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Silicon Valley nonprofit takes the initiative on arts education

Aaron Malchow

John Kreidler isn't promoting art for art's sake. He says he sees artistic creativity as an important engine that drives Silicon Valley.

"Innovation, creativity are part of what sustains and propels Silicon Valley forward," he says, adding that artistic and cultural expression fuels creativity.

As executive director of Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, Mr. Kreidler is able to put some muscle behind that belief. Cultural Initiatives is a San Jose nonprofit dedicated to revitalizing arts and culture throughout the region.

"A big part of our mission is to try to energize the civic and business leadership -- especially the business leadership of Silicon Valley -- to take interest," says Mr. Kreidler.

The genesis for Cultural Initiatives and its mission is the 20/21 Regional Cultural Plan. Designed in 1997, 20/21 serves as an outline for supporting the arts across Silicon Valley and calls for specific initiatives.

The cities of San Jose and Santa Clara, in addition to other organizations and businesses such as Adobe Systems and the Cisco Foundation, participated in its development.

While other local organizations have taken up other plan recommendations, Cultural Initiatives was created in 1998 to support four specific areas: arts education in public schools, amateur cultural arts (such as amateur painting societies), management abilities of professional nonprofit artistic organizations, and developing art and cultural facilities.

In the past couple of years, Cultural Initiatives has implemented its Greenhouse Grants, part of a five-year plan to improve arts education. The grants are designed to fund programs in public school districts for four years with a goal of making them self-sufficient and integrating them into the standard school curriculum by the fifth year.

"The point is to help them improve in ways that they think are important, not that we think are important," says Mr. Kreidler.

That's one reason the David and Lucile Packard Foundation helped fund Cultural Initiatives with a \$2.3 million grant.

"That's why we decided to partner with them -- because the planning that went into developing their grant-making in arts education really did come from the community," says Nancy Glaze, director of the Packard Foundation's arts program.

And for school districts already working to meet new state requirements for arts instruction in the primary grades, Cultural Initiatives' approach makes them seem more like a partner.

"It's just fabulous to have someone who can see the value of having the arts in the schools and can come in and work with you, with what your district or your school wants to do," says Kathy Hopp, the visual arts specialist for the Campbell Union School District.

Districtwide, she trains teachers in kindergarten through third grade, showing them how to put together art lesson plans while connecting the visual arts with other study topics, especially literacy.

Ms. Hopp notes that some other institutions will impose criteria for schools to meet in order to qualify for funding -- general criteria that don't always match a specific school's needs. With its approach, Cultural Initiatives is flexible enough to support Campbell Union's needs or that of the Santa Clara Unified School District, which can now develop its arts education with the Santa Clara-based Triton Museum of Art.

"With the funding from the grant, we'll be able to release teams of teachers to work with the Triton Art Museum as well as with our arts specialist to help better define the standards," says Ruthanne Costanzo, Santa Clara Unified director of curriculum and instruction.

Seventy-four percent of the public elementary school districts in Santa Clara County are receiving Greenhouse Grants. Mr. Kreidler says he hopes Cultural Initiatives can supply grants to schools in other outlying counties.

"The next thing that we'll most likely get involved in is the realm of amateur or participatory culture," he says. "We think that amateur cultural expression has a lot to do with forming stronger bonds of community in Silicon Valley."

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