

# The Gazette

## Art Helps to Focus the Mind ArtsSmarts brings artists into the class to help young students think creatively

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Reporter

**MONTREAL** – "Don't do this at home with your parents' records," Milu Mauffette joked with students at Bancroft School as they slathered white paint over vinyl albums bearing titles such as The Best of '66.



Students work on drawings as part of the ArtsSmarts project at Bancroft School. One student calls it "cool" to have artists visit her class.  
Photograph by: Allen McInnis, The Gazette

On the floor nearby lay the fruits of another art activity - white casts that students made of their arms that will be used for tree limbs.

Since February, the Grade 4/5 class at the Plateau Mont Royal school has had weekly visits from Mauffette, a singer and painter, and Adida Khavous, a multimedia artist. "The kids call us Coco 1 and Coco 2," Khavous said.

The art activities may just sound fun but they have a deeper purpose. The project is called ArtsSmarts, a learning strategy based partly on the premise that artistic activity is important for students' growth as creative thinkers.

Bancroft is one of 17 English schools in Quebec with ArtsSmarts projects that are part of a two-year research study looking at its effect on student behaviour and engagement.

ArtsSmarts was launched by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation in 1998 to counter the shrinking exposure to the arts in schools that has resulted from budget cuts. "To introduce the arts back into classrooms is where we were in 1998," said Annalee Adair, executive director of the Ottawa-based non-profit organization with a charitable status. "To integrate arts with other disciplines is where it evolved. ... (We're) looking at arts as a way of learning itself."

The projects use creative inquiry - asking big questions and combining arts and other subjects to look at those questions, Adair said.

An ArtsSmarts project at St. Mary's Elementary School in Longueuil focused on developing a 21st-century classroom that would suit students' learning styles. At Bancroft, the big question has revolved

around who the students, as individuals, are in their universe and as part of their cultural identity, said principal Dorothy Ostrowicz.

More than a third of the class has learning difficulties. Ostrowicz calls it amazing to walk into the room knowing the students' struggles and see their focus and high level of teamwork and involvement in the task. "They don't want to go out for recess. That's how much they're enjoying it," Ostrowicz said.

Julie Hobbs said she noticed a "real engagement" among students involved in ArtsSmarts when she volunteered the year after she retired from her senior post at Riverside School Board and started going into the board's classrooms. "Teachers basically said I don't have any more behaviour problems," said Hobbs, who is co-ordinating the ArtsSmarts research project for the Association of Directors General of English School Boards of Quebec.

Eight of Quebec's nine English school boards are involved in the ArtsSmarts initiative, which cost about \$150,000. Half of the money comes from the Quebec-Canada Entente for Minority-Language Education. The other half comes from schools or school boards.

Some things still need to be worked on, Hobbs said, noting it can be difficult for teachers to accept another adult in their rooms to work with them. "They're very used to having control in their classrooms."

Bancroft School plans to hold a vernissage of the students' ArtsSmarts' work.

"My favourite (activity) has been the one where we had to put the vaseline on our arms with the plaster," Emily Da Cunha, 10, said about the plaster limbs for the tree. The symbolism, she said, is that "we're all part of like a big family."

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