

# YUKON

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# Artistic Education

## Yukon Artists Take Their Techniques to the Classroom

Story and photos by Catherine Lai

In a workshop with animation artist Andrew Sharp, the Grade 4/5 students at Takhini Elementary School, in Whitehorse, were most excited about bringing something seemingly simple to life. Sharp taught the budding artists an animation technique where a pencil is used to flip a page back and forth, creating a moving picture.

“That was really cool,” exclaims Aevril Rowberry, a student in the class.

In all 28 schools across the territory, artists are teaching and inspiring kids through the Artist in the School program, funded by the Yukon Government Department of Tourism and Culture and administered by the Yukon Art Society. Artists get involved by submitting their resumé, a registration form, and a background check. Selected artists design a program they’ll teach to students, focusing on the medium they work in. Schools then schedule sessions with artists, and the program covers instructor costs for the hours spent in the classroom.

The Artist in the School program was originally developed in the mid 1980s to augment art instruction in the schools. In 2004, the program’s budget quadrupled from \$25,000 to \$100,000.

“Just like a lot of different arts funders, people are really interested in developing young artists and also exposing young artists to the arts so that they can practice in the arts or they can appreciate the arts,” says Laurel Parry, manager of arts for the Department of Tourism and Culture.

There are two primary objectives: contribute to professional artists’ incomes and expose students to a variety of artistic disciplines by working with professionals.

“It’s a very cost-effective way of transforming lives—that’s the way we see the program,” says Parry.

Aside from the added source of income, artists also benefit from the additional exposure.

“When a local artist who lives in town is hired to go to a school, that artist is then recognized as being a really important part of that community,” Parry explains.

Artists also find that interacting with young learners enriches their own artistic practice. In fact, the teaching often goes both ways.

“Children’s imaginations are incredible. It does allow you to return to that aspect, as an artist, to play,” says Lynne Sofiak, program



(Above) An art-show fundraiser of students' work. (Below) Detail of a student's artwork; artist Andrew Sharp gives an animation lesson.

coordinator. Sofiak is a potter who's been teaching with the Artist in the School program since 1987.

Sharp agrees that the teacher very much becomes the student.

"It's inspiring. There's a freedom that comes with younger kids, as opposed to older kids," he says. "I'm always surprised at what they come up with."

The opportunity to work with a professional artist provides children with an important element of their education: a glimpse at future possibilities. Parry wants to establish connections, like having a student attracted to words meet a poet. "That gives the kind of inspiration that we're looking for," she says.

And that kind of inspiration is happening. When an illustrator came to Rowberry's school to give a presentation, she says it made her want to be an illustrator when she grows up.

Rowberry's teacher, Colleen O'Brien, says the artists' passion for what they do passes on to the students.

"Just watching the inspiration of the kids—they get that from the artist," she says.

The scope of the Artist in the School catalogue echoes the breadth of talent in the Yukon. There is a diverse range of visual-arts offerings, including painting, drawing, bark carving, stained glass, felting, wood and leather burning, basket making, and oriental papermaking. There's also performing, literary, and media-arts programs, like breakdancing, capoeira, music, improv, circus skills, and creative writing, as well as a workshop on building enhanced eBooks.

Schools can also coordinate extended programs with artists, which allows for bigger projects like mural painting. This past year, painter Susan McCallum ran a two-week program with Elijah Smith Elementary School, in Whitehorse, culminating in an art-show fundraiser. The protracted time period allowed McCallum to take kids through the entire process of creating a painting, from basic drawing skills, conceptualization, and planning to the finished piece.

Parry says including artists of all disciplines in the program shows kids the mysteries and beauty of art experiences.

"These are professional senior artists who really do, in their career, probe the mysteries of that particular art form and their own artistic voice in that art form," she explains.

Furthermore, Parry argues that art education is important for everyone to lead an expressive life. Giving kids a chance to explore various media provides them with tools to express themselves in different ways.

"JUST WATCHING THE INSPIRATION OF THE KIDS—THEY GET THAT FROM THE ARTIST."



"[Art education] creates a whole being. We're not all just numbers and facts. We need to be able to express ourselves and learn the different ways of expressing ourselves," Sofiak explains. "Part of a child's education is to be exposed to all those various avenues. Art is not just colouring on Fridays."

Parry says art education demystifies art and creates a critical audience for the future. This creative learning is also about inclusivity.

"There's a place for everybody as an artist or an audience," says Parry. Whether it's providing opportunities for children with disabilities or children from families who don't have the resources to provide arts training, the Artist in the School program bridges the gaps.

McCallum recalls giving art supplies to students who didn't excel in other school subjects—their teachers consistently astounded by what they create—and remembers making a connection with a quiet, soft-spoken young girl. "She came up to me and whispered something. I said 'Pardon me?' And she said, 'You make me feel like an artist.'" **Y**