

AEMDD Spotlight: Cultivating the Seeds of Success: Grant Implementation in Middle School Evanston Expansion and Dissemination (MSEED) Project



MSEED helps students enjoy learning through the arts.

It was a cold winter in Chicago this year, but the weather could not dissuade dozens of 7th and 8th graders, and their parents and teachers, from heading out to Space, a local arts venue, for an exhibition of students' poetry and photography projects. For the junior high students in Evanston/Skokie District 65, this night was the "culminating event" of their arts integration project, where they had an opportunity to showcase the work they had done through their partnership with Columbia College Chicago's Center for Community Arts Partnership's (CCAP) Arts Integration Mentorship program. A little bit of snow, at least by Chicago standards, was not going to stop these students from exhibiting their work, and that commitment is a testament to the strong implementation plan developed by the grant managers of the MSEED Project.

MSEED, a 2013 AEMDD grantee, is a project that embeds Columbia College Chicago (CCC) faculty and teaching artists at three junior high schools. Through the project, classroom teachers and resident artists collaborate on lesson plans, attend professional development workshops, and deliver instruction that integrates the arts across core content areas. These activities come together in an inquiry-based arts integration curriculum designed to promote student achievement and build their social/emotional learning and critical thinking skills. According to David Flatley, the project director for MSEED and executive director of CCAP, the project vision is to "create a safe space for students to experiment, express themselves, and take intellectual risks. In the long run,

this experience will help students develop the higher-order thinking to make them successful in life.” This overall vision, Flatley said, informs the implementation plan MSEED developed for the project. “Our implementation plan balances our short-term desire for immediate impacts with our longer-term goals for students.” All elements of the implementation plan, said Flatley, connect with the overall vision.

The first component of MSEED’s implementation plan is to assemble a management team. Reflecting on this step, Lynne Pace Green, the deputy project director, noted that “It’s all about building and maintaining relationships with stakeholders.” To accomplish this, the project leadership team focuses on creating channels for stakeholders to communicate with each other. For example, the management team includes residency managers at each school, whose roles are to serve as liaisons between the teaching artists and the staff at schools. Additionally, MSEED has formed a steering committee at each school. This committee, which is composed of the principal, lead teachers, artists, and project staff, meets quarterly to check on project implementation. “The steering committees have proved very valuable for helping us see what is working and what is not,” said Pace Green.

Establishing a management team has helped MSEED with other aspects of its implementation plan, such as forming partnerships and planning professional development activities. According to Green, the grant provided the opportunity for professional development during the summer to introduce teachers to the model. “The Summer Institute helped teachers immerse themselves in the project and develop relationships with the artists. They used the opportunity to brainstorm ideas together,” said Pace Green. This collaboration is now paying dividends in the classroom, where teachers and artists are implementing the ideas they developed over the summer.

MSEED is also using the AEMDD grant to develop a professional learning community to support teachers and artists, and document and disseminate its work through a variety of resources. They are currently working on a website to host sample curriculum units, templates, classroom artifacts, and teacher reflections. Although the website is not live yet, Flatley is excited about the shape it is taking. “Dissemination is a lot more than writing a report, so we are working to build a website that provides comprehensive process documentation, with things like artist handbooks, templates for lesson plans, teacher notes, and other resources educators can use.” Even before the website launches, MSEED is creating opportunities for teachers, artists, principals, and students to share their expertise and build ownership over the work. The culminating event at Space, for example, provided a chance for all stakeholders to exchange ideas and form relationships. With stakeholders braving winter weather to come exchange ideas and see students’ work, MSEED is confident it can continue to work toward its vision, one step at a time.

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