



NATIONAL ART EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

ELEMENTARY DIVISION

Newsletter & Spotlight

Hello Elementary Art Educators,

As another school year gets into full swing, Jonathan and I hope you find a spark of inspiration in these pages to help you navigate these first hectic, exciting weeks back in the art room.

Whether you've been back with students for a few weeks or are just wrapping up those initial chaotic days, please know you aren't doing this alone. We all know the exact mix of energy, inspiration, and pure exhaustion that comes with the start of a new term! Take a deep breath and give yourself grace as you settle into your routines. Remember the magic you create in your room takes time to build.

Thank you for all the energy and creativity you pour into your students. We hope this newsletter brings you some fresh ideas and serves as a quick reminder that your Elementary Division has your back all year long.

In community,
Leslie Grace
NAEA Elementary Division Director

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Designing Your First Unit to Set Expectations for the Year

By Meera Ramanathan, Elementary Pacific Region Division Director
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It's that time of the year already! Summer is winding down, welcome-back emails are starting to flood your inbox, and Target has its "back to school" aisle dedicated to teachers and students. The first day of school seems much closer than you thought it was!

While the first week of school can seem a bit overwhelming even for the most experienced art educators, designing that first unit effectively can help set the expectations and the tone for entire school year.

I typically have students in 2nd through 5th grade come to my room for 45 minutes per class during the first week to familiarize themselves with me and the classroom. Our TK, kindergarten, and 1st graders are still getting acclimatized to campus, so I like to wait a few weeks before having them come into the art room. Although most 2nd- to 5th-grade students are returning students, I like to see and welcome them into the room to participate in a collaborative artwork before our official art rotation begins. What we do together during the first week sets the tone for the remainder of the school year.

I design the beginning-of-the-year collaborative work as a low-pressure, high-impact lesson since students are returning after a long break. It teaches students how to contribute ideas to a group and how to compromise—an important life skill students can learn while creating art. No matter how small or big a contribution is, it helps toward the final work where every student's piece is appreciated. Collaboration builds a sense of community as students work toward a common goal. Every student is contributing toward that same final objective, which is amazing! Collaborating also improves critical-thinking skills by requiring students to analyze and synthesize information from various sources. Students are continuously interacting with each other, planning their steps, and learning from one another while working. When using art instructional tools in the room, students share, wait, and take turns; as a result, they practice flexibility and resilience through artmaking.

Forty-five minutes for each class goes by quickly, so I pack in several items I would like for students to engage in. I welcome students into the room and go over the classroom expectations using Google Slides. I point out and remind students where the visual supports, drying rack, supplies, and bathroom passes are. I also let them know how the tables are color-coded and explain that they can choose to sit where supplies are set up at each table so they are facing the smartboard. Finally, I show students examples of collaborative works from previous years to get them excited!

Each year, I select an artist as an inspiration that we can use for our collaborative artwork. I engage students in a partner talk so they can feel confident talking to just one person before we move on to a whole-class discussion. While participating in the class discussion, my goal is for students to feel safe and comfortable contributing their ideas and thoughts. Students take supplies from the center of the table while talking to each other, taking turns and creating artwork on a piece of paper no bigger than a 6-inch square. They then bring their individual work to the floor, where there is a large piece of construction paper they glue their work onto while spending a few minutes planning where they want their work to be. The goal here is to give them the freedom to select a spot for their work while being respectful of their peers' work. Once done, students clean up and go back to their classroom.

The collaborative artwork is displayed in the auditorium for the whole school community to see for several months. Students love seeing the works in their entirety and knowing that each of their individual pieces has contributed to something so big and beautiful! I find that starting each school year in this manner creates community and positivity, and it lets students know that what they say, see, and create is valued and appreciated.



Art with Purpose: Connecting Lessons to School-Wide Goals

By Melissa Hronkin,
Elementary Western Region Division Director
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A great way to kick off the school year is with projects that do double duty: engaging students in meaningful art-making while reinforcing classroom procedures or school-wide social-emotional learning (SEL).

Last year, our school adopted a new SEL program called the Positivity Project (which replaced our previous curriculum). To help introduce it, my 5th graders jumped into a project where each student illustrated a specific "character strength" using a mandala-style shield.

What Is the Positivity Project?

If you aren't familiar with it, the Positivity Project is an organization dedicated to empowering students to build positive relationships and become their best selves. It's built on 24 character strengths—including things like bravery, perseverance, integrity, and gratitude. Crucially, these strengths aren't about ignoring the negative. Instead, they're designed to help students navigate and overcome life's inevitable adversities.

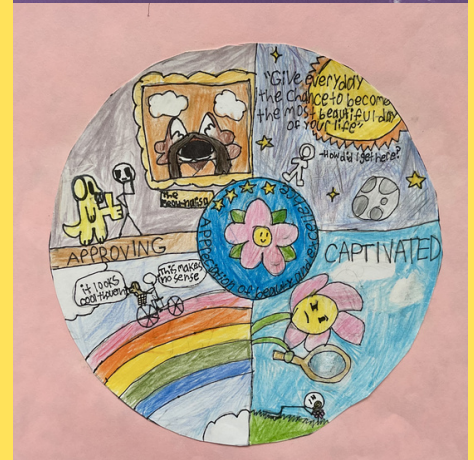
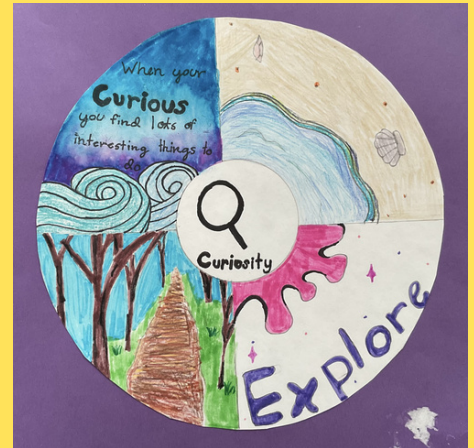
The Project in Action

For the lesson, students were given a clear challenge:

- *Using images and words, create a composition in each quadrant of your shield to share more details about your assigned character trait.*

After completing their designs, students wrote reflections explaining their mandala choices and talked about their traits with classmates.

Displaying these throughout the building was a fantastic way to introduce the language of the program to our entire school community.



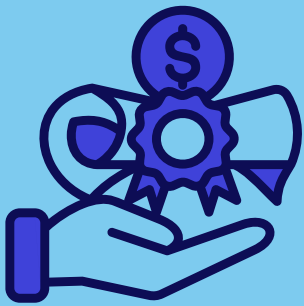


If you use Artsonia, you can pay for your NAEA membership through your funds raised from Artsonia!

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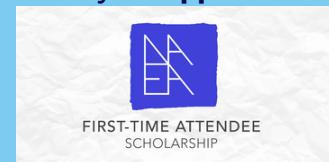


Did you know NAEA offers National Convention Scholarships?



The NAEA Art Educator Scholarship Fund supports art educators seeking further professional learning opportunities through the many programs and events offered by NAEA. The scholarships below support innovators in visual arts, design, and media arts education, providing access to professional learning, leadership experience, and connectivity to the field through the NAEA National Convention.

Click [HERE](#) to learn more. Or click on a box below to start your application!



Click [here](#) for scholarship information

NAEA suggests registering to attend NAEA27 by October 30 to lock in the best registration rate. If you are selected to receive a scholarship, the registration cost you previously paid will be refunded to you. Standard cancellation policy applies. Attendees may only be awarded one scholarship per year.



School for Art Leaders: Call for Applications

Applications open September 1, 2026

Applications close November 2, 2026

More information can be found [here](#). 4

Simple Ways to Collect Meaningful Data Right Away

By Leslie Grace, Elementary Division Director
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One of the biggest misconceptions about classroom action research is that you need elaborate spreadsheets, formal surveys, and hours of free time to get started. You don't. (And let's be honest, who has the extra hours anyway?)

Some of the most valuable data I've ever gathered came directly from routines already happening in my room. The only real shift was that I started paying attention to them with intention.

The start of the school year is the perfect window to try this. Everyone is building habits, routines are being established, and you're busy learning who your kids are. These first few weeks are naturally teeming with information if you know where to look.

Instead of stressing over how to collect data, just ask yourself: *What am I already doing that can tell me a story?*

Try a few of these low-lift strategies:

- **Quick Student Reflections:** You don't need a multipage worksheet. A simple exit prompt like "What challenged you today?" or "What are you proud of?" can show you exactly how a student views themselves as an artist. If you teach the little ones and writing is a barrier, let them circle a smiley face, draw their feeling, or just share with a seat partner while you circulate with a sticky note.
- **Document the Messy Middle:** I've stopped photographing just the pristine, finished artwork. Now, I pull out my phone to capture the active learning—kids collaborating, wrestling with a material, or trying to fix a mistake. Those process photos often show real growth far better than a final piece on a display board.
- **The "2-Minute" Notebook:** Keep a cheap notebook right by your door or on your cart. At the end of a class, take literally 2 minutes to jot down whatever jumped out at you. Did a quiet student take a massive creative risk? Did a lesson plan completely bomb? Writing it down immediately keeps those fleeting, brilliant observations from getting lost in the post-dismissal chaos.
- **Eavesdrop on Conversations:** Don't underestimate the power of classroom chatter. Listening to how kids explain their choices to a tablemate or how they respond to peer feedback tells you infinitely more about their critical thinking than a traditional assessment rubric ever could.

At the end of the day, you don't need to document everything. Just pick one small question you're genuinely curious about this month and focus there. When your data collection has a specific purpose, it actually becomes manageable.

Real data isn't about proving something to an administrator; it's just about understanding our students a little better today than we did yesterday.



The 2027 Awards Program is now open!

The NAEA Awards Program offers more than 100 awards at state, regional, and national levels.

Nomination deadline: Monday, November 2, 2026.

More details can be found [here](#).

Download the awards rubric [here](#).



The Skill of the Week

By Jonathan Juravich, Elementary Division Director-Elect
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A few years ago, while conducting interviews for my dissertation on how elementary art teachers engage with social-emotional learning, one participant shared an approach that I immediately brought back to my own classroom. It has since become one of the simplest and most meaningful parts of every class period: The Skill of the Week.

She explained that she started this routine after noticing students struggling with basic interactions. She found herself explicitly teaching skills like saying "thank you," "please," and "Can you pass the scissors?" The Skill of the Week became a simple way to build those habits together.

In my elementary art classroom, students see a slide deck as soon as they walk in and take their seats. They expect it now because it is part of our routine. Displayed on the interactive TV is a slide that reads, "The Skill of the Week is..."

So, what is the Skill of the Week? It's an attitude, strategy, skill, or reminder that I want all 830 of my K-5 students to know. At the beginning of the year, for example, students are already managing so many new expectations that I don't need to teach every classroom procedure on Day 1. Instead, I introduce topics as they become relevant. Other times, I notice a behavior that needs to be addressed schoolwide, and the Skill of the Week provides the perfect opportunity to have that conversation proactively.

Each week I add a new slide while keeping previous topics in the presentation. That way, I know every student has participated in the same conversations. Teaching every student in the school is an incredible privilege, and these brief weekly discussions help create a shared dialogue across all grade levels.

You're probably wondering, How long does this take? On average, less than 2 minutes.

Maybe you're thinking, I don't have 2 extra minutes. I might respond, spending 2 minutes on a meaningful conversation is far more effective than spending a whole lot more time later responding to preventable behaviors. And then you can refer back to the discussion all year long.

So, you are wondering, What kinds of skills do you discuss? Think about the knowledge and habits students need to be successful in your classroom and beyond. Some examples include:

- This is our art room. Respect the space.
- Pencil Patience (using the pencil sharpeners responsibly).
- When we have a guest teacher...
- What does it mean to "help" someone? (You know those students who just end up taking over someone else's work?)
- Which bin? (Trash, recycling, or sweatshirts and jackets)
- Moving around the room with awareness.
- Stool safety.

One of my favorite topics is "knowing the difference between in trouble and redirection."

That simple conversation sparked incredible discussions that continued for months. I shared that, as a student, I always assumed I was in trouble whenever a teacher said my name. Looking back, now as an adult, I realize they were usually just redirecting my attention. Students immediately connected with that feeling. Heads nodded, and I saw plenty of "me too!" gestures around the room.

Now, when I say to a student, "You're not in trouble. This is simply me redirecting you to help keep you safe, keep someone else safe, or help you do your best," they understand what I mean. That shared language has made a noticeable difference in the climate of my classroom.

The greatest strength of this approach is that it isn't "one more thing." I don't create elaborate posters or spend hours planning each week's topic. It's simply one sentence on a slide, a brief conversation, and a shared understanding that we can revisit throughout the year.

That's the magic. These conversations matter, and learning these skills takes time. Revisit them year after year, update them as needed, and make them part of your classroom culture. A consistent 2-minute routine can have a lasting impact on every student who walks through your door.

Connecting With Early Learners

By Kimberly Olson, Elementary Eastern Region Division Director
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Teaching art offers a dual opportunity for knowing our students through picture and word, voice and choice. The beginning of the year is a wonderful opportunity to know our students beyond their creativity, from the most simple and evident ways, to more complex approaches that invite them to share personal details of their family, home, interests, fears, and dreams. Beyond what they create, early learners, especially 3- to 8-year-olds, love to talk and share about themselves. We learn so much about them from eavesdropping: listening to them converse, noticing everything from their inflection and associations to their comparisons and made-up words.

Standing at your classroom door sets the stage in a low-stakes way as you literally welcome each child in, looking at every face and making eye contact if they'll let you! Oftentimes, our early learners enter with a hug, a big smile, a warm hello, a fist bump, or a thumbs-up. Whether the acknowledgment is big or small, verbal or nonverbal, they are excited to be here already! The perception of art is typically universal, and we usually have them at "paint"! While it can be tricky to focus their arrival on the routine of entering the room in a line, letting students know you see them, hear them, and love them through built-in share time helps smooth these transitions.

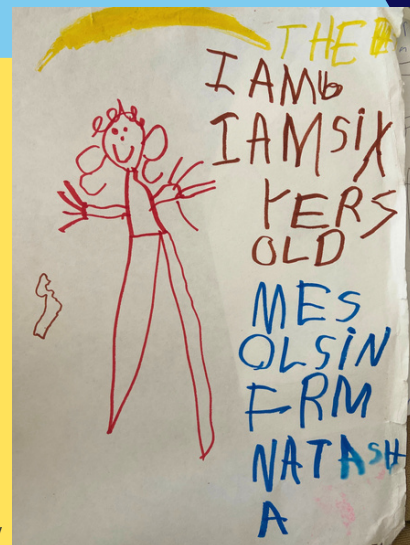
Circle time incites chatting! So, after taking attendance, a quick "whip share" not only helps settle young racing minds but adds to the community and social awareness being built with each class. Children share an excitement: after-school plans, a birthday, a connection to art, or simply a (seemingly) random thought, all leading to the development of vital rapport with our talkative charges. This approach offers a threefold benefit: (1) students share their thoughts and subsequently attend to instructions better, (2) their shared ideas build community and serve as "watermelon seeds" for future visual work, and (3) the routine adds to the growing collection of what you know about your students individually.

Archiving, or even physically noting these tidbits, details, and glimpses, adds up to knowing the individual cultural characteristics of our students. This, in turn, helps us develop meaningful curriculum and learning experiences reflective of our real students, ensuring greater engagement through student-centered learning. Of course, these experiences must change from year to year to account for the reality of children perpetually growing and changing. Finding out what your students like, care about, aspire to, and participate in continues these threads, or through lines, of knowing and belonging.

Teaching kids to share who they are often begins with an introduction to the word "identity," where we must instruct them on how to look past superhero alter egos. Who we are goes further than looks (and capes!). I like to pose the challenge, "Tell me three things about you that we can't tell by looking at you," beginning with the prompt, "I am..." Integrating this new understanding into their artwork, just as professional artists do, offers another way to represent who they are. Using picture books and mentor works to unpack the inherent role of art is a fun first step. Additionally, incorporating a "See, Think, Wonder" visual thinking strategy promotes close looking and a beginner's visual analysis of a new work (contemporary works best for our 21st-century kids). Students reveal their interpretations, sometimes surprising and always insightful, leading to more ways of knowing (and loving!) our students. Asking "What makes you say that?" typically uncovers connections and knowledge often beyond our own observations.

Finally, simple approaches for developing the sense of belonging all children deserve and need, such as welcoming them at the door, incorporating share time, co-constructing classroom rules and agreements, designing a student-reflective curriculum, and inserting

identity, can also be reinforced through the physical classroom. Developing an intentionally student-centered learning environment can lead to greater student engagement, risk-taking, and growth as students see themselves in the space. They absorb the sense of belonging and safety a room of their own imparts, feeling seen and cared for by everything from the images and words that hang on the walls to the colors, materials, furniture, seating arrangement, and supporting resources. Representing real-world diversity, especially in the not-so-diverse classroom demographics, offers another aspect of belonging, truly reflecting all and reinforcing that everyone is welcome, everyone belongs, and all have a place in art.



NAEF Grants



Investing in Leadership, Innovation & Learning

NAEF is a nonprofit organization that specifically provides grants to NAEA members. As such, other nonprofits and organizations cannot apply for our grants. As a NAEA member, you can submit a proposal for consideration.

Applications open August 15 and close October 1

Learn about the different grant opportunities [here](#).



The National Elementary Art Honor Society (NEAHS) will officially launch with the 2026–2027 school year.

Elementary art educators interested in starting a chapter are encouraged to learn more by visiting the NAEA website: www.arteducators.org/nahs

NAEA members are invited to celebrate the artistry within our creative professional community by submitting your artwork to be juried for possible inclusion in the 2026 NAEA Member Exhibition, taking place virtually. Up to 100 member artworks will be selected for display in the NAEA Virtual Gallery. Submissions open September 1 and the deadline is November 2, 2026, at 11:59pm ET. Check [here](#) for further details.

MEMBER EXHIBIT

Call for Artwork

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REGISTER BY OCTOBER 30 FOR THE LOWEST RATES



Got ideas, suggestions, or questions? Get in touch!

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