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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Nov. 13, 2020

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Baldwin Park Unified Students Build Academic Foundation through the Arts

BALDWIN PARK – Geddes and Margaret Heath elementary school students are building on their English language skills and establishing an academic foundation infused with [dance](#), visual arts, music and theater through a partnership between Teaching English Learners through the Arts (TELA) and the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE).

The five-year pilot program, now in its third year, is funded through a federal Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) grant shared by Baldwin Park and Hacienda La Puente unified school districts and administered through LACOE. The goal is to create an effective and equitable arts-based curriculum that can be used as a template for school districts across the United States.

“Baldwin Park and Hacienda La Puente are the only school districts in the country that are conducting federally funded school site research into the educational and cognitive benefits of art in education,” LACOE Coordinator Arleen Bates said. “We are already seeing positive results, with students responding enthusiastically to the instruction, which is also having a tremendous impact on their social-emotional well-being.”

Though the program is intended primarily for English learners to boost their vocabulary skills, all students at Geddes and Margaret Heath share in the TELA instruction, which concentrates on one art discipline per school year. TELA provides intensive professional development for teachers and employs art educators and specialists who assist in creating the curriculum.

For the 2020-21 school year, TELA is incorporating music into the curriculum, providing an extra layer of instruction for students and opening the door to a wider understanding of subjects and concepts as they move from visual arts to dance and music, then theater in the final year.

During the 2019-20 school year, TELA partnered with Conga Kids, an LA.-based nonprofit that promotes social well-being through dance. At first, Geddes and Heath students were reluctant to pair up with their classmates, but by the time the lessons finished students were proudly displaying their dance moves while also engaging their parents and families.

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“In the beginning there were nervous kids, but at the end of five weeks I saw a difference, an evolution in our students,” Geddes Principal Irene Garcia said. “I saw confidence, persistence, determination and overall happiness. They were happier and excited, and ready to come to school for their next dance lesson.”

Geddes and Heath teachers, with assistance from TELA instructors, work with students to transfer new vocabulary words and concepts into other content areas, specifically math, science and history. TELA also contains a strong parent engagement component, encouraging families to work together to embrace the art instruction.

“In the first year, when we were concentrating on visual arts, we invited parents into the classroom so that they could share in what their children were creating. The parents worked with their kids and helped create scrapbooks,” Margaret Heath Principal Dr. Maria Alonso said. “The students perceive art as fun, so their engagement is higher, and they are eager to share what they have learned with friends and family.”

At the end of the five-year pilot period, the TELA research will be presented to OELA and combined with OELA/TELA research being conducted at the university level; together, the data will form the basis of an arts-based curriculum that can be implemented by school districts across the country.

“At Baldwin Park Unified, we recognize and value the importance of arts-based instruction, and it is an honor to partner with TELA and LACOE for this innovative and pioneering program,” Superintendent Dr. Froilan Mendoza said. “Thank you to our incredible principals and teachers for their insightful leadership, and to our students and parents for embracing TELA with enthusiasm.”

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