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Arts may lift performance

At DPS's transformed Kunsmiller school, teachers and artists will guide students

By Jeremy P. Meyer

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Diana Howard sees the nearly vacant four-story building that has housed the low-performing

Kunsmiller Middle School as an empty palette. Its hallways are darkened, locked-up classrooms contain leftover books, and just 350 students remain.



Justice Valdez, 7, drums for the student body at The Studio School in Northglenn, an Adams 12 elementary that integrates art into its daily curriculum. A recent study shows a correlation between arts and learning. (Photos by Brian Brainerd, The Denver Post)



At The Studio School, chalk can be as much a part of schoolwork as pens and pencils.

"I see this all being something miraculous . . . transformed into something beautiful," said Howard, who is leading Kunsmiller's revival.

Next year the building will reopen as Kunsmiller Creative Arts Academy — an arts-focused school where students will learn core subjects while exploring dance, music, drama and visual arts.

Artists will work alongside teachers. Students with an interest in arts will be accepted even if they have no training.

"We haven't captured children's minds and souls for learning because we have taken out the context," Howard said. "When we have poems that we are jumping and dancing to and writing scripts, they will learn to read and write."

A recent study by the Colorado Council on the Arts showed a correlation between arts and learning, revealing high schools with more art programs had higher proficiency in writing, reading and science.

Several Colorado schools have integrated arts as a way to engage students and push learning.

Loveland's school district has created an arts feeder program, while Mapleton schools started an arts-centered school that was visited by presidential candidate Barack Obama in May.

And Kit Carson School District pulled out of the federal No Child Left Behind program in part because of how it would have affected the district's music program, which requires music classes for all students through the sixth grade.

"We didn't want the federal government to tell us how to educate our kids," said Gerald Keefe, Kit Carson superintendent. "It would have eroded our arts and sports."

Adams 12 School District this year opened an arts-focused elementary in Northglenn called The Studio School that blends the arts into the curriculum. The school has artists who work alongside teachers to develop lessons.

Last week, drama and dance teacher Jonathan Davis straddled a hand drum and methodically tapped out a rhythm for his students to follow.

Children with drums sat in a circle, concentrating intensely as they banged away to match Davis' beat.

"See how they are bringing everything they can into that drum and rhythm," said principal Roberta Manitone. "One of the things we are working on is building focus and attention. That's one of the underlying struggles in reading."

The state's most notable public arts school is Denver School of the Arts — the only comprehensive secondary arts magnet in the Rocky Mountain region.

The sixth-through-12th-grade program is fashioned after the New York school that inspired the film "Fame."

DSA students must audition for admission, and usually only a third are selected, said assistant principal Pete Castillo.

The knock on DSA has been that it excludes many Denver students who haven't developed proper creative skills.

That's what the new Kunsmiller intends to address.

The school opens in August with kindergarten through seventh grade and will add a grade every year until it is K-12.

Seventy-five percent of Kunsmiller's students will be from the surrounding neighborhood in southwest Denver. No auditions or portfolios will be required, Howard said.



Storyteller Opalanga Pugh, right, coaches teachers at Adams 12's The Studio School. (Brian Brainerd, The Denver Post)

Kunsmiller Middle School has served a Latino neighborhood where 93 percent of students are eligible for federal meal benefits — an indication of poverty.

The school has been low-performing: Just 5 percent of eighth-graders go into high school proficient in math.

Can Howard, who created the district's only school for highly gifted and talented children, turn around such a school through art?

"One of the challenges is how do you get kids who are really low-skilled . . . to grade level," said Van Schoales, education expert at the Piton Foundation.

"It's hard to create something from scratch that works really well," Schoales said. "But they have such a big advantage of having Diana as principal. It's better than schools with a vision who don't have a good principal."

"I truly believe the core curriculum and the arts are two parts of a whole; one isn't more important than the other," Howard said. "I believe children will succeed when we weave the arts in everything we do."

The school's guiding philosophy stems from Daniel Pink's book "A Whole New Mind" and its theory that America's workforce must develop a more "conceptual" side to succeed in the 21st century.

The idea for an arts-centered school was part of last year's reform plan that also included closing several low-performing schools.

Kunsmiller would become the only magnet school in southwest Denver. It was pushed by school board members Michelle Moss and Jeannie Kaplan. A committee of artists, educators and representatives from groups including the Colorado Ballet and the Denver Center for the Performing Arts helped guide the vision.

Howard took on the job in April and has been devising the program ever since, studying schools around the country with similar models.

She expects to hire 24 teachers and eight artists next spring. Last week she mailed 6,000 postcards to area parents and has been holding meetings to get the word out.

"This is going to be the most exciting learning environment that you can ever imagine," she said. "I hold this vision in front of me because I believe so strongly in what this can do for children."

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Kunsmiller Creative Arts Academy

2250 S. Quitman Way Website: kunsmiller.org

Mission: K-12 integrated arts magnet school for Denver Public School students.

Demographics: 75 percent from areas feeding Kennedy and Lincoln high schools and Grant Middle School, and 25 percent from the rest of the district.

Admission: Students will apply and be selected at elementary by lottery and at middle and high school by interview to discern passion for the arts. No auditions or portfolios are required.

Parent information meetings: Oct. 14, 16; Nov. 11, 13; and Dec. 2