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Fresno chosen for prestigious arts project

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The Fresno Bee

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More than 250 arts organizations, the city of Fresno and local education leaders are joining forces with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts to make sure school children learn more than just reading, writing and arithmetic.

In a ceremony Tuesday at Storey Elementary School in southeast Fresno, the Washington-based Kennedy Center announced that Fresno is its newest partner in its Any Given Child arts education program. Fresno is only the 10th city in the country chosen for the project and the second in California since Sacramento became the first partner in 2009.

The Kennedy Center will work with the Fresno Unified School District, Fresno County Office of Education, the city of Fresno and local arts organizations to develop -- and put into practice -- a long-range plan for improving art education.

"President Kennedy talked about the development of the human spirit, and that's what we're looking at for the children in kindergarten through eighth grade," said Darrell Ayers, the Kennedy Center's vice president for education. "We focus on K-8 because we want kids to understand the various arts available to them, whether it's playing an instrument, singing, painting a picture or acting in a play."

Fresno Unified Superintendent Michael Hanson said art education remains a priority for the district's Board of Trustees, despite diminished money from the state in recent years. "Arts education has too often been an afterthought in the frenzy to focus on student achievement," Hanson said. But he said leaders see in school site visits "just how essential the arts are for students.

"Students say they only come to school for band, for music, for strings. These are incredible connections for students to our schools."

Kennedy expertise

The Kennedy Center program provides no money, but its staff will lend its expertise to determine how best to bring Fresno's existing art resources into classrooms.

"This is not a grant, but since the Kennedy Center is leading this, it will be an organization that says, 'We endorse what is going on' " and looks to the local arts community for help, said Allan Kristensen, Fresno Unified's manager for visual and performing arts.

While Fresno Unified has strived to maintain and restore some music programs at each of its 64 elementary schools and 15 middle schools, Kristensen said, there is room for improvement.

"What the arts look like right now in our schools is a little one-dimensional," he said. "We have a smattering of things throughout the district."

There are more elaborate arts programs at such schools as Bullard Talent or Manchester GATE, but Kristensen said every fourth-grader has a recorder flute, and every fifth- and sixth-grader has an opportunity to participate in band, strings or choir.

Storey Elementary sixth-grader Anyssa Trimmer, who plays trumpet in the school band, said music helps her with her schoolwork "by helping me think more clearly."

"Music makes my brain come alive," she said. "I have always loved music because it is another way to express myself."

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin said her two children attend Bullard Talent and Manchester GATE, "and I can tell you firsthand how impactful arts education is when blended into other curriculum at our kids' schools."

Winning application

Fresno was chosen by the Kennedy Center on the merits of its application, letters of support from the mayor, the district and county school superintendents, and a preliminary inventory of the community's arts resources, Ayers said. The city already has formed a community arts team that will work with the center's experts to put together an arts education plan.

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Fresno appealed to the Kennedy Center selection team because the city already has a solid arts foundation to build upon. "When you start to look at what's going on," Ayers said, "there's wonderful theater, wonderful jazz, wonderful dance going on through Fresno State."

The Kennedy Center's goal is to ensure that those resources are available in all of Fresno's elementary and middle schools. "We're looking for where the gaps are," Ayers said. "You may have one school that has the symphony working with it and maybe some visual artists helping out, and then there's another school down the street that doesn't have anything. We want to make sure that every child gets a complete education that includes the arts."

Ayers said the goal is to be ready to put a plan into action at the start of the 2013-14 school year.

"This is not a drive-by consultancy," Ayers said. "The Kennedy Center will remain involved for two or three more years to ensure successful implementation."

Linda Cano, executive director of the Fresno Art Museum, said she is glad to see the Kennedy Center coordinate an effort that involves the entire Fresno arts scene in the schools.

The museum has its own program to send art educators to schools throughout Fresno County to lead hands-on creative experiences for students, as well as hosting tours and classes at the museum.

"We are so proud to be involved with all these other organizations," she said. "To get everyone together in the same room, this is just something that's not been done before, and that's what's exciting."

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