

*Dr. Christine Davis, Editor*

## **Taking Art To The Streets: A Mobile Art and Reading Experiment**

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The El Paso Independent School District, located in far west Texas on the border with Juarez, Mexico is the largest school district in the El Paso metropolitan area, serving some 63,000 students, fifth largest district in the state. El Paso sits in one of the most economically disadvantaged metropolitan areas in the country; a border community burdened with dual language problems and constant high unemployment and the accompanying educational woes that come with poverty. Consequently, the arts are far down the list of necessities in the curriculum. Due to this troubling situation, the core subjects take a very strong driver's seat in the quest for educational successes. In visual arts, the art specialist, long coveted as a wished for part of the El Paso ISD teacher workforce, is not a viable alternative to schools that fill their teaching slots with desperately needed bilingual math and science classroom instructors whenever possible.

While El Paso does claim some recent goals met in the quest to strengthen student performance through consistent emphasis on the Texas standardized test (TAAS), few dollars and little educational emphasis have been shown toward the arts in years. But a program that highlights one of the very successful efforts of the school district to meet the needs of elementary students in the area of fine arts, particularly visual arts and

the relationship of art to core subjects such as reading and writing, is the "Van Go" Mobile Art and Reading Classroom.

During the 2000 school year, the district curriculum unit initiated a needs assessment of how best to serve students in the primary grade levels in arts instruction, with a goal of alleviating the chronic lack of arts instruction. In the EPISD campus, regular classroom instructors have long done the bulk of art instruction for students in grades K-5 and they have consistently done a very good job. But the need for more specialized arts instruction was very clearly defined by the needs assessment. It was also determined that there was an insufficient number of teachers within the district to offer that specialized arts instruction to elementary grades, without harming the advances made in TAAS test scores. Due to these factors, there was difficulty adequately addressing the district board stated goal of improving student and academic achievement, as it pertains to fine arts at the elementary level.

The result of this initiative is "Van Go," a mobile classroom that is being used to take instruction in art history and art appreciation to elementary students at the campus. Mobile classroom vans previously used by itinerant teachers serving local parochial schools were available for service. Each of these vans was outfitted to serve up to 22

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primary grade students at a time. But the “Van Go” program would need renovation to be truly effective in arts education delivery. One of the vans was completely renovated for use with 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students with desk space for hands-on art production and bench seating for student reading of the artist biographies. The addition of a teacher demonstration area and easel display panel completed the necessary additions that would provide a working studio setting for the teacher and students. A beautiful program graphic was created for the outside of the van.

Because of the readily available commercial grade level reading material in famous artist biographies, third grade students were targeted for this unique offering. During a typical lesson, students are introduced to a famous artist, read a short biography on that artist, discuss the life and art of the artist and finally create hands-on art in the style of the artist studied. Additionally, in support of core curriculum instruction, the visiting art instructor ties two standardized TAAS subtests, reading and writing activities, to each presentation and provides follow up enrichment activities for the regular classroom teacher to extend to students after the “Van Go” visit.

The district was initially able to find funding for the project through federal Title VI innovative programs money. Within a two-year framework, the district must take over the local funding of the project and is expected to do so.

The initial implementation of the program was a multifaceted joint effort by a variety of district entities. The district external funding department provided management. The vocational students of the wood shop program at the Center for Career and Technology Education designed and built benches appropriate for 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. The district cabinet shop made renovations to the van interior to accommodate the young students.

It is anticipated that the “Van Go” project will be expanded in the next year to include a second instructor visiting the campuses in “Van Go II!” This staff addition would allow for 5 for 6 continuing art experiences during the school year for all 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students in the district. With such exposure to the lives of artists and the accompanying emphasis on reading El Paso ISD, students can expect a rich and continuing arts background to be an integral part of their educational experience.

While not pretending to adequately take the place of a qualified visual arts specialist, the “Van Go” mobile art and reading classroom provides a unique experience that students will remember and retain information thanks to the unusual and creative experiences that they encounter when the “Van Go” mobile van pulls up in front of their campus.