

# Listen To My Story



## Breaking Cultural Barriers Through The Arts



## Let Me Hear Yours

A Report by: Public Citizens for  
Children and Youth

October 2009

## ***About PCCY***

*Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) serves as the region's leading child advocacy organization and works to improve the lives and life chances of its children.*

*Through thoughtful and informed advocacy, community education, targeted service projects and budget analysis, PCCY seeks to watch out and speak out for children and families. PCCY undertakes specific and focused projects in areas affecting the healthy growth and development of children, including child care, public education, child health, juvenile justice and child welfare.*

*Founded in 1980 as Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth, our name was changed in 2007 to better reflect the expanded work in the counties surrounding Philadelphia. PCCY remains a committed advocate and an independent watchdog for the well-being of all our children.*

## ***Special Thanks***

*Public Citizens for Children and Youth thanks  
The Leo Model Foundation and The William Penn Foundation*



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# Listen To My Story...

Philadelphia and its surrounding counties now have the largest and fastest growing immigrant population among comparable metropolitan regions, with large representation from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and to a lesser extent Africa. The city's public schools teach children who are being raised in families with different cultures and perspectives; they speak 113 different languages.<sup>1</sup> Philadelphia is once again a gateway for new immigrants.

As the new immigrants settle here, they rub shoulders with those who have longtime Philadelphia roots, but whose life experience and history have separated them from the larger city and its populations. Even as immigration patterns are changing the city's landscape, many of Philadelphia's low-income neighborhoods continue to be communities where students

never step beyond the boundaries that separate the familiar and known from the broader world. Many attend schools which lack significant diversity and include many young people who know little of their own cultural backgrounds and histories.

Probing the possibility of using the arts to recognize and value difference, PCCY recently explored the experience of some Philadelphia schools in creating new pathways to build better understanding between and among children with different heritage.



As a number of arts initiatives have demonstrated in recent years, the arts can offer an opportunity to help students develop their own cultural identity, while breaking barriers and finding common ground among their peers of different backgrounds.

*Three years ago, the African students in one of our high schools were threatened because they wore traditional clothes of their homeland or talked with unfamiliar accents.*

*Last year, some youths whose families came from Mexico, China, India and Haiti were regularly taunted in their community.*

*This year, hundreds of kids in several schools dressed up in tradition garb and celebrated their families' heritage.*

*And the story of many new arrivals repeats itself as differences cloaked in fear, shame, pride and honor come together in our school and communities.*

# A Closer Look at Cultural Exploration Through The Arts

Recognizing two large, yet diverse groups — immigrant students and students from culturally isolated, low-income communities — PCCY interviewed a variety of teachers, teaching artists and administrators at district public and charter schools and area arts and community organizations that work both in and outside of schools.

We asked about arts programming that addressed students' cultural identity and connections to others. The featured interviewees were nominated by their peers in the arts and education communities in Philadelphia.

## Three main themes emerged:

- 1. Philadelphia is a growing magnet for immigrant populations.**
- 2. The city's low-income communities — largely African-American, Latino and Asian — have been historically isolated, and have not explored or appreciated their own cultural histories and traditions or interacted with those whose histories and traditions may be different.**
- 3. The arts can help deal with both issues: to recognize and value students' cultural heritage, and help students learn to appreciate and find commonalities with those different from themselves.**

*We can tell our stories through the arts.*

Our talks with practitioners revealed a strong message: the arts can offer an opportunity for students to investigate their own lives, develop better self-understanding and be more able to engage with and appreciate people from different backgrounds. Especially in communities where students may lack global perspectives or defer to conformity rather than difference, arts can give students the opportunity to be participants in the broader world, a doorway into a world of diversity.

Arts are currently helping students break new ground through innovative approaches despite ongoing challenges of restricted funding and resources. With more support, the impact of the work on students, schools and communities could be greater.

We present just a small sample of arts successes in a city with over 280 public schools and more than 904 arts and culture organizations,<sup>2</sup> many of which offer learning experiences that explore cultural identity and empower students to connect better to each other and their communities. The examples that follow occur in varied settings: district public and charter schools and arts organizations, and with practitioners including classroom teachers, arts subject teachers, teaching artists, and arts organization staff.

The ideas presented may shed light on how the city and schools of Philadelphia can make a signature commitment to children and youth — breaking through barriers, clashes and intolerance with the help of the arts.





# Cultural Identity: Perspective from the School District

School District of Philadelphia arts leaders attempt to address the needs of Philadelphia's immigrant population, develop an appreciation of the value added by their presence in our city, and promote learning experiences that explore diverse cultures. Music offers an opportunity to "celebrate the global breadth of culture, not just the Western canon," says Department of Comprehensive Arts Education Director Dennis Creedon. "We don't want to lose anything, but help the immigrant populations appreciate what they came with. It draws the parents in and builds respect among students for their cultural traditions. For students in schools with immigrant populations, it helps them understand their peers and gives them new perspectives."

Creedon points to the creation of the School District's Chinese orchestra at Southwark, Kirkbride and McCall schools, Indian dance at Lincoln High School, and instruction in Puerto Rican folk guitar (the Quatro) at Edison High School. Arabic cultural arts including percussion are being taught at Moffett and Penn Alexander elementary schools, Feltonville Arts & Sciences Middle School, and at Motivation, Ben Franklin, Leeds Military Academy and Elverson high schools. Creedon emphasizes that cultural exploration is part of — not ancillary to — the PA arts curriculum: "Bringing cultural understandings into schools is a part of the curriculum. It's something you're supposed to do." The Department is anxious to respond to any request for culturally-relevant artist partnerships in schools across the city.

What has been the impact of these efforts? Creedon cites many examples of the positive impact of programs that are respectful to various cultures. The Chinese orchestra, composed of elementary school students, brought tears to the eyes of the Asian Business Association, and words of amazement that these students were learning instruments thought by most to be lost to the next generation.

The Arab Culture & Heritage Celebration, held at the School District Administration Building in May 2009, helped to illustrate the roots of Arab cultures in our own society. The Department reports students at participating schools felt more comfortable in their school, and with their peers who may not look or talk like they do.

In the summer of 2009, the Department prepared for District-sponsored cultural arts and core academic summer programs for up to 20,000 students, an initiative unique to programming in recent years. Eight hundred teachers were hired, many of whom were integrating arts into their core subject areas. Over

300 teaching artists were hired with the help of Philadelphia Arts in Education Partnership. Activities at programs included a wide range of cultural exploration

including dance, music, visual arts and the written word, hip-hop and rap. The District further accelerated its progress in hiring arts positions for 2009-2010, adding 42 new vocal music teachers, six band directors, 10 instrumental music teachers and 35 new art teachers. The Department emphasizes that innovative exploration of cultural identity is an integral part of arts learning. "State standards call for a celebration of cultures, not an homogenization," Creedon shares.

***"Bringing cultural understandings into schools is a part of the curriculum. It's something you're supposed to do."***



# Cultural Exploration: School Stories

## *Cross-cultural identity in a multicultural context: Birney Elementary School*

*“We want to recognize every child’s background and build a stronger community as they become more comfortable with their differences and even discover how they are the same.”*

- Rachel Marianno, Assistant Principal, Birney Elementary School

After several years exploring cultural identity in its diverse student body through the arts, Birney elementary school reduced cross-cultural conflicts, increased student engagement, connected immigrant students to native-born students and improved school climate as a whole.

Birney wanted to address the cultural differences in its diverse student body. A schoolwide project undertaken in 2005-2006 focused on an important aspect of African-American roots through a series of projects on the Harlem Renaissance involving participation and performance by students across various art disciplines with the help of teaching artists. The project was a great success and brought the school together around enjoyable arts-based learning and instruction. It was also given credit for improving overall school climate while developing students’ appreciation for African-American history and traditions.

But, “our Asian and African students didn’t feel part of it. We had to do something to bridge the gap,” said Assistant Principal Rachel Marianno. With students from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Ghana, Nigeria, Haiti and Jamaica alongside its African-American population, there were noticeable taunts and derogatory comments directed toward many of the minority populations. Many of these students felt left out of the school mainstream.

In 2008, the school planning committee conducted a cultural survey of all students and staff members, asking them to share something of their family’s background. From this survey of “roots” they developed a schoolwide project utilizing a unifying theme of migration and immigration.

As survey results were read during morning announcements, students learned about each other and the interesting route that led their families to the common bond of the Birney school. Discoveries were made about teachers and their connections to foreign lands; information even other faculty didn’t know. Some of the shared information became subjects of mini-lessons on geography and history, such as learning about South Africa (the homeland of one staff member) and apartheid. In an effort to make the project truly multi-disciplinary, math classes plotted the results of the surveys and a PowerPoint presentation was created to share the results.

Using several small outside grants and the Kennedy Center Arts Edge curriculum material, Birney explored the migration/immigration theme with teaching artists and internally-generated lessons. Hip Hop roots were found in Africa, and expressed at a drumming event. Poetry was used to express the feelings of those migrating. Dance was used to explore Cambodian culture. Much to the surprise of many, the students took up the challenge of this very unique dance style. As Marianno described, “The kids’ attitude was, ‘We learned hip hop. Let’s learn this one now.’” For the Asian students, there was great excitement that something they could claim as theirs was being brought into the school. “Their eyes lit up!”

The project has helped create a school that is more welcoming to all its students. The Cambodian and African students have become stronger participants in the school, previously shying away from engaging in a school that had not always felt open to them. Additionally, students have become curious and appreciative of the events which brought them together.

In the school's Cambodian New Year celebration, for example, students from many backgrounds guided the ceremonial dragon through the school hallways.

Exploring different cultures at Birney through the arts has created a more open and exciting school. Drumming, dance, poetry, drawing and storytelling have connected Africa, Cambodia and the U.S., and offer a way for everyone to explore similarities and

differences safely. Kids had the opportunity to have fun learning about others so that "difference" was no longer something to be made fun of, but a characteristic to be explored creatively.

Cultural exploration reduced conflicts between students, resulting in a happier, more engaged student community at Birney.

## *Doing Art and Learning About Our and Others' Cultures: E.M. Stanton Cultural Arts Center*

Teachers who established the Cultural Arts Center at E.M. Stanton School believe that "doing" art is a way for students to learn about another culture and feel more comfortable in the world around them. Beyond building arts skills, the goal of the Cultural Arts Center is to help students feel comfortable in a diverse world and enable them to discover what is different (as well as what is the same) about the people and cultures with which they interact. School leadership believes the arts also help students learn social skills and develop confidence through interactions with people different from themselves.

Begun 11 years ago, the Stanton Cultural Arts Center has evolved into a school institution offering students unique experiences to explore world cultures in music, drama, visual arts and dance. As a very small school, Stanton had limited access to arts teachers. But through the leadership of former teacher Sue Kettell, Stanton developed the Cultural Arts Center into a "window on the world," with the belief that everyone is an artist and students should be given the opportunity to learn through each of the art forms. "There are some basics we all need... food, shelter, love, families... they just look a little different from place to place," says Kettell.

The Center engages outside teaching artists to develop skills through specific projects, working with classes over a period of time to complete a given ac-

tivity. During the 2008-2009 school year, the Center listed 14 different partnerships they were involved with including African drumming, ceramics, a variety of dance styles, folk tales, mask making, vocal arts, violin study, and the production of Shakespearean plays. Partnerships invite artists-in-residence to the school, or take students to the various arts landmarks in neighborhoods throughout the city and in the suburbs to help them feel more comfortable in different cultural environments. Each activity includes making historical connections and geography lessons, with the ever-present world map.

Behind much of the activity is the goal of expanding the students' views of the world. The artistic process offers enjoyment, encourages different kinds of interactions, and allows students to shine in ways they normally might not in the classroom. While Kettel reports that a number of eyebrows were raised within the school community about producing Shakespearean plays in a school with a predominantly African-American population, learning the Elizabethan vernacular opened a world of vocabulary and syntax discussion, and provided the opportunity to connect England to the Americas historically during the era when the slave trade thrived. The process of producing a play placed students in unfamiliar roles, showing off gifts that were not previously displayed — as directors, producers, and set-designers.

*"There are some basics we all need...  
food, shelter, love, families...they just  
look a little different from place to place."*



The experiences in the Cultural Arts Center are especially valuable for students who lead relatively isolated lives in their neighborhoods, helping them step with confidence into a world that may not look or sound like them. The work done at the Center is geared to encourage students to discover qualities to complement in each other, not criticize, and learn

how to be “in the world,” welcoming to audiences and being considerate to guests. A focus of the Center’s activities is on team efforts, building social skills and learning to utilize each others’ talents. Kettel adds that through the arts, students “discover a myriad of gifts, their brightness. They get over self-doubts and can be of the world.”

## ***The Arts Are How We Learn About Each Other: Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School (FACTS)***

***“Folk arts are the way we have passed knowledge and values from generation to generation in our communities. Learning these traditional forms is about persistence, patience and respect. It’s not fast and easy, with instant gratification.”***

- Debbie Wei, Principal, Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School

Starting its fifth year in September 2009, Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School (FACTS) views cultural arts exploration as a prime avenue to open students’ connection to themselves, their community and the world at large. Co-founded by Asian Americans United (AAU) and the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP), FACTS partners with its founding organizations and others to embody a community-based and intergenerational vision of learning where family members, elders and the community are involved in the students’ learning experience.

Approximately 60 percent of the students are Asian, representing Chinese, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao communities, among others; 30 percent are of African-American; and 10 percent are African, Latino, mixed race, and European heritage.

Besides being a springboard for teaching and learning, the school sees arts — especially folk arts — as a key strategy for delivering education that “incorporates and respects the lives of students and their families” and “engages students in understanding their own cultures and communities.”<sup>3</sup>

“We felt that in order to rebuild a sense of community among our children we needed to bring elders into the school,” explains FACTS principal Debbie Wei. “And we also felt we needed to include those elders in a way that the knowledge and the skills they have are honored.



“Our elders have culturally rich and relevant knowledge — food ways, textiles, dance, music, stories — they can bring to the learning process.”

Both AAU and PFP work with the school’s teachers and administrators to design and implement the folk arts education program and to bring a broad spectrum of arts experiences to students both during and after school. Art forms have included Liberian dance and song,

Vietnamese dan tranh (zither), West African dance and percussion, Cambodian crafts and classical dance, Tibetan sand mandala, Chinese kung fu and lion dance, African-American storytelling, and vocal improvisation and body percussion.



The residencies offer a level playing field where all students participate immediately and are taught how to help others learn what they have learned. Many of the artists return year after year, becoming a part of the school, comfortable with its culture and climate so students look forward to studying with them. These long term relationships deepen the teaching and learning experience for artists, teachers and students.

Beyond the residencies, folk arts are incorporated into the school in a number of ways. Students engage in writing oral histories and a partnership with SEAMAAC (Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Association Coalition) brings in senior citizens to FACTS to engage in a number of activities. At “Honor Our Elders Day” the seniors are served lunch and engage in circle/folk dances with the kids. Some seniors teach the music teacher songs in their home language (Vietnamese, Cambodian, etc.) and the students learn the songs in choir. The seniors go to FACTS concerts and the children sing the songs for them. Seniors work with classes to teach them how to cook or do needlework. In FACTS’ Chinese language program, children learn paper cutting and dance. After school, they learn Chinese opera, lion dance, kung fu and wushu.

PFP and AAU also work to develop school rituals, policies and practices that foster an environment characterized by inquiry, respect and investment in positive social change. “We are working to move beyond ‘tolerance’,” says Germaine Ingram, FACTS

board member and former Associate Director of the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP). “Experiences with folk and traditional arts and culture develop knowledge, skills, empathy and respect as students work to learn traditional art forms and cultural practices, study their origins and evolution, and delve into their meaning for arts practitioners and communities.”

School faculty members participate in staff development on the roles of traditional arts and culture in teaching and learning, and PFP maintains a resource center with books, videos and CDs teachers can use for their own research and study and for classroom instruction. FACTS assigns and compensates a folk arts coordinator from the school faculty to be a liaison with PFP and AAU and to keep arts at the forefront of curriculum planning in the school.

“We are getting steadily better at using folk art forms to make a school environment where students feel that their backgrounds and heritage are valued and respected, and where students and educators alike build their capacity to navigate and serve multiple and diverse communities,” reports Ingram. In 2008, a committee of school administrators, teachers, and AAU and PFP staff developed a set of folk arts standards that were formally adopted by the FACTS board in June 2009. The result of weaving community and traditional folk arts into the school day is profound, offering students different ways to see themselves and the world, and providing them with an increased comfort level with their peers.



# Cultural Exploration: Stories from Organizations

## *Celebrating Different Cultures Through The Arts: Fleisher Art Memorial*

*“When we do our work well, it allows young people to see the humanity in other people.*

- Magda Martinez, Director of Arts Education and Community Engagement,  
Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial

Behind Fleisher Art Memorial’s work in schools is an effort to develop deeper understandings and respect for cultural differences and similarities among students. Through artist residencies at schools and on location at the Art Memorial in South Philadelphia, Fleisher teaching artists work with diverse populations, making cross-cultural connections between newcomers and long-term residents, and between immigrant and diverse American-born students.

Arts Education and Community Engagement Director Magda Martinez says students are encouraged to recognize their own “cultural markers” and become curious about those of others. For example, a Vare Elementary School project connected art forms and symbols present in their own lives to art forms and symbols of the native Lenape who were living in the Philadelphia area when Europeans arrived. The resulting computer-generated collage found common ground among all those involved, exposing unforeseen connections for students. “The arts, whether, visual, music, theater, dance, are universal and create a common ground that the written language does not always allow,” says Martinez.

In schools where demographics are more homogeneous and students tend to be isolated in their particular culture, Fleisher works to create openness and appreciation among students for cultural ideas that may seem new, unknown, or unconventional. Recognizing that the lives of many students do not permit exploration outside a limited set of expectations, either from home and parents or the immediate neighborhood, Fleisher’s seeks to help students discover cultural traditions and behaviors which may not be their own. Students can validate their own traditions while learning about others.

“Arts allow kids to find a way back to themselves,” Martinez explains. “For example, ‘I’m African-American. I enjoy hip hop. It’s okay to like bluegrass too!’” Arts can develop students’ strength to be comfortable with themselves while incorporating others’ experiences into their lives, becoming more at home in a much larger world.

“We have to be careful not to fall into the ‘empty vessel’ syndrome,” Martinez stresses. “All students come with cultural markers and traditions, often not recognized even by them.” Projects work to validate and appreciate the students’ own traditions while exploring others. According to Martinez, immigrant students may not articulate it but they can feel when their lives are not included in the culture and life of the school. Martinez adds that some students whose families have been living in Philadelphia for generations may also feel that their home culture is not reflected and recognized at school. And yet other students feel disconnected, but are not well-versed enough in their own cultural history to understand why they feel uncomfortable at school.

In a project at United Communities’ Southwark House, 10-12 year old students were invited to bring in and explore board games their families have played, encouraging them to find out more about their personal backgrounds. Next, students designed their own games using objects and symbols familiar to them, then played the games with each other according to the rules they created. The social interaction across cultural boundaries was significant and the project, importantly, was allowed to evolve as needed. Martinez reports, however, that staying open to see where a project leads is often challenging to schools that feel constrained by core curriculum demands.



The work at Fleisher recognizes that culturally-sensitive arts projects can successfully weave through the intersection of recognizing cultural identity, developing stronger self-esteem and building cross-cultural friendships. A guiding belief fuels the work: bringing out and recognizing cultural traditions through artistic forms helps everyone.



## ***Reconnecting Youth To Their Roots and Their Communities Through Storytelling: The Village of Arts and Humanities***

The Village of Arts and Humanities (The Village) focuses on restoring cultural connections for youth from a low-income, predominantly African-American community in North Philadelphia and restoring hope and vitality to this community. Artistic exploration helps re-connect youth to their own cultural roots, empowering them to move beyond themselves to achieve positive change in their neighborhoods. Through all their projects The Village works to restore cultural traditions and connections lost in the tumult of difficult lives, including neighborhood collaborations with seniors, youth and staff. “Our work is always about empowerment,” explains Executive Director Kumani Gantt.<sup>4</sup> “The narrative is incredibly important because it recognizes who these young people are, helps end their isolation and restores connections with other people.”

Using rich African and African-American arts traditions emphasizing storytelling,

The Village has developed an afterschool program for high school-aged students focused on keeping them in school and getting into college. The Village creates a safe haven for kids, expecting participants to maintain good grades, and provides tutoring assistance if they fall down. The Village uses the arts as a tool to help students investigate themselves and find ways to share their stories with others. According to Gantt, storytelling is the foundation for recognizing the difficult realities of many young peoples’ lives, providing historical context and helping them recognize commonalities with others outside their own immediate experiences.

***“The narrative is incredibly important because it recognizes who these young people are, helps end their isolation and restores connections with other people.”***

Through classes in digital media, including both film and video, dance, African drumming and the spoken word, young people choose topics to create a narrative that is presented to others in a respectful setting. In addition to the regular afterschool programming, The Village runs a Teen Leadership Corps, with competitive enrollment, to develop leadership, school and career success skills. The program has developed a relationship with students from Winterfelt Township in South Africa, involving a student exchange experience helping students understand a different kind of poverty and the historic impact of systematic oppression from apartheid. Creating art is central to the work of both organizations and offers

a gateway to expressing their thoughts and feelings. This cross-cultural experience has given important perspective to students in both settings.

“Art is the doorway to disengaged youth,” says Gantt. “It can be a way to recognize who these young people are, what’s going on with them and give them historical context for their lives. By honoring each of their stories, a conversation emerges about what is bothering them about their neighborhood and where they would like it to go.” Whatever the art form, the narrative comes from students’ personal experience and helps them counter the negative image of North Philadelphia. “We need to think differently about arts experiences for our young people,” Gantt continues. “We can help restore connections and create something new.”

## *Expressing Pride in Puerto Rican Heritage: Taller Puertorriqueño*

For 35 years, Taller Puertorriqueño has explored the arts of Puerto Rican and other Latino cultures with youth, working to eliminate stereotypes and build cross-cultural comparisons with students from other cultures. At Taller, the arts are used as a vehicle to build cultural pride and appreciation within the community itself.

With a 35-year history of work in North Philadelphia's Puerto Rican community, Taller comes from "humble beginnings," originally offering opportunities for teenagers to feel a stronger connection with their culture through printmaking and other art forms. Today, Taller works to maintain the artistic traditions of Puerto Rico while recognizing other Latino cultures with ties to the island.



While not working directly in schools, Taller's afterschool programs run throughout the school year at their home base. A theme is chosen for the student projects (Taino Indians, African roots in Puerto Rico, etc.) and research is always part of the preparation for the artwork that results. Students use the traditional art forms, such as mask making, murals or printmaking, to give their interpretation of the historical and cultural context they have discovered.

Results are displayed in Taller's galleries. "It's very important that we teach children about their culture, but also about social justice and about other cultures so they can be more culturally sensitive and tolerant of others who may be different," says Sandy Andino, Taller's Director of Education. "They need to develop themselves as positive human beings who contribute to their community in a positive way."

Through the "Visítanos" program, schools are invited to tour Taller and participate in workshops on Puerto Rican culture, working on one short-term arts project. Rather than sending staff to schools, it is important to the institution that these students come to Taller so they can overcome any negative stereotypes they may have and begin to appreciate the long history of Puerto

Rican art existing at Taller and in the surrounding neighborhood. The experience works to break down negative perceptions and build cross-cultural comparisons with students from other cultures. The art projects are vehicles for restoring pride in the students' own traditions and connecting them with community and family.



## *Supporting Immigrant Children: Tamaa Program of the Children's Crisis Treatment Center*

Based in Southwest Philadelphia in a building renovated by The Children's Crisis Treatment Center and the African Cultural Alliance of North America, The Tamaa Program specifically supports West African immigrant children, aiming to strengthen through artistic expression the confidence of kids with particularly traumatic pasts. Tamaa, Swahili for "glorious, smiling, hopeful faces," has become the project to support new-to-Philadelphia war refugees from western Africa, primarily Liberia, Ghana and Sierra Leone. The program boosts confidence through cultural exploration, breaks down barriers between African and American-born students, and helps both groups discover connections between them.

The in-school program is a therapeutic arts curriculum using traditions and crafts from the students' native countries to help the young people "speak" about their experiences. Many of these students have been traumatized by extreme violence in their homelands, having seen friends and relatives killed or removed abruptly from their families and communities. Upon arriving in Philadelphia, the language, school setting and ways of life are all unfamiliar. They become easy targets for other students, the victims of teasing and bullying; and they are often involved in fights. Few feel confident or are given the opportunity to speak to others about their lives. They often have difficulty recognizing their own feelings about what they've been through. Art allows these children to express what might not otherwise be heard.

Tamaa works to restore appreciation of the students' cultural traditions by using them to give kids a voice. Mask making leads to discussions about what they may want to hide from. Pots they construct become recipients of feelings they don't like. Drawings to represent safe or relaxing places offer the opportunities for stories to be told about these places. Tamaa

develops a support group for these middle school students and helps them develop coping skills with which they can encourage each other.

Tamaa has seen remarkable results. "Students have moved from being non-verbal and fearful to being outspoken and expressive of their thoughts and feelings," explains Marjorie Robinson, Arts Coordinator at Tamaa. "They have developed friends with American-born students; there is much less fighting and they no longer feel ashamed to say they are African."

Robinson acknowledges that Tamaa is a therapeutic art program which focuses less on learning artistic technique and more on self-expression. "But isn't that what art is really all about?" she questions. "We ask them, 'What do you do when someone calls you a name you don't like? Take a deep breath. Walk away. Listen to music you enjoy. See if you can find a way to talk to others about your lives. They may be interested.'"

Tamaa students go beyond cultural self-exploration to break down barriers and promote exchange with American-born students. Robinson reports American-born students in the schools where the program existed were beginning to ask when they too would get to go to the Tamaa program. The activities offer a perfect opportunity for cross-cultural dialogue and social skill building. While the in-school program Tamaa runs is being cancelled for 2009-2010 due to a decline in the number of war refugee students, it is clear to all involved that there is value in continuing something similar. "Everyone has a story," Robinson shares. "If there were other students, then activities should include their cultural traditions and we could find similarities together."

# ... Let Me Hear Yours

*We all have stories — listening to some and telling others helps us create new ones.*

As both newcomers and “old timers” live in the city and rely on its schools, school teaching staff and outside arts providers in Philadelphia are using the arts as a valuable tool to offer both unifying and uncommon voices, exploring culture, identity and diversity. Successfully restoring and expanding robust in-school and community arts experiences will meet many of our societal goals: creating more engaged students, supporting our many heritages, increasing our sense of self and creativity, and building the workforce of the future.

Recent School District policies supporting the return of arts teachers to schools point us in an encouraging direction. Several new collaborative initiatives bridging arts organizations and schools have recently emerged. Through Art Speaks, all School District of Philadelphia fourth graders gain free admission and transportation to one of five collaborating institutions, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the Barnes Foundation, the Institute of Contemporary Art, and the Fabric Workshop and Museum.<sup>5</sup> Arts for Children and Youth, a public-private initiative, aims to increase access and equity of arts learning experiences for children and youth in Philadelphia and the region within a 10-year time frame. Support for the arts through the Mayor’s Office for Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy adds positive momentum to arts education efforts citywide.

Educators and organizations mentioned a number of supports they need in order to accelerate this progress, including more funding, resources, arts teachers and arts administrative personnel, and better linkages between schools, arts organizations and Out-of-School Time programs. Teachers pointed to the need for professional development, better space, time for collaborative projects and residencies, better assessment, and a new culture in schools that welcomes inquiry-based and open-ended artistic process. The pressure to deliver success measured by high-stakes academic tests is an additional challenge to schools.

Arts can open doors through cultural exploration. Philadelphia presents a unique opportunity for the city and region to shine as an arts education model. The region can become a place where students master skills in arts disciplines and use the arts to connect better to themselves, each other, their neighborhoods, the city and beyond. The opportunity is here, the work is aligned as immigration increases, and the importance of creativity and the arts to the future of the city and to the next generation is recognized by our citizens and our leaders. We can build a better, stronger city by creating arts pathways to understand and celebrate our differences as well as our commonalities — in our homes, our schools and our communities.



# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> School District of Philadelphia Office of Accountability, “Language Diversity in Philadelphia Public Schools,” 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance (GPCA), GPCA Web Research Brief, 2008, <http://www.philaculture.org> (15 July 2008)
- <sup>3</sup> FACTS school mission statement
- <sup>4</sup> Note: Kumani Gantt joined Seattle’s CD Forum in June 2009. Elizabeth Grimaldi is currently Executive Director.
- <sup>5</sup> See <http://www.philamuseum.org/education/32-219-178.html>

# Special Thanks

***We thank the schools and organizations featured in this report who have worked hard to bring experiences in the arts to their students:***

E. M. Stanton Elementary School  
1700 Christian Street, Philadelphia PA 19146

Birney Elementary School  
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Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial  
719 Catherine Street, Philadelphia, PA 19157

Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School  
1023 Callowhill Street, Philadelphia, PA 19123

School District of Philadelphia, Department of Comprehensive Arts Education  
440 North Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA 19130

Taller Puertorriqueño  
2557 North Fifth Street, Philadelphia, PA 19131

Tamaa - Children's Crisis Treatment Center  
417 North Eighth Street, Philadelphia PA 19123

Village for Arts and Humanities  
2544 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19133

***For contributing photos:***

Ellie Seif, cover (top)

Gudmond Iversen, cover (bottom)

Ayanna Glover for Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture, page 2

Ellie Seif, pages 3, 4, 7 & 8 (bottom)

Gretchen Elise Walker, page 8 (top)

Laura Richlin, page 10

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# Acknowledgements

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## PCCY Funders

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The Barra Foundation, Caroline Alexander Buck Foundation, The Claneil Foundation, The Dolfinger-McMahon Foundation, Eagles Youth Partnership, The Samuel S. Fels Fund, Firstrust Financial Resources, Genuardi Foundation, GlaxoSmithKline, Green Tree Community Health Foundation, John C. and Chara C. Haas Charitable Trust, Phoebe W. Haas Charitable Trust, The Allen Hilles Fund, Independence Foundation, Lenfest Foundation, Christian and Mary Lindback Foundation, The Christopher Ludwick Foundation, Leo Model Foundation, The Neiman Group, Grace S. and W. Linton Nelson Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Philadelphia Foundation, Philadelphia Youth Network, Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation, The Puffin Foundation, Ltd., The Elizabeth B. and Arthur E. Roswell Foundation, Stoneleigh Center, United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, William Penn Foundation

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