



March 28, 2006

St. Louis Among Eight Cities To Get Arts Grants

By Jeff Douglas

Fourth-graders moving to the beat of drums in a traditional African dance is much more than a playful exercise at Dunbar Elementary School.

When the music stops, students explore the geography of the Ivory Coast. They get a history lesson on the African culture behind the "Diasa" dance. Then, students write about what they learned for an English assignment.

Blending arts into standard curriculum in public schools will be more common in eight communities, including St. Louis, under \$2 million in grants from the Ford Foundation to be announced Wednesday. The grants will support programs to integrate arts into the classroom and reinforce the foundation's push to give the arts equal footing as other school subjects.

Learning partnerships between cities and theaters, museums, symphonies and schools are by no means new, but officials in the St. Louis arts community said never before have all the programs worked together.

Interchange, the St. Louis pilot program funded under the grant, wants to change that and become an umbrella organization to connect about 50 partnering arts, education and cultural groups with St. Louis Public Schools.

"We want to give teachers a menu and show them all the programs that are already offered and how exactly to bring them into the classroom," said Larry Cohn, co-chair of Interchange. "It's ambitious, but it's very attainable and it doesn't require a lot of money."

Along with St. Louis, Dallas, Washington, Cleveland, Baltimore, Jackson, Miss., and Alameda County and Berkeley in California each will receive \$250,000 grants to proceed with initiatives that support integrating arts into curriculum.

Some cities already have programs in place, while others, including St. Louis, are in the pilot stage, said Cyrus Driver, spokesman for the foundation's education programs.

The grants come at a time when one in four school principals say less time is being devoted to the arts, according to a Council for Basic Education study.

Cohn pointed to Dallas, where the "Big Thought" program has become a model for other cities to follow. Several times a year, students engage in learning through the arts or cultural community.

"It makes learning extremely active," said Gigi Antoni, director of Big Thought. "Rather than simply reading about astronomy, they get to explore it conceptually. It's very powerful."

Research in Dallas has shown improved test scores, Antoni said, and it's believed to have boosted attendance and involved more parents.

By 2007, officials said St. Louis teachers in kindergarten through grade 12 will be able to access a database of hands-on arts and cultural programs tied to virtually every subject. The Saint Louis Science Center, Saint Louis Symphony and museums are involved and already have curriculum in place.

Interchange will train teachers to integrate the arts into their teaching in a few schools to start.

"The obstacle has always been that all of these services the arts community provides are fragmented," said Stephanie Riven, director of the Center of Creative Arts (COCA) in St. Louis, which has spearheaded Interchange.

The African dance program at Dunbar Elementary is just one example of COCA's attempt to bring the arts to schools. In a separate program, a St. Louis theater company teaches students how to be playwrights.

"There's a larger picture here," Riven said. "Arts and cultural organizations are going to lead the rebirth of this community."

Copyright 2006 Associated Press All Rights Reserved