

# It's not just about drawing

By Dee Ann Campbell  
The Choctaw Sun

GILBERTOWN — "Our students are lacking training in the arts," said Donna Russell of the Community Audit for Arts Education. "Every student may not be a Picasso, but every student needs to learn about the arts."

In an effort to assess the quality and availability of arts education at the school, a group of local parents, school officials, and community leaders gathered at Southern Choctaw High School last Wednesday. The audit committee spent several hours discussing arts education already being implemented at the school, its effectiveness, and possible goals to increase its availability, both in the classroom and in the community.

With several recent studies reflecting the wide range of benefits that arts education gives to students, proponents on state and local levels are working to promote a new emphasis on the arts in school. Organizations involved in the emphasis include the Alabama Alliance for Arts Education, the Black Belt Arts Initiative, and even the Alabama Department of Education, as well as the Kennedy Center for Arts Education Network, which developed the Community Audit for Arts Education that was the focus of the meeting at SCHS on Wednesday.

A giant step in the effort to incorporate arts education into the curriculum at SCHS is the new \$24,000 Black Belt Arts Initiative grant that has now been awarded to the school. One of only 12 schools in the state to be selected to receive the funding, SCHS is working to develop a comprehensive arts education program, with Wednesday's audit a step in that direction.

But their effort is about more than just teaching students how to draw. It is about creating an atmosphere that incorporates arts education into all facets of the classroom.

"I'm a real advocate for the arts," Principal Betty McBride stated at the meeting. "I know what it does for children."



Choctaw Sun photo by Dee Ann Campbell  
Donna Russell of the Community Audit for Arts Education is pictured during the meeting at SCHS.

McBride cited proven correlations between student performance and academic success in areas such as reading and math and their exposure to the arts. An increasing number of studies agree with McBride's correlation. In fact, more and more studies show a powerful, positive relationship between the study of the arts and success with academic subjects, as well as the overall attitudes of students — and even their behavior.

In a 3-year study reported by the national arts in education organization, Americans for the Arts, more than 60% of the students attending schools with arts education integrated into their classrooms performed at or above grade level on the math portion of state assessments, while only 40% of students in schools without arts education did so.

Another study by Americans for the Arts showed that academically at-risk 4th, 5th, and 6th grade students who were involved in arts-integrated classrooms made greater gains in reading than did students who were taught in traditional classrooms that did not integrate the arts into the curriculum.

**SCHS  
working to  
develop arts  
education  
program  
using Black  
Belt Arts  
Initiative  
grant**

Studies also show that arts education influences more than just academic performance. It may also affect such factors as the drop-out rate. In a study of students in areas where the drop-out rate was notably high, those who participated in arts education dropped out at a rate of 2.5% by the time they reached 10th grade. Those without arts incorporated into their educational process dropped out at a rate of 3.7% or higher.

Overall, studies show that young people who participate in the arts reap a variety of benefits, many of which are not readily evident. Students who participate in arts education are 4 times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement, 3 times more likely to be elected to class offices, 4 times more likely to participate in math and science fairs, 3 times more likely to win awards for school attendance, and 4 times more likely to win awards for writing essays or poems. They also participate in youth groups nearly four times as frequently, read for pleasure nearly twice as often, and perform community service more than four times as often as those who do not



Submitted photo  
GILBERTOWN — Resident artist Brandi Clark works with students during the after-school CIRCLES program at Southern Choctaw Elementary School,

receive arts in their educational process.

Arts education in the schools does not just affect the students. It can also benefit the teachers, both directly and indirectly. In schools that strongly promote the arts, teachers have found that students are more cooperative and more willing to share what they have learned than students with low levels of arts training. Students with much arts training typically have better relationships with teachers, and their teachers are often more likely to be innovative in their teaching methods.

According to librarian Cecelia Bonner, who has been working closely with the grant-writing process to procure the Arts Initiative grant at the school, a portion of the grant funding for SCHS will be used to help teachers learn to incorporate arts in their classrooms to bring about those innovative teaching methods.

"A big part of the funds right now is going for professional development to train some of our teachers," Bonner explained. "Then they can come back and teach the others."

Among the upcoming opportunities for professional development for the staff at SCHS is a 'Renaissance in the Classroom' program being held

in Montgomery on June 18-20. The workshop is designed to help teachers develop ways to use imaginative learning in incorporating arts into the regular classroom.

"There are other opportunities for professional development coming up," Russell said. "Those teachers can come back here and train other members of the school staff."

Arts education has long been limited in Choctaw County schools. In fact, there have been relatively few opportunities for students to learn music, drama, dance, or visual arts in any of the four public schools in the county. But with the new emphasis on the arts becoming a statewide focus, such opportunities in local schools may be increasing.

At the elementary through junior high levels, students have the opportunity to take part in the performing arts through local instructor Fred Kimbrough's involvement with the Summer Enrichment program held at both elementary schools. Kimbrough also offers lessons in performing arts through his Ballet and Theatre Performing Arts School, with scholarships available for underprivileged students to attend the classes.

In the area of music, students have been

through music education through marching bands, as well as a few music appreciation classes. But other forms of music education have not been available.

This year, local artist Brandi Clark has been teaching visual arts at each of the four public schools, traveling to each school on a daily basis. Clark's presence at the schools came about, at least in part, through a \$10,000 grant awarded through the Alabama Arts Initiative, with the Choctaw County Board of Education paying mileage for her travels from school to school.

SCHS is also incorporating its emphasis on the arts by giving students the opportunity to participate in drama after school. Students are currently working on a play to be presented in the near future.

However, even with such opportunities being added, arts education is still limited locally — a fact that both SCHS school officials and state proponents of arts education like Russell hope to change.

"Our goal is that in 4 to 5 years or less," Russell said, "people from all over the state will be calling Southern Choctaw High School saying, 'I'd really love to come to see what you are doing, to use your school as a model.'"

## Local 10th grader taking steps to help kids with cancer

By Dee Ann Campbell  
The Choctaw Sun

GILBERTOWN — "I hope one day to be the one who helps find a cure for cancer," she says.

When Jessica Taylor thinks about her future, she thinks of one thing — medicine. But her dreams do not necessarily include a high-paying career in a prestigious hospital. Rather, they include working with those who have no other options, and when she needed, even giving of her medical skills as a volunteer.

"I want to be a pediatric oncologist," she says. "I want to work with kids who have cancer."

And as a high school sophomore she is already taking steps toward her goal. From taking advanced science courses to volunteering both in Choctaw County and beyond, Jessica is putting feet to her plans.

Jessica's interest in oncology stems, at least in part, from her family history of the disease that has taken the lives of several of her loved ones.

"All my grandparents have had cancer, and one recently died from diabetes."

But, Jessica adds, her passion for caring for children comes, in part, from her family's experiences with her 4-year-old brother.

"My little brother has lung problem — asthma," she says. "He's been in the hospital a lot with that, and I've seen the



Choctaw Sun photo by Dee Ann Campbell  
SCHS sophomore Jessica Taylor is now volunteering with a local hospice and plans to work with St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital next summer.

pain of that. It gets really scary, especially in the middle of the night when he's not breathing. I can't imagine the pain that the families of children with cancer must go through."

"I want to be the kind of doctor who really sympathizes with the family," she adds. "Not just the patient. When a child is sick, the parents need to be treated, too."

It is that compassion for children with cancer that has prompted her to pursue what she says will

be the first step toward her future career in pediatric oncology.

"I'm planning to go to St. Jude's in their volunteer teen program," she says. "I'm going after my junior year to be a volunteer there."

Jessica says that she has already learned much about the work of St. Jude's through literature and media reports on the facility, and through her own family's support of the organization.

"My family has

always donated to St. Jude's," she explains. "And I've been reading a lot about it. I think going there will help me to understand more about this kind of work."

But, Jessica admits, there may be drawbacks to working with terminally-ill children, drawbacks that may cost her much heartache in the future.

"My biggest problem may be trying to not get emotionally involved with the children," she admits. "That may be hard to do because I love children, and when they are sick it's hard not to care about them."

Jessica's goal to help other medically is not limited to those who need help in the United States. One day, she says, she hopes to attend medical mission trips to India.

"A friend of mine went there and brought back pictures," she explains. "I've learned that in many places like India, good medical care is not available like it is here. It may be free, but it's not nearly what we have here. I want to go there and help."

Although she is only a sophomore, Jessica is already putting her passion to work in the medical field, in a position that could potentially affect local patients who are terminally ill. Last week, she began to work as a volunteer with Caring Angels Hospice in Gilbertown. At only 16, she is too young to work with the patients, but she

is spending her afternoons doing what she can in the office and helping to put together gift baskets for the patients.

"This is really the best thing I can do to help people here," she says. "If we had a hospital, I'd volunteer there. I just want to get involved."

With much of her future already mapped out, Jessica is now taking other steps toward fulfilling her goals. She is taking all of the advanced science courses that are available to her.

"I'm taking 11th grade chemistry this year," she says. "I plan to take Anatomy — all the sciences I can. I especially love chemistry."




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