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EDUCATION

Studying art and visiting museums to improve statewide exam scores

■ Three Miami-Dade schools have woven into their curriculum the resources of seven museums through a program that teachers say is producing results already.

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The students at Shenandoah Middle School have

huge classrooms: one holds more than 13,000 pieces of art, another is more than 56,000 square feet and a third holds a collection valued at nearly \$10 million.

Shenandoah is one of three Miami-Dade schools that launched a museum magnet program this year, integrating their curriculum with the resources of the Miami Art Museum, Miami Museum of

Science & Planetarium and five other museums.

"This is a school without walls," said Maria Gonzalez, principal of Southside Elementary, another museum magnet school.

Each class visits a museum every week or two, and museum staff help develop classroom activities, as well.

•TURN TO ART, 2B



CHUCK FADELY/HERALD STAFF

MUSEUM SCHOOLING: Shenandoah Middle School eighth-graders Dayana Novoa, left, Cynthia Mejia and Fabiana Quiroz take notes in the Lowe Museum.

EDUCATION



CHUCK FADELY/HERALD STAFF

IN CLASS: Lowe Art Museum docent Mary Jane Haggerty talks to students from Shendandoah Middle School about a Duane Hanson sculpture. The school is one of three that has a museum-themed magnet program.

Artful lessons on critical thinking

•ART, FROM 1B

Unlike traditional field trips — tours that represent a break from regular classes — the museum magnets' "learning expeditions" are integrated into reading, math, science and social studies lessons.

When Southside's fourth-graders studied Florida history, they visited exhibits covering the state's prerevolutionary days at the Historical Museum of South Florida.

After a second-grade unit on national monuments, the Dade Heritage Trust arranged a bus tour of historic sites such as the Freedom Tower and the statues on the Brickell Avenue Bridge. The students then wrote essays comparing those places to national symbols such as the White House.

"What they do in the museum has to be a direct link to what's happening in the classroom," said Karen Chisholm, the lead magnet teacher at Southside.

RESULTS

At Shenandoah, teachers already have seen results, especially with a program called Visual Thinking Skills.

For eight weeks, teachers guided free-form discussions of paintings. The students were asked to explain what they thought was happening and back it up by pointing out details in the art. In the ninth week, they brought the students to the Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami.

No answer is considered right or wrong — eighth-grader George Balseiro suggested one of the characters in a 17th-century Dutch painting was a bullfighter, pointing out his cape, elaborate clothing and a red cloth

dangling from his hand. His teachers are far more interested in his ability to pluck those details than with the literal meaning of Nicholaes van Galen's painting.

Back in the classroom, those weeks of observation have an obvious impact on their writing. When English teacher Beatriz Alvarez hands each student an image and asks them to write a short description, they draft complex narratives that gleam with rich language.

Writing about a highly stylized image of Noah's Ark, 12-year-old Gustavo Ballesteros describes "devastating thunderstorms letting down their reign of terror" and the shipbuilder "working hard as a lion trying to catch its prey."

Jimenez said the Visual Thinking Skills lessons also crack a critical problem among middle-school students: the fear of talking in class.

"They're afraid of being wrong and being made fun of, or of being right and being seen as a smarty-pants," Jimenez said. "This activity gives them a voice, gives them opinions."

The program also exposes students regularly to museums and college campuses, which are often foreign in the high-poverty communities where they live. At the three museum magnet schools — Miami Springs Middle is the third — between 75 and 88 percent of students come from low-income families.

Now they regularly travel to the Lowe at UM and Florida International University's Wolfsonian, and Shenandoah principal Lourdes Delgado said she hopes to see higher college enrollment rates after these students graduate.

More immediately, she hopes to see improvement on

the state's high-stakes Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

If Shenandoah can improve from its steady pattern of C grades, Delgado said it will help dispel the belief that FCAT success can come only at the expense of a broad cultural education.

"Once we get the kids to think critically, they're going to test better," she said.

CURRICULUM

Widely used FCAT skills have been tweaked to fit the museum curriculum. Teachers are often at Southside until 5 or 6 p.m., said lead magnet teacher Karen Chisholm — and many of those extra hours are unpaid.

Shenandoah art teacher Laura Askins said she spends an extra two to three hours a week to integrate her lessons with the English department, and next year she also will coordinate with math and science teachers.

On Wednesday, her students were making doll-sized clothes that reflect the themes of their essays about conflict resolution. Like much of the work in the museum schools, it will be on exhibition for parents later this winter.

"They want to write better because they're doing artwork about it," she said.

The project started with three trips to the Wolfsonian: the first to view art under the Visual Thinking Skills program, the second to research the actual meaning of the paintings and the third to write their feelings about those works.

"It's bringing the classroom and the museum skills and the curriculum into one amalgamation," Askins said.

To accompany his story about one friend convincing another not to drop out of

school, sixth-grader Lester Salgado crafted a black felt business suit.

"If he stays in school, he'll get a good job," explained Lester, 12. "If he drops out, he won't get a job or earn a lot of money."

The logistics are also complex; each class has its own schedule of field trips, meaning each school has multiple trips almost every week.

"Sometimes I feel like a woman with two dates in the same restaurant," Chisholm said.

The magnet program is open to students across the county — any seats available after the neighborhood children have enrolled are offered through the district's magnet lottery.

In the next few years, the museum program may be expanded to at least one senior high, allowing students to stay with the program from kindergarten through graduation.

FUNDING THE PROGRAM

The project is funded for three years through a \$9.8 million federal grant, which is used to pay for teacher training, the near-daily bus trips to museums and to hire extra staff at some of the museums.

Researchers at UM and FIU are monitoring the sixth-graders closely, hoping to follow them at least through eighth grade to measure the impact of the museum program.

And when the grant expires in 2008, Shenandoah principal Delgado said she will find a way to keep the program alive — even if she has to beg for money door-to-door.

"We're sold," she said. "I saw where we were in August and where we are now."