

CONNECTED ARTS NETWORKS QUARTERLY SESSION, NO. 12
CLOSING WITH COMMUNITY IN MIND

Connected Arts Networks (CAN) establishes national virtual Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for educators in dance, music, theatre, visual and media arts. CAN aims to build a sustainable model of professional learning for arts educators in public schools to strengthen their leadership skills and build their capacity to address social-emotional learning and equity, diversity, and inclusion in their arts instruction. Find out more about the project and our partners [here](#).

This is the last CAN Tip Sheet in this series, a series developed through the Connected Arts Networks grant, funded by the US Department of Education. In full transparency, the CAN team was notified in September 2025 that our remaining funding would be rescinded by our funder due to our focus on equity, diversity and inclusion practices in the classroom. We stand by those practices, for the reasons outlined in these Tip Sheets, and while CAN will be ending in its current national format, we know the work we have done and the relations teachers have created with peer educators and their students will continue to thrive. As we consider how to close the grant, CAN teachers considered effective practices for closing out the school year in their classrooms.

The work of this project has been challenging, sensitive and of paramount importance to serving the needs of students and their arts learning. CAN has supported arts educators with much-needed resources to research, explore, experiment, learn and analyze those strategies that are responsive to students and nurture and empower their artistic voices as they are affirmed in their identities, dreams and potential. We hope the resources we created and are disseminating to the wider arts education community will allow more arts educators to benefit from the work CAN teachers are doing.





Leslie Grace (she/her/hers)

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Leslie is an award-winning K-8 visual arts educator at Nebinger Elementary in Philadelphia with over 20 years of experience. She currently serves as the Elementary Division Director for the National Art Education Association and is Past President of the Pennsylvania Art Education Association. Leslie also leads the Philadelphia Art Teachers Alliance, supporting a vibrant network of local art educators. A dedicated advocate for equity and inclusion, she centers culturally responsive teaching, social-emotional learning, and student voice in her classroom. Leslie's work in teacher leadership, professional development, and action research reflects her commitment to creating transformative learning experiences through the arts. A few of her achievements include being named a "Leader Under 40 in Education" by BillyPenn.com in 2015, receiving the PAEA Outstanding Elementary Art Educator Award in 2016, and earning the prestigious Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching in 2022.

Community: In what ways do you support students in naming and honoring the community they have built while acknowledging that art spaces, like many third spaces, are ephemeral?

One of the most meaningful ways I support students in honoring the community they've built is through our annual end-of-year art show. Every student from kindergarten through 8th grade has artwork featured, and the event brings together our entire school and neighborhood. In the weeks leading up to the show, we reflect on what we've created together—how we've grown, what we've learned, and what the art room has meant to us. Students help hang the show, greet guests, and lead art activities. This sense of ownership, even in a temporary space, helps them recognize and take pride in the community they've shaped.

Action Research: From an equity-centered perspective, how do you allow all students to provide feedback on their experience in the class or course?

From an equity-centered perspective, I create multiple entry points for student feedback, so every learner feels heard. Rather than waiting until the end of the year, I embed feedback opportunities throughout—using sticky-note reflections, anonymous suggestion boxes, visual surveys, and open class discussions. This ensures all students, including quiet, multilingual, or neurodivergent learners, have accessible ways to share their thoughts. After our art show, we reflect on feelings of pride, inclusion, and ideas for change. When students see their suggestions implemented—like more choice or extended time—they recognize their voice matters. Feedback isn't just gathered—it actively shapes our shared art space.

Impact: Did you learn what you thought you would, or learn something new about your curriculum and teaching practice?

I definitely learned some things I expected, like which projects really resonated with students or where I needed to adjust pacing, but what surprised me was how much I came to realize about the emotional weight of the art room. Through our reflections and the lead-up to the art show, I realized just how deeply students connect to the space and to each other. It reminded me that my curriculum isn't just about skills—it's about identity, agency, and belonging. I learned to pay even closer attention to the quieter moments, because that's often where the most meaningful growth is happening.

Resources: What educational resources on this topic would you recommend to colleagues?

One resource that grounds my end-of-year reflection practice is Elena Aguilar's [The Art of Coaching Workbook](#)—her reflective questioning helps me pause, process, and plan with intention.

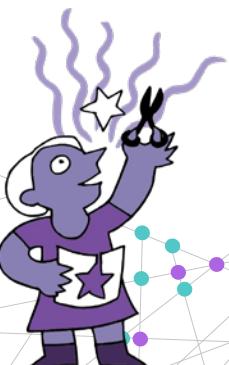
I also use [Harvard Project Zero's Visible Thinking Routines](#), like "I Used to Think... Now I Think," to guide meaningful student reflections.

Gholdy Muhammad's [Unearthing Joy](#) reminds me to center identity, joy, and community in our closing rituals, especially through our schoolwide art show.

Finally, [CASEL's SEL Framework](#) supports my efforts to help students reflect on their growth, emotions, and relationships. Each resource helps make reflection more inclusive, joyful, and student centered.

Reflection: How do you process and use what you learned as fuel and fodder for the following year? What does this reflexivity look like in action for you?

For me, reflection is the bridge between what was and what could be. After the art show and year-end wrap-ups, I take time to process student feedback, emotions, and patterns I noticed throughout the year. I ask: Did students feel seen? Heard? Connected? I revisit what sparked joy and what fell flat, using those insights to reimagine lessons and classroom culture. Reflexivity shows up in how I adjust—not just content, but approach. I take notes, save moments, and let their voices guide what comes next. It's not about perfection—it's about growth. Their stories fuel the vision for the year ahead.





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Theatre Teacher

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**Educational
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Association™**

Kimberly is a passionate high school theatre educator and arts advocate with nearly 2 decades of experience nurturing student creativity, voice, and inclusion. She holds a BA in Theatre Education from California State University, San Bernardino, and an MEd in Education from the University of La Verne. As a teacher leader with The California Arts Project, Kimberly develops and presents professional learning workshops for K-college educators focused on theatre instruction and arts integration across the curriculum. Kimberly is also a Teacher Leader for the Connected Arts Network. She has directed numerous high school productions, done extensive stage management, and sometimes has time for community theatre. Her deep love for children's theatre and belief in the transformative power of the arts guide her mission to create an equitable, meaningful, and safe space for all students.

Community: In what ways do you support students in naming and honoring the community they have built while acknowledging that art spaces, like many third spaces, are ephemeral?

In my theatre classroom, I intentionally create a safe space for students to reflect on community and what they share through creativity, risk, vulnerability, and trust. We use circle time to reflect and build community, connections, and growth. I guide them in noticing how their shared effort creates something special. We also use reflection strategies and positive notes to each other to foster growth, and community. We will inevitably move on to the next class or production and intentionally create and leave a lasting meaningful impact on one another.

Action Research: From an equity-centered perspective, how do you allow all students to provide feedback on their experience in the class or course?

From an equity-centered perspective, I create multiple avenues for students to share feedback, including written reflections, check-in surveys, class discussions in circle time, rotating centers, and theatre journals. I spend weeks doing team building in my class, allowing for all students to be heard, valued, and make connections with others. Adaptability is an important piece. I am listening to student input. I use student feedback to adapt instruction, making sure our curriculum reflects students' experiences. I like to have ongoing dialogue with my students, which drives a classroom culture of a safe place of belonging and learning.

“From an equity-centered perspective, I create multiple avenues for students to share feedback, including written reflections, check-in surveys, class discussions in circle time, rotating centers, and theatre journals.”

—Kimberly

Impact: Did you learn what you thought you would, or learn something new about your curriculum and teaching practice?

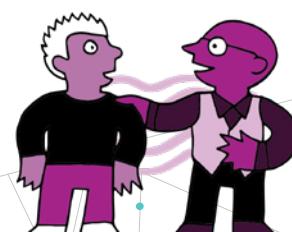
This year, I grew as an educator by deepening my understanding of student-centered learning and becoming more intentional about creating an inclusive, culturally responsive environment. I want buy-in from the students and for them to have connection with the lessons that we are doing in class. Two things I used this year were community circles on “Wellness Wednesdays” to create more connections in class; in my action research, I also created “centers” for students to hone acting skills and used more advanced students as leaders. These upped my practice exponentially and will be routine from now on.

Resources: What educational resources on this topic would you recommend to colleagues?

- [Theatre Folk: The Drama Teacher Resource Company](#)
- [Start Here, Start Now](#) by Liz Kleinrock—a great resource for all educators
- [Learning for Justice Resources and the Social Justice Standards](#)

Reflection: How do you process and use what you learned as fuel and fodder for the following year? What does this reflexivity look like in action for you?

Reflection is a huge part of my practice. I consistently evaluate what we've done in class and look for ways to improve it for the next year. I'm already tweaking lessons and sketching out ideas based on what worked and what didn't. Student motivation is a major focus, and I'm becoming more adaptable in response. I've learned to listen more to student input and to accept that different classes may need different approaches. Rather than being hard on myself, I use those differences to grow. This flexibility helps me create more engaging and responsive learning experiences for all my students.





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National Association
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Cody Puckett is a dynamic professional educator, disabilities advocate, and change leader committed to driving innovation in adaptive music education. Currently a PhD student in Music Education at the University of South Florida, with a focus on Speech-Language and Hearing Sciences, Cody is dedicated to bridging the gap between music and accessibility.

Community: In what ways do you support students in naming and honoring the community they have built while acknowledging that art spaces, like many third spaces, are ephemeral?

Within my community, I strive to support all stakeholders within our educational staff. I enjoy collaborating not only with additional music or fine arts specialists but also with others to develop new and innovative ideas that help all my students succeed. I enjoy collaborating with special education staff, grade-level leaders, and other staff, as well as utilizing paraeducators to help facilitate additional learning support for all the students I see. If we do use additional school community members, then we have a strong staff presence and support through a musical showcase of performances for all my students.

Action Research: From an equity-centered perspective, how do you allow all students to provide feedback on their experience in the class or course?

I allow students to work collaboratively, allowing them an allotted amount of time to share. This can help reinforce learning targets and collaborative learning for a center-based learning style.

Impact: Did you learn what you thought you would, or learn something new about your curriculum and teaching practice?

I was able to learn about identifying new things and realize that D/deaf students enjoy learning and are intrigued by the learning of music. D/deaf and hard-of-hearing students are similar to ESOL students. I sometimes forget that. I have been teaching D/HH (Deaf and Hard of Hearing) students for the past 6 years, and sometimes I forget the little things. I am fluent in ASL, so I am happy to have the opportunity to use the same language as them. It's a wonderful opportunity for all students to incorporate ASL into a music classroom!

Resources: What educational resources on this topic would you recommend to colleagues?

Our students deserve, and we deserve, a type of teaching that celebrates our uniqueness, our histories, and our contexts.

- [Teach with Give \(GIVE: Your Guide to Teaching Artistry in Inclusive Settings, Free online resources created by Teaching Artists for Teaching Artists working in Integrated Co-Teaching \(ICT\) Classrooms in New York City and beyond.\)](#)
- [Florida Educators of Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing \(The Florida Educators of Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing \(FEDHH\) is an association of educators who work with students who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing \(DHH\) in Florida.\)](#)

Reflection: How do you process and use what you learned as fuel and fodder for the following year? What does this reflexivity look like in action for you?

I always want to meet and network with other Teachers of the Deaf to help me navigate teaching the proper ways and strategies when teaching this population. I am always hungry for more professional learning either in special education or in music education.

Want to hear more
from these educators?

Listen to the corresponding podcast
episodes on [K12 Art Chat](#).





Elizabeth Zwierzynski (she/her/hers)

Supervisor of Visual & Performing Arts and Partnerships

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Elizabeth is the supervisor of visual and performing arts and partnerships for the Trenton Public School District. Previously, she was the founding dance educator at the Visual and Performing Arts Academy at Trenton Central High School. She also serves as a curriculum writer, professional development leader, mentor teacher, and member of the Community Arts Team through the Kennedy Center's Any Given Child program. Elizabeth holds an EdM and BFA in Dance from Rutgers University, where she is a part-time and guest lecturer. She has written assessments for the New Jersey Department of Education's Model Curriculum in Dance and authored dance history curriculum for the NYC Department of Education. As a Dance Education Lab (DEL) Facilitator, she has designed professional development for national and state arts organizations and contributed to Arts Ed NJ's "September Ready 2020" and "September Forward 2021." She also facilitated Arts Ed NJ's Culturally Responsive Arts Education Workout and was selected as a Dance Teacher Leader for the Connected Arts Networks project. Her honors include the NJDOE Distinguished Student Teacher Award and her school's Educator of the Year award.

Community: In what ways do you support students in naming and honoring the community they have built while acknowledging that art spaces, like many third spaces, are ephemeral?

Central to my teacher's heart is the belief that education and artmaking are tools for empowerment, self-reflection, and social change. It's the art of making something that is often a vehicle for the way students contextualize the world around them. While a performance may be ephemeral, these experiences live with our students forever, and that is a really special part of our jobs—to cultivate these spaces. For many students, the arts are what anchors them to the school community. It gives them a sense of place and the validation that they are indeed geniuses.

Action Research: From an equity-centered perspective, how do you allow all students to provide feedback on their experience in the class or course?

I think reflection is an important component that is woven through all parts of the school year. It helps to set the stage for designing instructional goals; it's essential to the process of revising those goals in response to our students' needs and interests, and it helps us vision forward. As a CTE dance educator, I treasured leading our seniors through their portfolio development unit, which asked them to compile artifacts and reflect their units across the previous 3 years. The reflection questions center around not only their artistic process but also the community and intellectual development that was hopefully fostered.

Impact: Did you learn what you thought you would, or learn something new about your curriculum and teaching practice?

Engaging in action research made me recognize where I need to further deepen my instruction in the SEL domains. I became even more interested in intentionally teaching SEL development in companion with our choreographic process. My AR project investigated how I could support both my student choreographer's SEL development in the domains of self-management and responsible decision making while also coaching the cast to become more socially aware of their rehearsal dynamics and what leadership looked like in these seemingly different roles. This culminated in a reflection tool for each of weeks of rehearsal aligned to the SEL competencies.

Resources: What educational resources on this topic would you recommend to colleagues?

I really resonate with the work of Chris Emdin and am sharing an independent professional learning tool that I created for arts educators in Trenton. The [document](#) hyperlinks to some of Emdin's resources around creating a classroom culture and environment that radically welcomes students.

This [blog](#) from Ed Week clearly explains Chris Emdin's Five C's of Reality Pedagogy, emphasizing the importance of student voice and feedback in shaping equitable instructional practice.

Reflection: How do you process and use what you learned as fuel and fodder for the following year? What does this reflexivity look like in action for you?

As an instructional supervisor, this is an essential time for me to really listen to my staff: gather data around the implementation of our instructional goals for the year, evaluate the successes and areas for refining in our coaching and professional learning plans, and listen to their emergent needs for professional development. I aim to foster a community where my teachers are cared for and "fed" in order to really inspire inclusive and inquiry-driven classrooms for the betterment of the students in our district.