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EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

SUCCESS STORY: Increasing Rigor and Achievement Through Arts Integration

Raise Student Achievement and Success

At Turnaround Arts California (TACA), we have found the best way to leverage the benefits of the arts is to invest significantly in teachers themselves, building their confidence and capacity to integrate the arts into classroom teaching. Through our Lesson Lab program, we gave teachers dedicated time and support to work with their peers to design arts integrated lessons to increase access to grade-level learning in English language arts, math, science, social studies and visual and performing arts. As a result of Lesson Lab, teachers saw their students in new ways, including increased student motivation, participation, collaboration and learning, especially for English language learners.

> We found out a lot of strengths, skills and qualities in our students that we don't necessarily see [everyday].
>
> *-Teacher, Costaño Elementary, East Palo Alto, California*

The Origins of Lesson Lab:

During the COVID pandemic, our Turnaround Arts network of principals and coaches gathered virtually for an annual principal retreat. The group exchanged ideas about school challenges and key priorities for the arts. The principals discussed the significant impact that our multi-year partnership was having at their schools. We realized that, through school musicals, artistic residencies, mural projects and teacher training, we had created school communities full of connection and joy.

However, principals asked: How can we move the needle on academic learning?

They wanted to go deeper in the arts to address a persistent challenge that existed before the pandemic: getting students participating in the classroom and learning at their grade level. This is an equality issue, as research shows that students of color and from under resourced communities more often receive below-

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grade-level assignments, regardless of their ability to learn. Teachers, too, have lost their passion for teaching under the pressure to teach more from a one-size-fits-all curriculum.

With the leadership of TACA Principal Coach Dr. Akida Kissane Long, retired principal of a Turnaround Arts partner school in South Los Angeles, our network principals spent the spring experimenting with arts integration to meet core content standards. They co-developed lessons that combined visual arts, literacy and social studies standards.

After the principals taught the co-authored lessons in a few classrooms at their sites, they were amazed by the results: students clearly demonstrated increased motivation and learning. Principals were immediately hooked and eager to develop this experience with their teachers. With additional leadership from our longtime partner Danielle Reo of CoTA (Collaborations: Teachers and Artists), this work evolved into our award-winning Lesson Lab program.

What is it?

Our Lesson Lab is a Professional Learning Community (PLC) of teachers on the same grade level co-creating a standards-based, arts-integrated lesson. Over the course of 12 weeks and four PLC sessions facilitated by a TACA coach (teaching artists with deep instructional expertise), teachers co-design effective, arts-integrated learning experiences for students with their principal.

> We learn best by doing…the most promising strategy for meeting the challenge of helping all students learn at high levels is to develop educator capacity to function as a professional learning community."
>
> *- DuFour and DuFour*

Engaged Principal
The principal secures resources and participates actively in PLC goal-setting and reflection on learning. Their supportive presence demonstrates that learning recovery through arts integration is a priority.

Protected Planning Time
Principals schedule grade-level teams for 14-20 hours of facilitated PLC sessions, and may provide additional time, often supported by contract or professional development time.

Experiential Learning for Teachers
Teachers engage first-hand in the exercises and tasks they will later facilitate with students, gaining insight into the critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity and collaboration

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embedded in arts-based learning. By experiencing the learning process themselves, teachers are better equipped to design and adapt lessons that foster student agency, voice, and choice while meeting academic goals and responding to the needs of their students.

Teacher Agency and Shared Ownership for Student Outcomes
Teachers have the ability to work outside scripted curriculum and pacing guides to collaborate with peers with full support of the principal. In the spirit of "collective efficacy", teachers have a shared belief in how arts integration can support outcomes for all students, no exceptions.

Specialized Expertise and Coaching
Arts integration specialists can provide critical coaching and support for the ideation and building of lesson elements in a formative and iterative process. They are experienced coaches and facilitators of adult learning.

Tips for Success:

1. **Start with a collaborative grade level team:** We've found it's helpful to start with a grade-level team that has a more established culture of collaboration and cohesion. Having this first Lesson Lab team present the work at a staff development meeting is infectious for recruiting additional teams!

2. **Find your arts integration expert**: If you have internal expertise, invite that arts integration specialist to meet with your grade level team to identify desired outcomes and key standards. If you need to look outside, seek an arts organization or consultant that has had a track record of success supporting arts integrated lessons with teachers in a PLC. You may have a local arts council, or county or state entity that can help you research this expertise.

3. **Utilize supportive texts**: Accessible tools for designing highly effective, standards-based instruction:

    - The Teacher Clarity Playbook, Grades K-12: A Hands-On Guide to Creating Learning Intentions and Success Criteria for Organized, Effective Instruction. Fisher, Douglas, and Nancy Frey. 2nd ed., Corwin, 2024.

    - For facilitators, understanding the "Lesson Study" process, which inspired our Lesson Lab: Lesson Study Step by Step: How Teacher Learning Communities Improve Instruction. Lewis, C., & Hurd, J.. Heinemann, 2011.

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What Students and Teachers Achieved

> It is a lot of work, but the experience that my students and team had was priceless. Student engagement was high and students were motivated to learn and create.
>
> *- Fremont Lopez Elementary, Stockton, California*

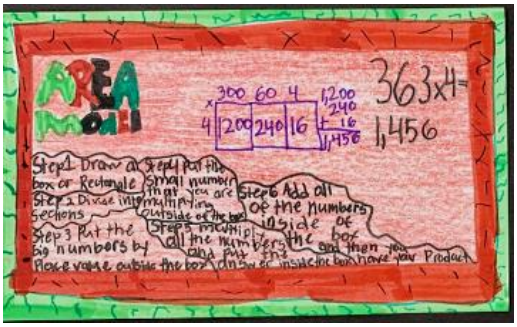
Fourth graders at Fremont Elementary School in Stockton, California explored the state's diverse regions through an arts-integrated study of physical and cultural geography. Students researched regional characteristics, built academic vocabulary, embodied key features through dramatic tableaux and collaborated to create mixed-media displays.

Students demonstrated growth in reading proficiency and English language development, with teachers attributing gains in engagement, confidence, collaboration and communication to the arts-integrated approach. The fourth grade experienced a higher-than-usual rate of redesignation of English learners at year's end.

Fifth-grade students at Los Cerritos Elementary in Paramount, California designed math resource cards to explain division strategies. After analyzing Uno, Lotteria, and Pokémon cards, students explored how graphic designers use the elements of art and principles of design to communicate information clearly and effectively. They then created their own cards, thoughtfully using color, line, pattern and balance while translating division strategies into their own words and illustrations.

By representing mathematical thinking visually and verbally, students deepened their understanding of division, strengthened their ability to explain their reasoning, and developed flexible problem-solving skills that could be applied in new situations.

Second-grade students at Mary Chapa Academy in Greenfield, California investigated the plants and animals that live in habitats around the world. Students conducted research and used a variety of art materials to create detailed animal dioramas and biome installations. As they built the desert, rainforest, grasslands



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and tundra, students discovered how living things are specially adapted to survive in their environments. Comparing and contrasting the biomes developed a deeper understanding of biodiversity, habitats and the unique conditions that support life across our planet.

A teacher noticed how the learning impacted a student who struggles with perfectionism:

> "The open-ended nature of the arts allowed her to embrace experimentation, take risks, and find joy in the process rather than just the final product. Instead of feeling anxious about making mistakes, she remained calm, engaged, and confident in expressing herself."

Second graders at Echo Valley Elementary investigated where everyday foods come from and how they reach local stores by integrating social studies, informational writing and visual arts. Students created mixed-media artist books that traced a food product's journey from farm to table. Through research, writing, collage, watercolor and interactive foldables, students documented each stage of the process. Because students had the freedom to make creative decisions about how to represent their learning, each book was unique.

The project sparked remarkable enthusiasm for writing, with many students eagerly filling multiple pages and asking for more space to explain how food moves through the local production system.

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The Impact

> Lesson Labs are the most valuable time you can spend outside of the classroom. You [the teacher] are in the driver's seat!
>
> *- Washington Elementary, Lynwood, California*

Teachers:

- Increased teacher collaboration
- Recognized that they have carried too much of the cognitive load for students, and that students benefit from "productive struggle" with the right supports
- Enhanced understanding of student strengths and capabilities
- Gained a greater understanding of the state learning standards
- Increased their ability to design and facilitate learning experiences that address standards
- Scaffolded and differentiated supports for learning, so that all students could reach mastery regardless of their prior knowledge

Students increased the following social and emotional learning skills:

- Self-motivation
- Curiosity
- Collaboration
- Problem-solving
- Persistence
- Confidence
- Courage to take risks
- Recognizing strengths of peers

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Students' academic learning improved in:

- Critical thinking
- Reading comprehension
- Research
- Retention, recall and application of knowledge
- English language speaking and writing skills

Arts integration is the student-driven, hands-on, collaborative learning we need to create a path to cognitive justice. Lesson Lab honors and engages teachers as critical thinkers and collaborative learners, using the arts to increase their capacity to do the same for all students.

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Acknowledgments

This success story was developed by Turnaround Arts California (TACA), whose Lesson Labs program brought hands-on, arts-integration professional development to teachers and principals across California. Following the passing of founder Frank Gehry, TACA's board made the decision to sunset the organization in summer 2026, concluding twelve years of work that reached 37 schools and more than 40,000 students and teachers statewide.

We're honored to share this story to highlight the successes of TACA. The insights gained from Lesson Lab and its approach to teacher coaching will continue to be embedded in the work of CoTA, a longtime partner organization with its own 28-year history of building teacher capacity in arts integration, as well as that of other TACA coach partners and schools. AEP is proud to help share this work for the students and educators it serves.

Authors:

Dr. Akida Kissane Long had been a Principal Leadership Coach for Turnaround Arts CA since retiring in 2017 from Los Angeles Unified School District, where she served for 35 years as a teacher, curriculum specialist, central office administrator and elementary principal. Dr. Long mentors TACA principals, coaches and teachers and supports the implementation of Lesson Lab in our Network Schools. She is certified in arts integration from Alameda County Office of Education's Integrated Learning Specialist Program, and was the Program Chair of Educational Leadership, Assistant Professor, La Fetra College of Education, University of La Verne. Dr. Long received her MA in Educational Psychology from Cal State Northridge and her doctorate in Educational Leadership and Administration from UCLA.

Barbara Palley served as the Executive Director of Turnaround Arts California prior to its closure in summer 2026, and previously as the Director of Program and Strategy, overseeing a doubling of school partnerships statewide and impactful program refinement and iteration in response to school community input. Previously at Cool Culture, NYC, Barbara helped narrow the arts education gap through citywide partnerships between early childhood centers and cultural institutions, which engaged families in out-of-school time. Barbara has over two decades of experience in facilitating professional learning communities, advocating for equity and access, and working in museum education, program administration and evaluation at a variety of institutions including MoMA, Brooklyn Museum, Whitney Museum of American Art, and Harvard Project Zero. Barbara has a BA in Art History, University of Virginia and an Ed.M. in Arts in Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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Sandy Seufert, former Program Director at TACA, spearheads programmatic goal-setting, strategic partnerships, and integration of the arts into standards-aligned classroom instruction. With over 20 years of leadership in the field, Sandy specializes in bridging the gap between administrative strategy and classroom practice. Prior, Sandy spent a decade as a District Coach with the LA County Department of Arts and Culture's Arts Ed Collective, guiding districts through long-term strategic planning. Her expertise spans curriculum development and professional training for classroom teachers and teaching artists, with a focus on integrating arts into Common Core Math, ELA, and Next Gen Science Standards. A dedicated advocate for the field, Sandy has held advisory roles for numerous boards and worked with premier organizations including LA Opera, The Music Center, and the Entertainment Community Fund. She began her career in the classroom as a special education professional and music teaching artist. Sandy's artistic life has been as professional cellist, specializing in classical and jazz, and currently as a fiddler playing Scandinavian folk music for local dances and festivals.

Danielle Reo has served as Program Director of CoTA (Collaborations: Teachers and Artists) for more than 20 years. Danielle oversees program design, implementation, evaluation, and the training of teaching artists. Her work emphasizes equity, collaboration, cultural responsiveness, and meaningful learning opportunities for diverse student populations. Since 2016, she has also served as a Regional Coach for Turnaround Arts: California, facilitating Lesson Lab professional learning communities and supporting school leaders in arts education planning. Previously, she was Associate Director of inSite97, a binational arts initiative spanning San Diego and Tijuana. Danielle holds an MBA from San Diego State University and a BA in Art and Art History from the University of California, Santa Cruz.

CoTA

CoTA (Collaborations: Teachers and Artists) CoTA is a professional development program with a 28-year track record of building teacher capacity in arts integration. We partner teaching artists with classroom educators to design and deliver standards-aligned, arts-integrated instruction that strengthens core academic learning in elementary classrooms. CoTA's theory of change is straightforward: when teachers have practical tools that foster engagement—especially project-based arts integration—students increase critical thinking, collaborative problem-solving, and overall academic skills, while teachers deepen their perceptions of what students can do. Our arts-infused approach embeds authentic artistic process into daily instruction—boosting engagement, expanding access to rigorous content, and building

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transferable skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and communication. CoTA advances educational equity by helping schools deliver high-quality, rigorous arts-integrated learning for students who are often least likely to have access to the arts. Since 1998, we have partnered with 2,500 teachers and more than 49,000 students across 59 schools in eleven California districts.

Turnaround Arts California, Turnaround Arts California, an independent nonprofit organization, integrated the arts and creativity in underserved schools—to inspire students, empower teachers, engage families, and transform learning. After 12 years of work, and the passing of founder Frank Gehry, the board made a decision to sunset the organization in summer 2026.

The model traced its roots to a 2011 federal pilot—the first national effort to use the arts as a lever for turning around America's most struggling schools. The pilot sought to test the hypothesis that strategically implementing high-quality, integrated arts education in chronically underperforming schools could drive meaningful school-wide improvement. TACA founders, architect Frank Gehry and arts education advocate Malissa Shriver, brought the model to California. It grew in both breadth and depth, reaching 37 schools and more than 40,000 students and teachers.

Turnaround Arts California worked exclusively with K–8 public schools in underserved communities where at least 75% of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Our whole-school model is culturally responsive, community-driven, and focused on long-term, sustainable change. Through hands-on professional development and coaching for teachers and principals, arts-integrated curriculum resources, peer exchange among like-minded educators, and partnerships with local artists and arts organizations, we helped schools build student learning, cultivate positive school cultures, and bring families into the school and their children's education. Together with our statewide network of school communities and arts partners, we cross-pollinated ideas, expertise, and data to advance a new vision for public education across California.

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About AEP Success Stories

Established in 1995, the Arts Education Partnership (AEP) is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education and is administered by Education Commission of the States. AEP serves as a national hub for education, arts, cultural, government, research, business and philanthropic organizations with shared commitment to and diverse expertise in arts education. To achieve its goal to expand access to high-quality arts learning opportunities for all learners, AEP gathers detailed information on success stories with the potential to be replicated in communities across the country.

The Success Stories project collects submissions from organizations that highlight successful arts education programs. These stories demonstrate the benefits of arts education and promote continued collaboration and learning for individuals and organizations working toward student achievement and success.