

SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE: *Opera in the Classroom* | Florida's Funding Win | *The New NEA Chairman*
Public Art & Community Development | *Arts Marketing & Advocacy* | Explaining the Universe with Art



arts

LINK



Americans for the Arts

FALL/WINTER 2014

THE SOURCE FOR ARTS PROFESSIONALS IN THE KNOW

NEWS SNAPSHOT

ARTS EDUCATION POLICY

AMERICANS FOR THE ARTS is taking the next step in investing in our nation's future by advancing arts education policy, broadly in all 50 states, and deeply in a pilot cohort of 10 programs across America. On August 20, we announced the 10 state teams who will participate in our State Policy Pilot Program—a three-year pilot program to strengthen arts education by advancing state policy. The 10 states entering the program are Arizona, Arkansas, California, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Wyoming. Throughout the three-year engagement, each state team will work toward specific objectives and outcomes that will address issues ranging from teacher effectiveness and high school graduation requirements to Title I funding and equitable implementation of state policies. Americans for the Arts will support each state team with customized coaching and technical assistance, and teams will receive a direct grant of \$10,000 each year to support identified goals. This pilot cohort is one component of Americans for the Arts' broader State Policy Pilot Program, which provides support to all 50 states in strengthening arts education through state policy. For more information, visit www.AmericansForTheArts.org/ArtsEducation.



Narric Rome announces the launch of our new pilot program at the National Conference of State Legislatures, while NCSL Education Committee Co-chair State Senator Joyce Elliott (D-AR) looks on. Photo by Justin Fritscher.

NEWS SNAPSHOT

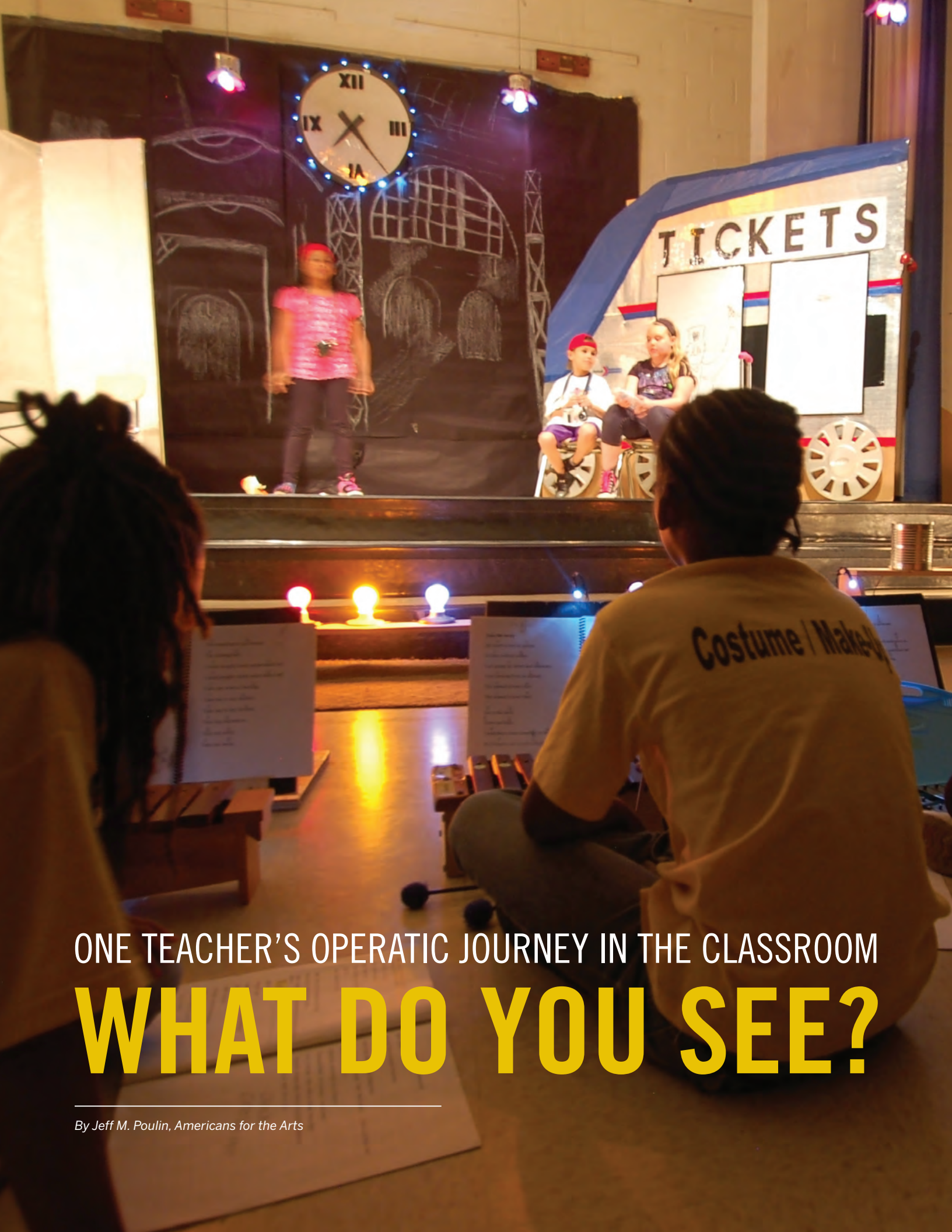
National Arts & Humanities Month

HOW DID YOU CELEBRATE National Arts & Humanities Month this year? Head over to www.AmericansForTheArts.org/NAHM to see what people all across the country did! This year, in addition to resources for planning and promoting Creative Conversations, we developed the #ShowYourArt Instagram campaign for you to ask your community and civic leaders to “show your art!” and celebrate local cultural treasures and discover hidden talents. This coast-to-coast collective recognition of the importance of culture in America is designed to encourage all Americans to explore new facets of the arts and humanities in their lives, and to begin a lifelong habit of active participation in the arts.

NEWS SNAPSHOT

Arts Advocacy Day

THIS NOVEMBER'S ELECTIONS mean changes for arts policy on Capitol Hill, and your face-to-face advocacy could make the difference. Join us in Washington, DC on March 23–24, 2015 to learn the latest research facts and figures on the arts to help make your case and network with other arts advocates from across the country. Receive two free tickets to the 28th Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts featuring author, producer, and political activist Norman Lear. Registration will open November 3 at www.AmericansForTheArts.org/AAD. In the meantime, get [advocacy tips & tools on page 33](#).



ONE TEACHER'S OPERATIC JOURNEY IN THE CLASSROOM

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

By Jeff M. Poulin, *Americans for the Arts*



▶ Katie, composer, awaits her musical cue during the opera performance.

Every year, in Ms. McGinn's 3rd grade class, students write, compose, produce, and perform their own original opera. It's not just magical—it's life-changing hard work, and not just for the students.

Walking into Stedwick Elementary School on a Thursday night in May, students with nervous energy in distinct outfits line the hallways. Excitement is in the air for the premiere of Lightning Strike Kids Opera Company's yearend production. The Opera Company—as they're known in their school—is about to take the stage to perform their original opera, a year's worth of work.

This opera, however, is not just a musical exercise, nor is the Opera Company composed of the most talented opera stars. The director of the Opera Company and Americans for the Arts member, Mary Ruth McGinn, has become a master teacher, using the model of opera in the classroom and arts integration for more than a decade.

Her educational philosophy—using the process of creating a student opera as an authentic vehicle to learn curriculum and 21st century skills—has generated energy in three Maryland suburbs and has struck halfway around the world to energize the next generation of quality arts educators.

For more than 25 years, Mary Ruth McGinn has sought innovative ways to meet the needs of each of her students in classrooms across Maryland and the world. She has spent her entire career in schools where a majority of students speak English as a second language and where poverty significantly impacts the learning experiences and opportunities of students and their families. Twelve years ago, she had an experience that changed her life and altered her professional path in a profound way. She attended training sessions at The Metropolitan Opera Guild in New York

City, spent nine intense days living the process of creating an original opera, and learned how to replicate the experience with her students. She then began creating opera with her students and using the process of creating the opera as a vehicle through which to teach curriculum and life skills. The authentic purpose for learning coupled with the arts provided the perfect stage on which to construct a love for lifelong learning.

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Every year, Ms. McGinn asks her students this question, “What do you see?,” on their first day in class. The students’ answers begin the self-reflection process about values, challenges, and successes which influence the theme of their annual productions. The theme reflects what is profoundly important to the students as a group and serves as a powerful message that the students deliver to their audience.

The Opera Company is made up of, and also presenting to, increasingly diverse audiences. Stedwick Elementary School, which is located in Montgomery Village, MD, serves about 600 students in grades K–5. Its Latino population increased 707 percent in the past two decades and the school has been adapting to an influx of English language learners. Additionally, over half of the school is eligible for free or reduced lunch.

As part of the School Improvement Strategy, the administration has outlined four core values to lead the school, which include engaging every student



➔ **Dominic composes an aria.**



▶ **Opera singer Jackeline Echols works with performers on vocal technique.**

during every day, developing creative and critical-thinking skills, nurturing relationships to build social and emotional learning skills, and narrowing the achievement gap to maximize future opportunities for students. This school environment, through its diversity and commitment to positive student development, has been an ideal setting for Ms. McGinn and the Opera Company to become institutionalized and continually impact students' lives.

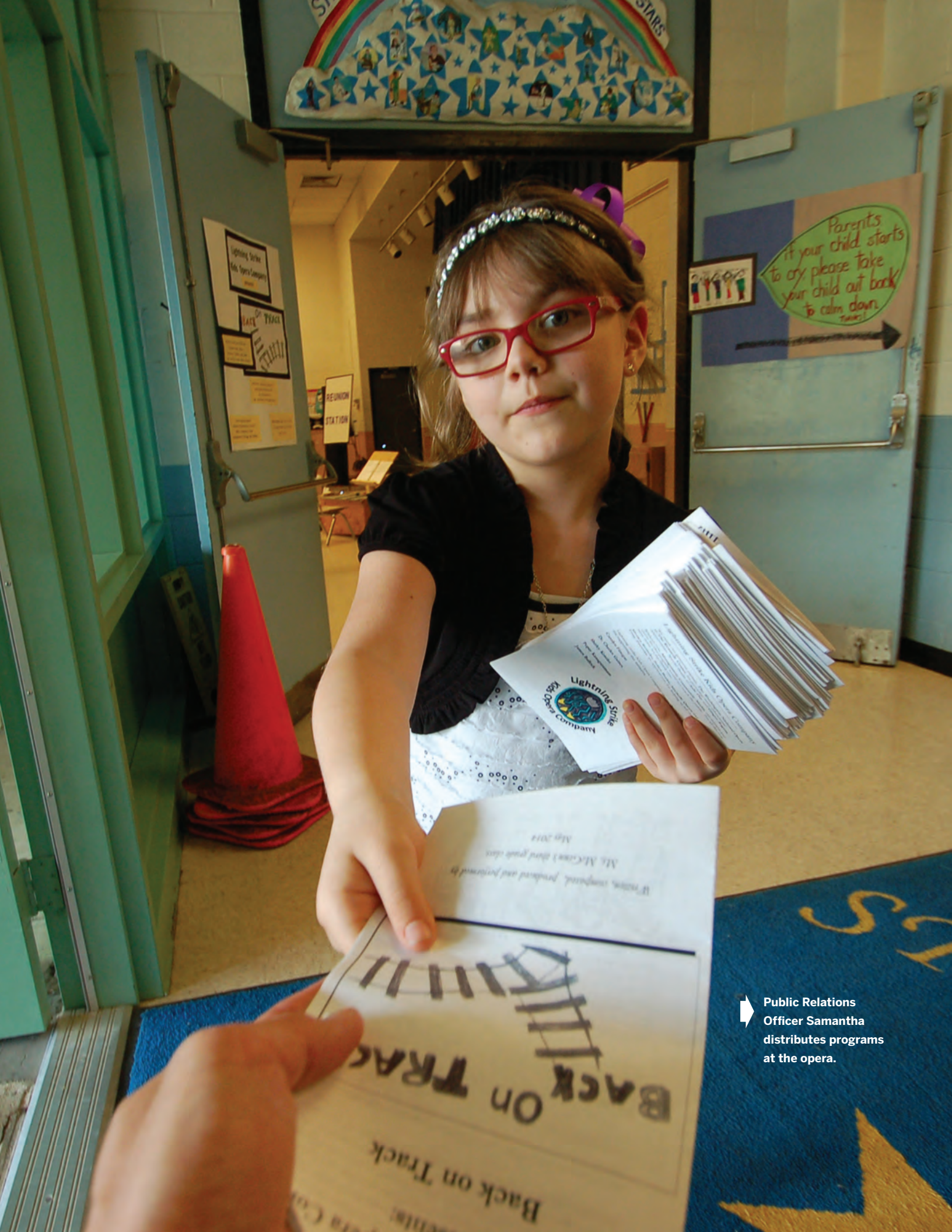
IT'S NOT ABOUT ME. IT'S ABOUT WE.

Embodying the school's philosophies of student engagement, project-based learning, and closing the achievement gap, Ms. McGinn has honed her opera-based curriculum. She describes

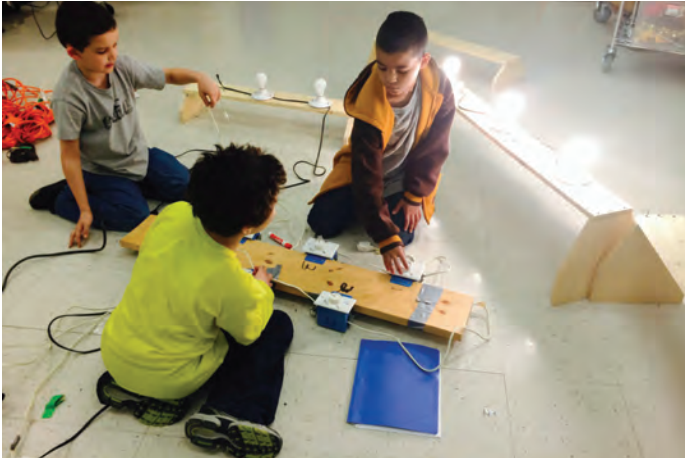
the class lessons, challenges, and successes on a blog titled "Learning for Real" in partnership with Montgomery Community Media. In one of her entries, she details the feeling of one of the Opera Company's typical Wednesdays:

"Every Wednesday morning, the halls are abuzz with incredible energy for Opera Class. Students walk from place to place with purpose. They know they have a job and they must be prepared. Commitment. Perseverance. Collaboration. Initiative."

Though the Opera Company meets as a team on Wednesdays to specifically focus on the production, elements of the opera are tied in throughout the entirety of their 3rd grade curriculum. This philosophy—that of arts integration—



Public Relations Officer Samantha distributes programs at the opera.



▶ **Above: Electricians rehearse with homemade footlights and dimmers. Right: The set from *Back on Track* by the Lightning Strike Kids Opera Company.**

costume and make-up designers, actors, writers, composers, public relations officers, production and stage managers. One student noted, “The best thing was probably that everyone noticed everybody’s part in the opera. We were all equal.”

OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM: AT HOME & IN THE COMMUNITY

Aside from academics, the program is designed to incorporate interpersonal relations through activities involving empathy, trust, collaboration, and self-reflection. The same activities were developed with a certain respect to parent involvement. As one of the core tenants of Ms. McGinn’s classroom, parents are involved as classroom volunteers, attend parent-student-teacher conferences and participate in monthly all-parent meetings.

During student-led conferences with Ms. McGinn and their parents, students were tasked to reflect on the following question with poetry to assess their strengths and weaknesses and to set goals: How have I progressed as a reader, a writer, a mathematician, a scientist,

a historian, a learner, a human being? Within that month, at the monthly parent meeting, parents were asked to respond in writing to their children’s poetry. They sat in a circle, reading, interpreting and digesting poems written by all members of Lightning Strike Kids Opera Company. The task was to reflect on each poem and to write a specific and encouraging comment to the poet about his or her original composition to encourage future growth in this academic and interpersonal area.

Ms. McGinn takes students one step farther outside—into the community around them. Throughout the writing, composing, and producing of the production, the Opera Company took several field trips and welcomed visitors to their classroom. The program assumes the belief that education is a shared endeavor between arts educators, non-arts academic educators, and community arts providers.

To help inform the original music composition process, music education students from the University of Maryland, under the direction of Dr. Janet Montgomery, provided an introductory composition session to teach the company about the tools and knowledge necessary to write original music.

In the fall, the Round House Theatre in Bethesda, MD opened its doors to the Opera Company, inviting the students to take a closer look behind the scenes of an operating theater. Associate Producer Danisha Crosby led a backstage tour, displayed how the unique revolving set functioned, and gave insight into the intricate, magical workings of theater that inspire and enlighten an audience.



“When I look in the mirror now, as a metaphor, I see the old me fading away and the new me coming in. Well now, I’m someone that I never thought I would ever be.”

—Michael Miles, age 9



➔ **From top to bottom:** Second grade make-up artists from Mozart Compañía de Ópera in Spain prepare for dress rehearsal. The orchestra, from Mozart Compañía de Ópera, performs an original composition during the opera performance.

In the spring, the youth Opera Company attended The Washington National Opera's Look-In performance of the opera *Moby Dick* at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. The students also got a firsthand look at the costume studio, which informed their costume designs for their own opera.

Additionally, more than 50 volunteers, parents, and community members engaged with the Opera Company during their coursework to make the opera a success.

THE NEXT ACT: FUTURE GENERATIONS OF ARTS EDUCATORS

It's no secret that Ms. McGinn's philosophy is working. Kids are more confident, more connected, and better collaborators. So why not share her

secret with the world? Ms. McGinn applied for, and was awarded, a Fulbright Scholarship—and a sabbatical from Montgomery County Public Schools—to travel to Spain to develop and implement a similar program there. Sponsored and funded by Teatro Real and Fundación Saludarte in Madrid, she lived in Spain for two years training educators and working side-by-side with teachers and students in their classrooms. The reception of the project was overwhelming.

Today, this work has continued as Mary Ruth returns to Madrid every summer to train a new team of educators and artists in the process with her colleagues, Peter Hoyle and Pedro Sarmiento.

Upon the completion of her Fulbright Fellowship, Sarmiento was able to start an institutional collaboration between Teatro Real, SaludArte Foundation, and others to form LÓVA—which translates to “opera, a vehicle for learning.” He tells the story of how Mary Ruth’s program became institutionalized into the Madrid opera scene:

“The funders had seen what the program could do in schools, and I was hired as coordinator, not to replace Mary Ruth, who was irreplaceable, but to create a structure, a network that would help the program grow through teacher training, support for schools, and many other activities.”

Sarmiento believes that LÓVA can help education by becoming a well-known benchmark, one that can help teachers and schools move in the right direction and connect with education approaches worldwide, engaging young people and the arts.

WHAT DO YOU SEE NOW?

After the opera is performed, after the set and costumes are put away, Ms. McGinn asks her students again: “What do you see now?” The impacts are immediate, of course, but what is so overwhelming are the impacts over time. Over 12 years, more than 250 students have been involved in Ms. McGinn’s Opera Companies in three different communities. Among her proudest moments are seeing former students and Opera Company members attend college and establish successful lives.

Ms. McGinn’s work at Stedwick Elementary School exhibits several indicators of quality teaching and learning: connected curriculum, impactful partnerships, exemplary instruction, and collaborative community-building. The long-term and long-distance effect of Kids Opera Companies is an exemplar model for both the educational and arts fields. At the end of the day, or school year, or budget cycle, the impact of quality arts education is measured by student success and growth, which has been demonstrated by generations of students in Maryland and with impact on students around the globe.

READ MORE

Inspired?

▶ We’ve only scratched the surface! Hear about the process from the students themselves and read Ms. McGinn’s blog posts chronicling the Opera Company’s work. Visit www.LearningForReal.org.