

# Auburn teaching through art



Carman Peterson Barrow County News

Students in Kim Easterling's fifth-grade class used movement to remember digits and place values. The students took a "digit parade" until certain numbers and place values were linked. (Below) "I can tell you've all had your noses in my books," said a visiting writer to a class in Louise Borden's story "The Day Eddie Met the Author." Courtney Purcell's third-grade class developed skits to act out the story.

**By Carman Peterson**  
Barrow County News

Music in math class? Sketching during science? For Auburn Elementary School students and teachers, the unlikely combinations are becoming common. Auburn is partnering with ArtsNOW to teach core subjects to kindergarteners through fifth-graders using the fine arts.

ArtsNOW is a professional learning organization under the collaboration of the Atlanta Ballet, Georgia State School of Music, Savannah College of Art and Design, and the theater department of Emory University.

Through ArtsNOW teachers are trained to use art to reinforce lessons in every subject. Advocates for the group claim the arts stimulate parts of the brain required to learn, and instill problem solving and reasoning skills.

Pam Millice, the executive director of ArtsNOW, has been involved in arts-based learning for several years.

"The biggest problem with arts integration is what people see as 'fluff and stuff,'" Millice said. "When people walk in and see cutting and pasting in a social studies class, they don't understand the deeper learning that is taking place."



Kerry Bryant, the fine arts coordinator for Barrow County schools, agreed that arts are a useful teaching tool, especially for young children.

"At the elementary level, kids are naturally moving, singing, drawing creatures," Bryant said. "[Schools] beat that out

## ARTSNOW

Continued from Page 1A

of them, and then send them out in a corporate world where bosses want more creative workers."

Bryant went on to explain that the brain functions in levels, with recall being the simplest form of brain activity and creativity being the highest form. He said the goal of arts integration is to push children to the higher levels of thinking.

"What's going to generate jobs in the future is that highest taxonomy," he said. "Why stop at those first couple of rungs on the ladder?"

Auburn principal Shawn Williams said the school has been using arts to reinforce the goals set out in the Georgia Performance Standard.

"Sequencing is something kindergarten have to do, so we use dancing and music to help them learn sequence," she explained. "One of the fifth grade teachers last year used [math skills like]

measurements and proportion to make self-portraits."

She recalled an incident last year which convinced her that the ArtsNOW program was working for Auburn students.

"I was in my office working one day and there was just noise and laughter coming down the hall," she said. "I walked down into the first grade classroom, and the kids were up, interacting, punching things out with cups and working on spelling. They were having a blast and when I asked the teacher later how they did on their spelling test, she said they blew it out of the water. That was the sound of engaged students.

"Teaching becomes more difficult every day," Williams continued. "This partnership gives us a vehicle and a different way of meeting different needs, and by doing that we hope to see test scores rising and kids coming to school hungry to learn."

Because of Auburn's participation with ArtsNOW, it has become one of two schools in Georgia chosen for the Music in Education National Consortium. Auburn will also become a National Learning Lab, with a focus on music in first grade. Auburn has already set an example in the educational world: next month administrators from a Massachusetts school will visit to study the program.

Millice, who nominated Auburn for the position, said she was looking for a school with what she called "innovative leadership."

In a letter accepting Auburn to the program, Dr. Larry Scripp, director and principal investigator of the MIENC, echoed Millice's confidence in the partnership.

"The Auburn-ArtsNOW partnership is based on a long-term commitment to the future of arts plus arts integration in public school classrooms," Scripp



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Students in Kim Easterling's fifth grade class get involved.

wrote. "Like those of us at the MIENC, school administrators [at Auburn] continually expressed the desire – and demonstrated the resolve – to create a school culture conducive to employing arts learning as a medium and model for learning success for all."

As part of the program, Williams, Bryant and several teachers participated in a three-day training session, with follow-up training ahead. Williams said her long-term goal for the program is

simple. "[We want to] improve student achievement and involvement, have better attendance and test scores," she said. "[We want] students who are creative thinkers and problem solvers, because that's what we need in today's economy. Bottom line is always, always student achievement."

Auburn is funding ArtsNOW through federal grant money and contributions from its Parent-Teacher Organization.