

# The A4E Program

Robert Masla



ART IS EDUCATION EXPRESSION EXPLORATION EMPOWERMENT

The A4E program (Art is for Everyone) grew out of a sixteen-week experimental pilot I conceived and executed for William N. DeBerry Elementary School in Springfield, Massachusetts. This after-school project grew from my commitment to art education and the severe lack of it, particularly in inner-city schools.

DeBerry is a Title I school. Like a number of under-financed schools in this country, it had no art program. Since there has never been a budget available for art classes or art teachers, the school has tried to integrate art in the academic curriculum in limited ways. Considering the teachers' lack of expert training, skills, or knowledge of the visual arts, this has been challenging. I designed the A4E program to address these needs.

## Project Structure

Through the A4E Project, I teach art to grades two to five at DeBerry for one-and-a-half hours once a week after school. I cover the learning standards for the visual arts of the Mass Arts curriculum framework. Beginning with basic drawing skills

and projects that nurture confidence, technical manipulation of materials, and expression, my lessons incorporate concepts of drawing, design, perspective, and the use of paint (watercolor, and acrylic) and the introduction of color theory. Students all showed, as is common to this age group, the very natural, genuine, and enthusiastic desire to engage in art activities.

## Content and Context Mural

Early on, I proposed a mural as a focus of the project. The first mural, at the Dunbar Community Center in Springfield, titled, *Content and Context—The Self and the World Around Us*, focused on values and images of the self and surrounding environment, as well as the goals, desires, and fantasies of an idealized world. Students added collage elements, using acrylic gel medium and photographs of themselves and images from magazines to the buildings they had painted in the mural.

The project concluded with a gala exhibition at the mural site. This was an introspective and reflective process for students, resulting in a concrete and lasting accomplishment that was met with appreciation and praise by the parents, school, and community at large. The attained values and sense of self-esteem nourished in the children are the goals of the A4E program.

**Art serves not only as a “hook” for students with an affinity for it, but also as a plan to create more diverse and deep thinkers through “art culture.”**

## Bricks of Color Mural

The second mural project, *Bricks of Color*, integrated visual art and mathematics. Using geometry and units of measurement combined with mechanical drawing and color theory, students learned how to use T-squares, triangles, compasses, plumb lines, and rulers. The mural was executed on a brick wall in a hallway surrounded by the math classrooms. Students measured the wall and bricks and then each student used drafting tools to cre-

ate a grid to scale on a large piece of paper. They next created geometric drawings that demonstrated different aspects of color theory, which were blown up to scale on the brick wall. As in other aspects of the project, students were encouraged to assist each other, adding to camaraderie and self-esteem as well as teaching valuable teamwork skills.

## Letters, Words, and Pictures

The third mural project, *Letters, Words, and Pictures*, integrated visual art and language skills as well as mathematics and art history. We also looked at the works of artists throughout history who have illustrated stories and/or used the grid method to create accurate images as well as transfer images from one surface to another. For example, we studied artworks from Albrecht Dürer and Chuck Close, and art forms from manuscript illumination to the pixelization of digital images.

## Progress

The effort to continue and expand upon the original A4E program has

grown with the addition of Springfield College participation. The Community Center Mural Project has gained support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. The project is now in its third year of funding. Teacher Professional Development Workshops, “Integrating Art in the Curriculum,” further solidified the progress the students made by providing the staff with much-needed professional tools for utilizing artistic resources in the classroom. Dr. Simone Alter-Muri, head of art education and art therapy at Springfield College, is primarily responsible for the involvement of the college and has spearheaded teacher training and grant writing. Her students volunteered time and assistance throughout the project as well.

## Reflection

The A4E program for DeBerry has provided opportunities for students to enhance and broaden their educational experiences through art. Its example for providing school improvement involves all aspects of education; thus, art serves not

only as a “hook” for those students who have a personal affinity to art, but as a plan to create more diverse and deep thinkers within the school through “art culture.” Yet a school does not have to be in such dire aesthetic straits to benefit from the model of the A4E Program.

Personally, one of the greatest aspects of the project for me has been watching students at the receptions for the murals. They raced from one spot to the other with parents, relatives, and friends in tow, glowing with happiness and pride.

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## NATIONAL STANDARD

*Students select and use subject matter, symbols, and ideas to communicate meaning.*

## WEB LINKS

[www.maslafineart.com/index.html](http://www.maslafineart.com/index.html)  
[www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com](http://www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com)