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Kids and the arts

Group forms in Paradise to support creativity in schools

By [Evan Tuchinsky](#)

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Sandy Miller's kids love to perform. Each Monday, she turns a kindergarten classroom at Paradise Elementary School into a mini music hall. The boys and girls form a circle, play hand-held instruments (drums, shakers, xylophones) and sing about virtues such as honesty and integrity.

A visitor walks in. Miller asks if anyone would like to play the piano. Every hand goes up. One boy plays a song he's composed (when asked for the title, he replies, "I don't have one yet"). Two girls take turns playing nursery rhymes, reading off sheet music that corresponds to color-coded stickers on the piano keys.

The disappointed faces of children not chosen to perform soon regain their smiles when Miller asks who would like to sing. Again, every hand goes up. One boy requests the echo effect on the karaoke machine. One girl, shy, first asks for the standard amplification, then warms up and asks for the echo.

Each day, Miller injects an art form into the lesson plan. Along with music, the kindergarteners paint, play with puppets and build with Legos. Such activities spark creativity, nurture self-confidence and make learning fun, she says.

Not every Paradise schoolchild receives this experience. Miller, an instructional aide and supervisor of the Afterschool Kindergarten Enrichment Program, comes into the class as part of a pilot program. Budget cuts have ravaged music and art programs in the Paradise Unified School District, as in districts state- and nationwide, and it has taken creative efforts to keep the arts alive.

Toward that end, Miller is spearheading the Paradise Alliance for Arts Education. The group, part of a state-spanning network, brings together educators and concerned citizens to rally support for funding and policies, plus increase community involvement.

"I've been working in schools for 20 years," Miller said, bridging interjections from her eager young charges. "I've seen the impact [of arts programs on students], and I've also seen us go in the opposite direction, when our music and art went away.

"I didn't do that well in school. I don't know where I would have gone if I didn't have my songbook and [a teacher who] tapped into what my gifts were. There's a whole bunch of gifts in this room; they might be struggling academically, but they get it when it comes to music. If they feel they belong, they feel valued, and they move forward."

The Paradise Alliance for Arts Education coalesced last Wednesday (March 16). PUSD Superintendent Roger Bylund and Paradise Town Manager Chuck Rough hosted a breakfast at the Paradise Senior Center at which Miller, PUSD music teacher Sam Gronseth and two leaders from the California Alliance for Arts Education (CAAE) spoke about challenges as well as opportunities.



Sandy Miller plays the didgeridoo for kindergarteners, who feel the floor for vibrations. Miller, a Paradise Elementary School teacher, is spearheading the newly established Paradise Alliance for Arts Education. PHOTO BY EVAN TUCHINSKY

Miller invited 65 educators, arts organizers and business/community leaders. More than 40 attended, including Paradise Mayor Alan White, Town Councilman Tim Titus and PUSD Trustee Judith Peters. Afterward, 17 volunteered to serve with Miller on the Paradise Alliance leadership committee.

Joe Landon, CAAE's policy director, explained that despite mandates in the state education code for arts instruction, opportunities have dropped significantly over the past 10 years, particularly in lower-income communities. "We're no longer fulfilling the promise of equal education for students," Landon declared, adding that "resources are down but requirements are up."

Gronseth, a CAAE board member for eight years, brought that decline home—literally. Eight years ago, he said, 500 students participated in PUSD music programs; now, just 125 do.

Citing a series of scientific studies (accessible online via www.supportmusic.com), Gronseth explained the connection between arts education and increased math and reading skills, resulting in higher test scores; higher graduation rates; greater success in college; and lower rates of substance abuse.

Particularly troubling is the elimination of bands and choirs in elementary schools. That may well trigger a ripple effect in middle and high schools, where Gronseth fears fewer students will reap the benefits of the arts. Simply put: "If they don't start, they won't continue," Gronseth said. "It's a 'starting' issue."

Miller isn't the only Paradise Elementary educator promoting the arts. Carolyn Steele integrates musical theater into history lessons—this winter, her fifth-graders mounted a production called "Historical Hysteria"—and she stepped up to organize a choral group when Paradise Elementary lost its choir.

A couple times a week, fourth- and fifth-graders gather in a classroom with Steele and Stana Miller (Sandy's daughter—a special-education and yard-duty aide). Steele plays piano and, with Stana's assistance, leads students from seven classes through a brief yet unhurried rehearsal.

"I wish we had more time," Steele said, moments before ushering 30-some students through the door and onto risers. "It ends up being maybe 40 minutes a week, which just isn't enough.

"We just started out singing," she continued, "and I had some fun songs that they learned." Now they're building a repertoire for an April 28 performance at Gold Nugget Days, a major community event. "We have lots of work to do!"

As does the Paradise Alliance for Arts Education. Both Steele and Stana attended last Wednesday's breakfast, where the notion of sustainability—as in maintaining enthusiasm and endeavors—became a significant theme. The leadership committee will meet soon, and CAAE will offer financial and logistical support for three years.

"Once the meeting happened, I felt so confident that it [a sustained effort] will happen," Stana said. "I'm very proud and excited to be a part of it. I volunteered for any help that they need—anywhere, any time."

Advocacy umbrella:

The California Alliance for Arts Education sponsors a local-advocacy network covering 25 communities, including Paradise, CAAE's first chapter in the North State. For more information on CAAE visit www.artsed411.org.