

Integrated Arts Approach

Integrated arts approach at Rio Grande School helps every student shine.

By Cullen Curtiss
Community contributor

“I learned more about the solar system because I acted out the facts,” said Carly Hinz, second-grader at Rio Grande School, of her class’ integrated arts play, and her role as methane gas on Uranus. Her teacher Kirstin Mitchell used a child-centered approach by handing the process of discovery over to her students, and then Chris Leslie, RGS Drama Specialist of 20 years, helped the students develop a tableaux or living pictures of each planet.

“Student-led inquiry deepens the learning, as does internalizing the information for performance, and using your body to express facts,” says Mitchell. “We have



similar success with our Ancient Greece theme, which culminates in a costumed re-enactment of the first Olympics — javelin, hurdles, long jump, discus — with the help of our Physical Education Specialist, 12-year RGS teacher Sara McIntyre. We always integrate our core classwork, and capitalize on the creative strength of teachers from other disciplines.”

Started as an integrated arts-focused school in 1978, Rio Grande School, an independent school, serving pre-Kindergarten through sixth grade, has expanded the breadth of special classes, now offering PE, Technology, Spanish, Science, Experiential Learning, in addition to Music, Art, and Drama. The constellation of collaborative teachers increases the possibilities for research-based classroom projects, enriching the core classroom learning.

For eight-year RGS art specialist Melissa Merritt, the richness of integrated arts projects is palpable. “First graders studying birds in the classroom gain a perspective of pattern, shape, and color by observing the work of J.J. Audubon. Fourth graders studying Ancient Egypt explore the question of how art differs according to time, place and belief systems through creating cartouches, collars,



The Rio Grande School 4-year-old class looks for signs of fall during a field trip; second-graders preparing for the Olympics with interim RGS Head of School Patrick Brown; and kindergarteners read their Earth-Day related poems as part of their integrated arts project.

and sarcophaguses, and clay protective animals.”

Another critical benefit is that the programming offers every type of learner the potential for a hook, an avenue into the material that facilitates a child’s success.

Third grade teacher Hannah Peria says, “Some understand through building, some through art or language or music. Each discipline adds significance, bringing a more holistic understanding.”

One of Ms. Peria’s richest integrated arts projects examines the Spanish Colonial period. Students simulate life on the rough seas, and once they reach land, research various vocations, constructing realistic workspace dioramas, with the help of 21-year RGS Librarian Susan Steinman and Director of Technology Greg Malone. Spanish Specialist Consuelo Byrd assists with language related to the Columbian Exchange, improving the students understanding of what’s native to the Americas. Seven-year RGS Music Director Barbara Bintree introduces the New Mexico state song, and helps the students research and create musical instruments from the period to be used in a retelling of events.

While the integrated arts projects become more complex in the older grades, pre-K and Kindergarten classes can, too, take advantage of RGS’ multi-disciplinary curriculum. Science Specialist Erin Gaddis expanded the 3-year-old class’ understanding of germs and hand-washing by giving each child a plush toy covered in a simulated germ substance called Glo-Germ. Under a black light, the students saw the spread of the germs, and washed until they were gone, underscoring the message that washing well reduces the likelihood of getting sick.

For Kindergarten teachers Mary Ann Pound and Nancy Sievert, the eight weeks spent preparing for the Earth Day animal puppet show offer the greatest opportunities for differentiated instruction.

What’s most important to 13-year RGS teacher Pound about RGS’ approach?

“I love to see all students shine, and with an integrated arts approach, each and every one does.”