



Hannah Piecuch • Daily Times

For Emma and Julia, kindergarteners in Mary Ellen Carlu's art class at Washington Oak, art is always a celebration, but their creative expression is especially special this month as Coventry schools, teachers and students celebrate Art Month.

'No one right answer' the beauty of art

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COVENTRY — Art is more important than ever in an age of technology.

As they celebrate Art Month in Rhode Island, Coventry elementary art teachers Mary Ellen Carlu and Sarah Hemendinger see how art impacts their students in an irreplaceable way, they say.

It strikes her whenever she teaches students to make something with their hands, said Carlu, who teaches art at Washington Oak.

As she walked her students through a weaving lesson in recent weeks, she realized that some of them were having trouble tying knots.

"Because of video games, kids just don't make things with their hands very often anymore," she said. "That's why art is more important than ever."

Art teaches patience and dedication in a culture of instant gratification, said Hemendinger, who teaches at both Tiogue Elementary and Hopkins Hill. It also introduces complex problem-solving skills.

"One of the reasons that I love teaching art is because its one of the few places where children can be

creative problem-solvers," she said. "I think that's something a lot of kids are lacking in their education right now. In art there's no one right answer. It gives



them a chance to practice in a safe way and come up with solutions to problems."

Given the many issues that the world faces right now, a generation of "problem solvers who are going to answer the questions" is something that is desperately needed, she said. "That's one of the best things that I do, besides inspiring them to be creative, is to give them a chance to realize that answers aren't always black and white, that they can come up with a grey that's the right solution."

Kendyl Ward likes art because she can draw whatever she wants, says the fifth grade Washington Oak Student. Her classmate, Hannah McGuirk likes it because "I can express myself," she says.

Most recently, Carlu's fifth grade art class has been working on tessellations — repetitive shapes in contrasting colors, pioneered by

artist M. C. Escher. Ashlet O'Loughlan has liked this project the most this year, she said. Her tessellation consists of brightly colored dragons.

Jamison Evans likes his tessellation project best because it took on a direction of its own, he said. "I didn't expect the shapes to come out like this — like elephants!"



Art ties in to other learning

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Drawing directly from major figures in art history is one of the techniques Carlu tries to employ in each lesson with her students. Fifth grade is just finishing Jacob Lawrence and making paper collages of athletes. Next they will move into mask-making and Papier-mâché. Fourth grade has been weaving and will study the Impressionists next. Third grade is learning about perspective drawings by studying Grandma Moses. Next they will do pastels and continue a study of community. Second grade is doing a unit on masks and shading. First grade is studying Winslow Homer and learning about shapes. It is in this grade that they learn to

draw a horizon. Kindergarteners are working on tissue paper stained glass, following the example of Eric Carl's very hungry caterpillar.

As much as possible, Carlu said, she collaborates with other teachers in the building so that the art classes tie in with other things they are learning. The same time that kindergarteners start the tissue paper art, Eric Carl's books are read in the library. As students star to learn about community, Grandma Moses landscapes of small towns become another layer of learning.

At Tiogue and Hopkins Hill Hemendinger is teaching her kindergarteners how to paint with rollers and then turn those pieces of art into collages, she

said. First graders are learning to mix colors and doing spring paintings. Third graders are looking at the work of Chagall and painting fantasy-scapes out of their own dreams or day-dreams. Fourth-graders are doing self-portrait cartoons. And fifth grade students are learning to use pen-and ink and the basics of calligraphy.

"Art is the heart of the [educational] core," Carlu said. In art students learn about shapes, colors, lines and textures. They can apply what they learn there to mathematics, history and ideas. It's important to encourage kids to be creative because in the end "they come up with an expression of themselves — and their projects look gorgeous."