

Work of Art

A Cincinnati school uses art instruction to reduce the high school dropout rate and change the lives of the city's most vulnerable teens

Kathleen Vail

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hen Asia Akins figured out how many credits she needed to graduate, she wasn't sure if she was going to make it. A pregnancy and chaotic living conditions had put the Cincinnati Public Schools senior nearly a year behind in her classes. Still, she was determined to graduate so she could provide a better life for her new son.



A teacher told her about an arts and technology program that helped Cincinnati students recover credits and graduate on time. "I said, 'I don't know anything about art, but I need the credits. I'm going to have to go and make the best of it,'" Akins recalled.

Make the best of it, she did. Akins graduated on time, is enrolled at Cincinnati State College, and works as a nurse's aide at Cincinnati Children's Hospital.

The school that helped Akins transform from a potential dropout to a working, college-going adult is the Cincinnati Arts and Technology Center (CATC). A private nonprofit that works in partnership with the Cincinnati Public Schools, CATC uses the visual arts to reconnect disenfranchised students with school so they can graduate and go on to work or to higher education.

Traditionally, school districts have viewed arts education



as enrichment, often curtailing or eliminating programs during tough budget times. This is particularly true in districts that already have limited resources.

However, considering art as a fringe subject may be short-sighted. Research and experience are showing that instruction in the arts can be a powerful tool in motivating and reclaiming students who don't do well in traditional school settings, including those from impoverished families who have had little or no exposure to the arts in their lives.

"To take raw materials and make something beautiful restores the soul," says Laura Greene-White, CATC's director of education. "We see that happen every day."

Creating 'viable adult lives'

Since it opened in 2003, CATC has had about 1,400 students—all from Cincinnati Public Schools—participating in classes. It

now operates at capacity, with about 400 students enrolled each year. More than 95 percent of the center's students earn the credits they need to graduate or to move to the next grade, and more than 90 percent of the seniors graduate. Also, 85 percent of those graduates apply for college or other higher education admissions.

Most students who come to CATC need high school credits but, like Akins, have little or no experience with creating art.

"We are not trying to prepare future artists," says Greene-White. "We are helping students create viable adult lives. We want to expand their horizons."

Students can earn seven credits—six electives and one in fine arts. Classes are offered in digital multimedia, drawing and painting, sculpture, ceramics, and jewelry design.

A National Board Certified teacher, Greene-White is a Cincinnati Public Schools employee who works in an out-of-

the-classroom position at CATC. She works with the instructors, who are artists from the city and community, on the curriculum, and makes sure the courses follow state standards.

In addition to learning the rules and techniques of their art subjects, students also get some history lessons. Each year, work is based on a different theme. One year, it was the Harlem Renaissance. Other years featured the Hero's Journey, and German Expressionism. This year is devoted to "isms" (Modernism, Cubism, Impressionism, etc.) in the art world.

Students look at the theme's cultural background and must produce something that relates to it. For example, Greene-White says, German Expressionists used their cities and villages as their inspiration. When studying that theme, the students created their art with Cincinnati's many bridges in mind.

"It fit with the state standards, and it reflected their environment," she says.

Breaking down barriers

CATC does its best to take down barriers students might face at their home school. It has rolling admissions, which means students can come into the program at any time during the year. They can catch buses from their home school. Classes are held in two sessions per day, one in the morning and, for those students who can't fit the classes into their regular schedules, an after-school session.

Clara Martin, the center's chief executive officer and a former Cincinnati school administrator, says the program's goal is not to recreate a public school. Instead, CATC uses a guild model in which students work with master craftsmen serving as role models. Some students even earn apprenticeships with the artists.

"It's a different kind of relationship than (the students have) with certified teachers," Martin says. "Some of our artists look like the kids."

The staff seeks to treat students like adults, and they are expected to meet or exceed the coursework requirements. "We are not walking in line, not giving out demerits. We are welcoming to them," Martin says. "We have no suspension or detentions, none of the punitive things that happen in school. It takes them a while to acclimate."

As a result, Greene-White says, the center has "very few discipline problems. They realize the person in charge is themselves."

Art is the hook, but the program doesn't stop at teaching students how to throw pots or bead a necklace. It offers other supports as well, such as an internship program that allows students to work with individual instructors or serve as leaders who tutor their peers. Students must go through a formal application process and review.

"They have to exemplify all the things we require," says Greene-White. "Their assignment completion must be on track and they must exhibit a good attitude."

CATC has a partnership with the Cincinnati Youth



Collaborative, a group that mentors at-risk students. A representative is on-site to help seniors apply for college and for financial aid. In addition, the school holds college fairs and takes students on tours of nearby universities.

Students also learn about the art business through the center's twice-a-year show, at which they exhibit and sell their work. They help coordinate the event and receive money from the sale of their work.

Martin says the art shows allow students to interact with people they normally wouldn't see in their daily lives, including affluent CATC board members and other art buyers. "Our kids talk to them," says Martin, "and look them in the eye."

'Why wouldn't you support it?'

A decade ago, the Cincinnati Public Schools had an abysmal 60 percent graduation rate, leaving many young men and women without supervision or education. Concerned community members gathered when William Strickland came to town to talk to them about bringing his long-standing Pittsburgh program—the Manchester Bidwell Corporation—to Cincinnati.

"Bill came in to talk about how he engaged disenfranchised groups and used arts as the basis to help kids develop rich, meaningful lives, but also to train adults for real jobs and employment in the community," Martin says.

Lee Carter, chairman of the Cincinnati Children's Hospital and longtime city philanthropist and community fundraiser, worked to bring the Manchester Bidwell model to Cincinnati. At first, he says, he couldn't drum up support. He realized that Manchester's building was a sticking point. Strickland's Pittsburgh building was a \$10 million facility designed by a student of Frank Lloyd Wright. People were concerned that

they wouldn't be able to come up with the money for a similar building in Cincinnati.

Carter suggested the city adapt the program rather than replicate it. That one-word change, he says, made all the difference. "The same people who were negative said it would be fine."

The building's aesthetics are an important part of the Manchester model. "It's all a part of Bill's philosophy," says Martin. "You put disenfranchised students in nice environments and give them the same thing their middle-class counterparts are accustomed to. The kids respect where they are."

While it's not in a new building, CATC's space is attractive. It's in a renovated warehouse with large windows and new lighting—fitting in with Strickland's vision. "Environment drives behavior," he says. "You build beautiful spaces, you get beautiful people."

Carter's business connections have proven to be crucial to fundraising. As a nonprofit, CATC must raise two-thirds of its \$1 million budget each year.

"When we started, people funded us as a leap of faith. It makes sense: Any startup takes some faith. Now we can show them data that shows that it works," says Carter, who now heads the CATC board of directors.

One-third of the center's budget comes from the school district, which has been a strong supporter from the start, Carter says.

"We've been through four superintendents in eight years, and they've all served on our board," he says. "It's not surprising, if you take a point of view that we're here for the good of the children, and we graduate 90 percent of the children who come here. Why wouldn't you support it?"

Mary Ronan, the district's current superintendent, was an administrator in the audience when Strickland gave his presentation about bringing his model to Cincinnati. "I thought, 'That looked interesting.' I didn't realize it would take hold and turn into the CATC that we have today."

Like her predecessors, Ronan serves on the CATC board. "The first time I got to tour the CATC center, I was really impressed: the ceramics lab and all the computers, a college admissions person, a gallery with artwork," she says. "That's when I thought, 'Wow, that PowerPoint presentation had actually turned into an actual school.' That's when I went, 'Wow.'"

CATC, says Ronan, is a great fit with the school district. "When it first opened, I don't think anyone realized it would have such an impact on the graduation rate. We thought it was a great way to get the credits, but no one realized how impactful it would be."

Cincinnati has worked with a Gates Foundation grant for high school reform, one of many changes that the district has made to bring graduation rates up to 80 percent today. All 17 district high schools are smaller, themed schools. That particular reform, says Ronan, has made CATC all the more vital.

Smaller schools, while they have their advantages, cannot

offer the variety of subjects a large, comprehensive high school can, Ronan says. "CATC can fill that void. Now you can have the kiln, the graphic designs, and the software. You couldn't reproduce that at 17 high schools; it's too costly."

Vanessa White, a Cincinnati school board member, also is the director of community engagement for the Fine Arts Fund, a nonprofit that encourages community engagement with the arts. She says the school board always has supported CATC.

"I think that partnerships are essential," she says. "There is a huge weight on the district to provide everything. CATC has aligned the work it does by helping young people meet high school requirements and give them additional exposure to the arts that builds social and cultural involvement."

Friends and partners

The Manchester Bidwell model has three other sites: Grand Rapids, Mich., San Francisco, and a center in Cleveland that opened this past September.

Strickland, who founded the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild more than 40 years ago in inner-city Pittsburgh, was one of those disenfranchised students who, as he says, was saved by art. "Mr. Ross, my art teacher, saved my life. He made a pot. I'd never seen that before. I apprenticed with him. I got pretty good with clay."

Why does art hold so much potential for at-risk students? Strickland says it operates in the hemisphere of the brain where imagination is centered. "If you unlock imagination, you unlock learning. The child becomes open to the environment in ways he wasn't before. That process is the pathway to education and the kindling of the desire to learn."

Many children, he says, have never been encouraged to learn. It never occurs to them that they don't have to be condemned to the circumstances of their neighborhood.

Strickland would like to see his brainchild take hold all over the country. He views his model as a partnership, not a competition, with public schools. "I don't believe any one school system can solve these problems by themselves. The problems are too powerful and pervasive. School districts find themselves overwhelmed. We are friends and partners. We bring resources and corporate leadership, so we can all look with pride on the outcomes."

Asia Akins is one of those outcomes—and CATC has many success stories just like hers. Like Strickland, her first work of art was a clay pot. Her next project was more ambitious: She wanted to make a ceramic baby. With her teacher's help, it took about 12 weeks. The figure sold at the art show for \$50.

"They tell you anything can be art, even if you don't know how to do it," says Akins. "Whatever is in your head, that could be your form of art." ■

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