ArtsBridge bringing art to classrooms

By Kim Burgess

Studying sculpture may seem like an unconventional way to learn geometry, but it can be more effective than hitting the books, according to directors of a new Utah State University arts program.

Through the university’s new ArtsBridge project, music, painting and dance are used to teach core subjects, providing hands-on examples of the material.

“It will be a new way of approaching things,” said Laurie Baefsky, USU’s new ArtsBridge program director. “This is showing a practical application and presenting it in a fun way where it sticks rather than just a bunch of facts you have to memorize. ... The benefit for teachers is that they can say, ‘I’m trying to teach this unit on South America.’ Then we can use the dance and native traditions to do that. It’s a win-win thing. We are also going to provide training (for USU students.) It’s going to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity or launch a career.”

USU launched ArtsBridge this semester, becoming the 23rd university in the U.S. to host the program.

At Edith Bowen Laboratory School, teachers are considering sending fourth graders to see Ann Preston’s art installation at USU’s Nora Eccles Harrison Museum.

The 20-foot-tall concrete sculpture features tetrahedrons and various shapes that can demonstrate fractions.

Other classes will be held at local schools, with the class working toward original creations as its final project.

The effort has been particularly successful in low-performing schools with few art classes and with teachers who don’t have art training, Baefsky said.

Victoria Rowe, director of the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum, brought the program to USU after hearing about its success at the University of Utah.

She felt ArtsBridge was a good fit for the museum’s teaching mission.

“Our energy goes to community engagement, bringing young people into the museum,” she explained.

Rowe secured funding and got the backing of College of Humanities Arts and Social Sciences Dean Gary Kiger and College of Education Dean Carol Strong.

Baefsky was hired for her experience in fundraising and education with the Virginia Arts Festival. A former flutist with the Virginia Symphony Orchestra, Baefsky has also taught music at Christopher Newport University and Virginia Wesleyan College.

She is now working on a USU and UofU ArtsBridge partnership that would allow the schools to jointly seek grants and learn from each other.

Interior decorating student Barbara Lundberg said she was looking forward to getting started on her project.

The USU senior will be helping Millville Elementary students redecorate their building — and showing
them design principles in the process.

"It sounds like a great opportunity," she said. "I had considered teaching but decided not to do that as my career, so I'm glad I get to do this."

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