A colorful flag announces the exhibit as children bound into the school with families in tow. They enter the gym which, for two days a year, is transformed into an art gallery. Bright art work fills the walls and display panels are strategically arranged around the gym floor. Tables hold three-dimensional designs and sculptures.

A small group congregates to admire kindergarten paintings while, across the room, students write fan letters to artists and deposit them in a pink mailbox. Families linger past closing time, savoring the community spirit brought on by this annual spring event.

My curriculum establishes expectations for every fifth-grader to assume responsibility for our school art exhibit. Early in the year, they select jobs as designers, curators and gallery managers—all central to the exhibit’s success.

By delegating as much as possible to children, skills develop in collaboration, communication, planning, and organization as they measure the space, map out exhibits, publicize the date, and set up the show. Each exhibit takes on its own identity and consensus builds as the student-generated theme gains momentum.

One year’s theme, “Luckyville,” resulted in an entire model village spread across the gym. Part of the preparation for this exhibit included learning about city planning and government. Subthemes emerged from the overarching concept to embrace varied media and techniques. Fifth-graders, familiar with each area within the exhibit, painted signs to direct artists and viewers to their work.

All students select the pieces they want in the show. The work a child values may be different than that which appeals to an adult aesthetic. The artist statement, typed and displayed on every piece, provides insight into the child’s selection. For those reluctant to exhibit, a private conversation can lead to a solution, such as exhibiting an artwork created outside of school.

School art exhibits are authentic assessments and vital to the artistic process. The authors of Studio Thinking 2 (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan; 2013) included “Exhibition” as a studio structure that provides “opportunity for learning how to engage in art as public discourse” (p. 37).

The art show carries far-reaching potential to demonstrate to school stakeholders and the public how children grow in all areas of their learning through visual art. With careful planning and ample lead time, the school art exhibit can become a fixture in the culture of the school. Luckyville continues to generate conversation years later—there can be no better arts advocacy effort!

Diane Jaquith teaches K–5 art and is co-founder of Teaching for Artistic Behavior, Inc. She also co-edited, with Nan Hathaway, “The Learner-Directed Classroom: Developing Creative Thinking Skills through Art” (Teachers College Press; 2012).

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### Choice-Based Art

Choice-Based Art classrooms are working studios where students learn through authentic art making. Control shifts from teacher to learner as students explore ideas and interests in art media of their choice. This concept supports multiple modes of learning to meet the diverse needs of our students. Learn more at teachingforartisticbehavior.org.