

# SUCCESS STORY: Arts Integration at Memorial Spaulding Elementary School



Support Effective Educators and School Leaders

## About the Program

Memorial Spaulding Elementary School is a public school in Newton, Massachusetts. We are a neighborhood school that serves around 400 students, grades kindergarten through fifth grade. In 2014, with the leadership of art teacher, Alexandra Etscovitz, a group of passionate teachers banded together to start a movement of integrating creativity and the arts into all content areas. This passion built a momentum that we continue to foster today, as we grow to be a true success story of the power of the arts.

## Arts Integration

Creativity isn't just for artists; it's the heartbeat of learning. That is how we use arts integration—the hands-on approach to making learning come alive—as a strategy that guides our school. Our success is measured in many ways, including interdisciplinary student-centered learning that is robust due to collaboration. We believe creativity is the catalyst for learning. It is rare for all constituents: teachers, administration, students and families, to be invested in the same goal. Arts integration hits the sweet spot we are looking for: engaged, independent and connected learning. This means we carve out a large space for student voice, authentic standards-based learning and trusted teacher collaboration that drives our work. For over a decade, integrating the arts across all subject areas has proven to be a powerful way to foster creativity and critical thinking in students at Memorial Spaulding Elementary School.

As the art teacher joyfully leading this initiative, I have the privilege of collaborating with passionate colleagues who embraced the transformative power of the arts. Together, we worked to create opportunities for students to engage with content in innovative, cross-disciplinary ways. Building an arts-integrated school has been a long-term vision, and after years of collaboration, experimentation and growth, this vision is coming to life. The success of this work is not only a result of my personal efforts but also the contagious enthusiasm of teachers across disciplines who have been inspired by the arts to make learning more engaging and creative. Recently retired principal, Tom Morris,



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says “arts integration not only supports students to meet academic standards but also encourages self-expression, collaboration and enhanced social-emotional skills.” With this support of school leadership, we see the cultural and academic transformation that arises when creativity is woven throughout the curriculum. This work is dynamic, evolving and requires a collective, soulful commitment to both academic excellence and the creative development of every student.



## Bridging Between Content Areas

As an art teacher, I am deeply aware of the transformative power of art in the learning process. My professional goal is to ensure that all areas of learning are as engaging and dynamic as art class. Arts integration makes this possible by bringing creativity into every subject. For example, we begin morning meetings by analyzing a work of art using visual thinking strategies or we create paintings of rainforests to illustrate descriptive language to enhance narrative writing comprehension. Other examples of successful applications of arts integration include scientific observational drawing, observing artifacts in social studies with critical thinking, painting seasons and trees and questioning photography of the Civil Rights movement. Through these experiences, we are able to foster a rich, interconnected learning environment that strengthens both academic skills and creative thinking that creates memorable meaning and capacity to these studies.

Students naturally thrive when they have the chance to play, tinker, experiment and create. The challenge, then, is how to capture the magic of an arts class and bring it into all of our content areas. Through teacher collaboration, we developed a range of lessons that bridge this gap. One favorite at our school is our English Language Arts study of artist biographies,

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creating artwork inspired by those artists, and then visiting the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to experience their work firsthand. Morris, says "These innovative units of study, such as third Grade Artists Biographies, not only support students to meet academic standards but also encourage self-expression, collaboration and enhanced social-emotional skills." Parent, Cove Davis, says "Students really knew the artist at the end of the unit and felt ownership of their projects." With the introduction of a new literacy curriculum, we are now turning to our arts integration approach to make these lessons even more engaging, ensuring that creativity continues to enrich our students' joyful learning experience.

In addition to visual arts, music plays a central role in the cultural and academic life of our school. With a principal who has a background in music education and a school with a well-established music program, we are fortunate to provide a robust musical foundation that enriches the school experience. Our monthly concert series, where students perform on the piano alongside other musical performances, exemplifies the strength of our music program.



Music teacher, Caroline Frick, states "When I arrived at Memorial Spaulding ten years ago, my eyes were opened to the world of arts integration. I was impressed by the incredible work being done in the visual arts, and how it strengthened their academic language skills, enriching the overall learning experience and I have been happy to dive in." This shared passion for arts integration is invaluable, as it allows us to create a more cohesive and enriched learning environment. Through our collaboration, we seamlessly integrate music and visual arts, studying cultures through both musical composition and artistic expression, thereby deepening students' understanding and fostering a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to learning.

Our arts-integrated approach spans a variety of subjects, from social studies lessons on civil rights to cultural studies of China and Mexico, explored through postcard art and writing in second grade. This multidisciplinary approach has fostered a deeper, more interconnected learning experience for students, enriching both their academic and personal growth. Second grade teacher Lauren Sacco states "Finding ways to incorporate the arts in content learning means finding ways to help all kids be successful. Art gives every student an access point to whatever learning we are doing and also challenges students to do more open ended and flexible thinking."

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## Building School Culture

The professional culture we’ve built has been essential to the success of our arts integration work. Arts integration is no longer just an initiative—it is an expectation. The collaborative environment we’ve fostered, supported by strong leadership, ensures that time and resources are dedicated to this effort. Through faculty meetings, summer curriculum writing and ongoing planning time, we’ve created the space necessary to make arts integration an integral part of our teaching practice. This commitment has allowed us to enrich the curriculum and engage students in more meaningful, creative ways. We work to fine tune our professional practice and collegial work through a shared vision of academic success as our guide. Second grade teacher Joanne Kazis explains this work saying “Students are more engaged and experience more joy in all areas. Arts integrated teaching furthers their curiosity, creativity, understanding, problem solving skills. Arts Integration encourages both collaboration and fosters independence, allowing for children to feel a sense of pride.”

With collegial enthusiasm, we secured grants and advocated for additional professional development time, which allowed us to rewrite our curriculum with a focus on creativity. While our school has increasingly embraced the visual arts, we have also utilized a variety of other strategies to support interdisciplinary learning. After a decade of this work, it is incredibly rewarding to see the growth in teacher confidence. Many educators now seamlessly integrate the arts into their teaching without the need for extensive professional development. This shift reflects a profound transformation, as teachers have developed and taken ownership of these skills, no longer relying solely on the art teacher but rather incorporating the arts as a core part of their own pedagogical practice. By creating a culture of mutual respect and collaboration, we ensure that the arts are not only a vital part of the curriculum but also a shared value that strengthens the fabric of our school.



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## Community Participation

With this joy, there has certainly been some initial reticence from teachers who felt uncertain about integrating the arts into their practice. For example, one teacher was initially very apprehensive about any arts-related activities, fearing the mess and unpredictability that often accompany creative processes. To address this, we say to “dip your toe in” with Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), a method that provides a structured, approachable way to engage with art while fostering critical and creative thinking skills. This was a pivotal step, as the culture of our school and its strong expectation for arts integration, created an environment where hesitation was met with support, not accommodation. We worked to nurture this teacher’s confidence, and over time, VTS became a gateway to more expansive arts integration. Fast forward ten years, and this teacher now embraces the full benefits of arts integration, experiencing firsthand the positive impact it has on student engagement and learning.

At our school, arts integration has been a part of our professional development and curriculum design. We began by incorporating an arts-integrated activity into every faculty meeting for an entire year, engaging staff in exercises such as soundscapes, visual thinking strategies, creating art, and developing dramatic tableaux. We saw value in this work. As third grade teacher John Miranda said, “Integrating the arts is an opportunity to expand our learning outside the four walls of our classroom and learning extends throughout the school.”

The broader community has greatly appreciated the integration of the arts into our curriculum. Field trips, including visits to sculpture parks, the Museum of Fine Arts and other local museums, have been essential in supporting and enriching this work. Parents have witnessed the benefits through their children’s increased engagement, and they’ve also had the opportunity to connect with the work through community events and mornings dedicated to sharing student projects. As parent Leah Kolidas states “participating in the arts integration work at my child’s school, I was impressed by how engaged the children were in learning. I loved how they connected their joyful artistic exploration to key skills they were learning in the classroom, such as research and writing. On top of that, I got to collaborate with my kids on actual art projects, most recently, a Chihuly-inspired piece that was delightful. There’s no better way to make learning fun and meaningful than to incorporate the arts.” One of the most visible manifestations of our arts culture is a massive mosaic that focuses on the theme of joy, which has become a symbol of our school’s vibrant, creative spirit. This mosaic, created by students, teachers and the community, reflects our shared commitment to fostering joy through artistic expression.

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## Assessment

In our arts integration approach, we employ a variety of assessment tools to evaluate the effectiveness of each experience, ensuring that both academic and creative growth are captured. These assessments include a combination of post-assessments, engagement metrics and rubrics, which help measure student understanding and participation. However, we believe that the most significant aspects of this work, such as the immeasurable joy and curiosity that students express, cannot be fully captured by numbers alone. While data-driven evaluations provide valuable insights, it is the intrinsic motivation and excitement for learning that ultimately guide and inspire our approach to arts integration. These qualitative elements are just as essential as any measurable outcomes in shaping the direction and success of our program. One primary grade student said “I just feel happier when I make art. It makes me feel calm and more myself when I create.”

Assessment is also something that can be important when evaluating this work. Previous Fine Arts Coordinator Richard King reflects “One writing unit also includes a field trip to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, an activity that calls upon parent volunteers to chaperone small groups of students throughout the museum. I sometimes join these museum visits and on one such occasion I was twice approached by a parent who told me how much their child loved doing this writing project and how eager they were to learn and write about their artist. When parents notice their children are motivated to engage in learning, that is a clear indicator of success.”

A fifth grader who participated in a Visual Thinking Strategy writing prompt said, “something about having art to look at helped to inspire me to write more than I ever have. Anytime I ran out of ideas, they sorta just sparked new ones when I saw the painting. I surprised myself with the longest short story I have ever written just by making stuff up about what I thought was happening. It felt more like a game than like a writing class.” These reflections and accounts help guide how to change and pivot as we embark upon writing new lessons.

## Navigating Challenges and Looking to the Future

This work has evolved into both a revelation—particularly as we have navigated significant changes, including shifts in staffing, new hires, curriculum updates—and cultural transformations brought on by the [COVID-19](#) pandemic. Our approach to arts integration remains dynamic and responsive and has surprised us that this work is essential as we evolve and change. Rather than viewing curriculum revision as a burden, through arts integration we have embraced it as a central part of our work—an exciting and ongoing process that drives our educational mission. “The bottom line is, if it was not valuable, we would not do it. Learning time is far too precious to give anything extra to work we did not believe in.” said one third grade classroom teacher. Arts integration is worth it. While work

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is never complete, we are eager to see how it continues to evolve in the future. We continue to tinker with new curriculum demands, political landscapes and community shifts as we continue our commitment to our students and the arts as a vehicle for engaging learning.



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## Acknowledgments

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[Alexandra Etscovitz](#) is an award-winning educator in her 22nd year of teaching elementary art in Newton, MA. She leads professional development in arts integration, supporting educators in bringing creativity into their classrooms. Alexandra lives with her husband and two daughters just outside of Boston. You can find her work and teaching inspiration on Instagram at [@artiselementary](#).

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## About AEP Success Stories

The Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States is a national network of more than 200 organizations dedicated to advancing arts education. AEP has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education since 1995 and is administered by Education Commission of the States. AEP is the nation's hub for arts and education leaders, building their leadership capacity to support students, educators and learning environments. Through research, reports, convenings and counsel, leaders gain knowledge and insights to ensure that all learners — especially those that have historically been marginalized — receive an excellent 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.

Are you interested in sharing your work for a future success story? Please reach out to [Mitra Chamanbahar](#), AEP project manager, to share your story.

