the California Department of Education for running an exemplary arts program, and its school accountability report card (www.clayar.com/pdklr17/) shows that its students' academic performance ranks above the state average.

"If your child comes to Creative Arts, there's no fear that they're not going to get the academic component," says Fernando Aguilar, the school's principal/director.

Creative Arts Charter's curriculum is unusual in that it places such a strong emphasis on the arts. But what it has in common with regular district schools is that the arts-heavy curriculum is there because parents get involved in setting the agenda for their kids' classes, and that is what everyone interviewed for this article said matters.

"When the parents get involved with school leadership, and they say, 'I want my child to be able to take advantage of the wealth of the arts that are available in San Francisco,' they have a direct impact on the decisions that school administrators make," says Susan Stauter, SFUSD's artistic director. "So the conduit for parents is that school site-based management council/PTA that they sit on, which help make those decisions."

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