

## Why School Murals Rock

In recent years, traditional educational priorities like order and consistency across school campuses have evolved towards an increasing emphasis on critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity. Teaching pedagogy has come to embrace a diversity of learning styles, and it is now understood that children learn best when they feel emotionally safe. It turns out that incorporating play into the learning process is one of the most effective teaching methods. Unfortunately, most school campuses still resemble correctional facilities. Heavy, functional buildings and universally beige walls don't echo the 21st century approach to education. Mural art is the most cost effective campus improvement project to make a school more inviting and celebrate a vibrant school culture through mural art.

At the core of the debate around mural art is this question: *Does the physical environment matter at a school?* If it is agreed that the physical environment matters, is that reflected in the budget? Why not be intentional and curate an environment designed for optimal outcomes?

Whether we are six years old or sixty, we feel safer, and happier, when our humanity is recognized and shared in our daily interactions. This friendliness can be encouraged by the environment. Good teachers instinctively know they need to engage their student's hearts first before they can teach them anything. It turns out we think better, we learn better, and we behave better when we feel safe and seen. The spaces we create provide cues for expected behavior. Spaces that feel kind and welcoming put us at ease, and we are more likely to find a kind or positive response in a relaxed state than when we are stressed. It might not be intuitive, but when efficiency trumps kindness, it can create more problems than it solves.

In the case of schools, a mural design that prioritizes "kid-friendly" aesthetics communicates to kids and adults that making kids feel welcome (a flavor of feeling safe) is a priority. Kid-friendly doesn't have to mean teddy bears and primary colors. Artwork should strike a balance so that it is also appealing to staff and the broader community who likely share the facilities on the weekends and during the summers. School murals can incorporate wayfinding, school values, and educational elements from the curriculum. Mural art becomes part of the school "brand". For example, schools I have painted at in the past use the mural as the backdrop for the top banner on their website, weekly newsletter, or as the backdrop for annual school photos. Some of my murals are designed with "selfie moments" to be shared on Instagram. All of

these uses enhance school identity and community pride, and are benefits of having the murals.

One of the primary hurdles for schools who would like to commission mural art is budget. While most schools would welcome mural art on their campus, a school administrator who prioritizes funding a mural is at risk of being criticized for not funding other worthwhile, but competing interests within the fixed budget. Art is not considered essential in so many arenas, but nowhere is this more apparent in schools. As a result, if a school does have a mural, more often than not it was painted by volunteers, sometimes with the help of students. The caliber of mural art on campus does not correlate with the skill, care, and professionalism that the teachers and staff bring to their work.

Murals are a relatively inexpensive solution to beautify environments when larger capital improvement upgrades are not an option, such as installing gardens or landscaping, or replacing the portables with permanent classrooms. "Relatively inexpensive" should take into consideration paying the artist a professional wage for a professional work of art the community can be proud of. I never recommend artists painting for free in return for "exposure", and schools are no different. At the very least, the school will have missed out on the experience of coming together to unite around a shared value of caring for their campus. And as for exposure, in the dozens of school mural projects I have painted, a school mural has never led to a private commission from a family, despite the large number of families who encounter the artwork.

It is great for the kids to see the artwork being made. Whenever possible, I schedule my school murals for times when school is in session, so teachers can bring their classes by, and the parents can see progress at drop off and pickup. I love the interaction with the kids. "Are you a *real* artist?" and "When will you be finished?" are common questions. The kids are always surprised how many days the mural takes to paint. It is also encouraging for the many self-identified artists at the school to see an artist getting paid for their work, that being an artist is a "real job" they could have someday.

Painting school murals *has* led to other school mural projects for me, especially other schools in the same district. The success of one school can ripple through other schools, and frequently leads to subsequent mural projects at the same school. In those cases I am glad to be able to keep my pricing consistent. I offer schools a 30% discount off my regular pricing, and always try to create designs that make the most of whatever budget they can offer. Even though price is a constraint for schools, make sure you set

up the project so that you can earn a living. Every project that keeps you in business allows you to hone your craft and improve your offering for the next project.

For an artist, school mural projects are a great bridge between residential and public murals because the scope of the projects is typically larger than residential projects, and you will gain experience with an increasingly collaborative design process, including gathering community input, that is typical for a public mural project.

School administrators are stretched thin in a hundred directions and are not necessarily the mural project instigators. The majority of the school mural projects I have worked on are initiated by a parent serving on the PTA, or a teacher who wants to upgrade the area around their classroom. No matter how enthusiastic the vision, a campus mural project always requires support from the school principal, who navigates an often complicated process of getting district approval. Even if the mural project is headed up by a parent, it is important to include the principal in the very first meeting so they can understand what is involved, and hopefully support the idea. The principal has the most complete information on the long term plans for the buildings and potential sources of funding for the project. The district typically oversees campus maintenance, and a mural falls in a complicated grey area between a school initiative and district oversight. Some school districts require that the artwork be painted on panels. Also, when working with schools, you will want to make sure the contract is clear on issues of maintenance and liability.

School mural funding can come from a variety of sources, including the PTA, a principal's discretionary budget, campus maintenance budget, or even curriculum budget. Some schools fund a "Character Education" or other social emotional learning curriculum, and a mural that celebrates that character curriculum could be funded from that program's funds.

Case Study: Springer Elementary School  
Or, "How to Transform a School in under \$15,000"

*Quick Quiz*

*Where would you prefer to send your child to school?*

*Here:*



*Or here:*

*Does one seem more kid friendly than another? More playful? More inviting?*

*When I first met with Christy Flahavan at Springer Elementary, I noted that the school had seriously neglected their curb appeal. For the previous 40 years. "Putty on putty" was the color palette and portable classrooms (putty colored, of course) dominated the entrance to the school. Christy attended Springer as a child, so she had a special affinity for the campus and was dismayed by the impression of stale neglect. Although the principal was leaving the school, and there was only lukewarm interest from the PTA and school community, Christy met with me to discuss possibilities for art on campus. She shared a vision and specific designs with the Principal and PTA, and gained enough support to use PTA funds to commission a relatively small playground painting project. Because the pavement painting project could be executed in one day with the help of volunteers overseen by the artist, the price was lower than some of the other projects being considered. (\$3000, including design and materials.)*

*The first day the kids and families saw the completed playground painting, it was a revelation. No one questioned whether it was a worthwhile expense as the kids ran around delighted at the colorful, interactive, and educational elements on the ground. The parents felt peace of mind leaving their young child in such a visually happy, cared-for space. The teachers felt supported in their work with the upgrade. The lift from the color and creativity of the transformed blacktop was experienced by everyone in the school community.*



*Springer Playground, before and after*

*The success of the kindergarten blacktop mural enabled Christy to gather support (and donations) from the school community to paint a larger mural at the center of school on the back of the multi-purpose wall a year later. The 40' long peaked and windowless wall faced the center of campus where students lined up for class and had their Friday morning assembly. We chose a landscape as the subject of the mural, a scene that celebrates the local natural habitat to bring the feeling of an expansive nature preserve. We incorporated a legend on the side of the landscape mural to identify species the fourth graders learned*

*in their California History unit, including quail, California poppy, and a red tailed hawk. The kids loved watching each day as the mural went up, seeing the image unfold. The colorful welcome at the entrance to the school increased campus pride, and provided school families a visual understanding of the rural history of the school and the species they might find in local native habitats.*

*The following year, the new principal used part of her discretionary funding to continue the artwork onto the pavement below the large wall mural. She wanted to amplify the citizenship qualities that Springer school was focused on in their social-emotional curriculum. We created a design that celebrated the growth mindset and citizenship qualities Springer embraces in their curriculum. Using a pun on the school mascot, the "Springer Stingers" bee, I designed a "Who do you want to Bee today?" art campaign. The principal came up with seven "Springer Bee Qualities" that support a positive learning environment and are also simple enough for the youngest students to understand: Bee kind, bee brave, bee playful, bee persistent, bee confident, bee helpful and bee curious. Sign me up!*

*The school was also proud of their garden-based science curriculum. After we completed the pavement painting, the principal added to the project, to include wall vignettes throughout the campus. Each vignette featured one of the seven "Springer Bee Qualities" as well as a native plant species. The kids created a game of finding all the vignettes throughout the campus which also taught students to identify key pollinator flowers like hummingbird sage and recognize showy milkweed flowers, the primary food source of Monarch caterpillars.*

*In the span of three years, Christy's determination to breathe fresh life into the campus created a cascade of beautification projects that transformed Springer campus. If you visit the school today, you would have an entirely different first impression of the school than you would have had just a few years prior: many of the bare putty colored walls now feature colorful artwork that celebrate aspects of the campus culture, history, and curriculum. All of the foot traffic entering the campus passes over one of the two pavement murals, so the entire school community is greeted with a colorful positive message as they come onto the campus. What I have witnessed across most of my school mural projects is that once the school community experiences the positive impact from the artwork firsthand, building broad based support for future mural projects at that school is much easier. The first leap is the hardest.*

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. *Who owns the copyright?*

The artist retains the creative copyright on their work of art. If you buy an original painting, you can sell or destroy the painting, but you don't have the right to sell copies of that image for profit; the copyright attribution remains with the artist. The school should consider including in the contract a release of liability for damage and the right to dispose of the artwork by painting over it at any time for any reason. The contract might also specifically grant the right to schools to use images of the artwork in print and digital format for any reason except for profit. Schools are typically not for-profit, so giving schools virtually unlimited use of the artwork makes sense.

### 2. *What are reasonable design fees and work deposits?*

The design process is unique creative labor for that project and location, and should therefore be paid work. A typical fee for mural design for a medium sized project is between \$500 and \$2000. The design portion is a substantial part of the work for the project, as gathering information and integrating the unique elements and identity of the school into the artwork takes time and research. If a client decides not to move forward with the project after seeing the design, the artist retains the design fee.

### 3. *Should the mural be painted on panels?*

Panels add expense and liability to a project, so there are only two instances where I recommend painting the artwork on panels:

- 1.) If the artwork is painted on temporary structures (portables), or
- 2.) If the artwork is done by either students, amateur artists or volunteers.

Unless the work is of high quality, amateur art typically has a shorter useful life. A mural painted by a graduating class, for example, loses some of its contextual relevance to the school community in just a few years.

I recommend 6mm PVC panels for interior projects. They come in sheets up to 5' x 10'. The PVC panels are lightweight, weather resistant, and easy to cut for interesting shapes for outlines. For exterior projects, wood based MDO panels, primed on all sides, are a good alternative but are heavier, more expensive, and not as easy to cut to dynamic shapes.

I recommend the district, who will be responsible for maintaining the artwork, install the panels.

Whenever possible, I prefer to paint directly on the wall as it saves the cost of additional materials and installation. Also, there is reduced liability, a panel could be badly installed and be pulled off the wall and injure someone. Without the fixed border of a panel, adjacent surfaces can be used, allowing the artist to dynamically play with the space. For example, I love to take the artwork onto the ground or around corners with a dynamic edge in my murals: it is unexpected. For example, with a tree or foreground flowers that trickle out as the artwork turns a corner instead of a hard vertical line that ends the artwork. Or having roots from a tree extend out onto the pavement in a creative pattern. Not having to paint on panels gives the artist more flexibility with how to make the artwork integrate into the environment.

#### *4. Who decides what will get painted?*

Usually the person who first contacts me is the most passionate about the idea of beautifying their school with a mural, and becomes the project manager for the design and approval process. Ideally, for the best design process, it is best to have only one or two individuals from the school involved in the design development with the artist, for example the principal and PTA president. "Design by committee" can dilute the core visual narrative and cohesiveness of the artwork.

What about including the students or volunteers in the painting process?

Schools often ask me if the students can participate in the painting process. My response is that it depends on the goals for the artwork. If the goal is to create a quality work of art that will become part of the school identity for decades to come, then I would leave the painting to the professional artists. Painting, like playing the violin, tap dancing, or cooking, is a skill, one that is developed with dedication and practice. In the same way that schools hire professional musicians to perform as an educational experience, exposing students to professional quality mural art is also educational.

If the purpose of the artwork is that the students are learning to paint and their participation is the goal, then the project can be structured around that goal. If this is the case, paint the murals on wood panels that can be removed. Both the coordination to include students and the materials and labor to install panels will add to the cost of



the mural, and the product will be substantially different than if the painting was left to a professional mural artist. The coordination and painting time (and proportionately, the cost) will double or triple, not to mention the cleanup time from the paint drips and spills. Finally, there is the short attention span. Kids at schools will ask me after just a few hours, "Aren't you done yet?" and the next day, "I thought you were done already! Are you STILL painting?" Most young students can't imagine working on a work of art for more than 30 minutes.

A permanent wall mural defines the physical space for 30 years to come, and impacts the space for all the students and teachers that come after. I advocate for creating a visual legacy that respects the quality of skill, care and professionalism that the school undertakes in its approach to education. There is merit in the pride a student would feel at seeing *their* ideas showcased on a school wall. Is there a different way for the students to participate in the mural other than participating in the actual painting?

### ***School Involvement***

#### ***Case Study: Blach Elementary***

*The principal invited all seventh and eighth graders who were interested in helping design a school mural to meet in the art room at lunch. It was both an open invitation yet only the students who cared a lot about the mural would be willing to give up their lunch hour for the project. I met with a dozen students and we looked through design ideas the art classes had created during their class time, and considered the merit of the various ideas presented. We picked out our favorite elements, and discussed a way to put all their favorite elements into one design, and also if they could think of anything to add that hadn't been considered. The self-selected group was unanimous on the following design features:*

- 1. The artwork should feature a "selfie moment"*
- 2. The mural should feel "happy"*
- 3. Their school mascot, the falcon, should be "friendly"*
- 4. Include glitter*
- 5. Make it holographic*

*Except for the last item, which I haven't quite figured out how to do yet, I checked the box on all the requirements. As the final protective coat was drying, I blew rainbows of glitter over the mural, so it sparkles as you walk by. The student body was polled to find out which words best embody the school ethos. We incorporated these words into artwork on*

*the ground in front of the mural. The qualities included: Enthusiastic, Creative, Curious, Inclusive and Kind.*





"If you really believe in what you're doing, work hard, take nothing personally and if something blocks one route, find another. Never give up."

-Laurie Notaro

5. *How do I select an artist?*

A school will increase the likelihood of a smooth and successful mural project by working with an experienced mural artist. From wall preparation, to timely completion, mural art is a skill that takes dozens of projects to learn to do well. Arguably the most important aspect of a mural that distinguishes it from canvas art is the collaborative nature of a mural. The collaborative aspect includes dialog with the community in the development of a site-specific design as well as the ability to take feedback from "non-artists". Stories of the unfortunate results that may come from artists working on an unfamiliar scale with unfamiliar materials, taking longer than expected (or at worst leaving artwork unfinished), and poor communication skills are par for the course when working with an inexperienced mural artist. You can find a local artist that *specializes in painting murals* from a Google search, word of mouth, reaching out to local arts organizations, or posting to your school community for a referral. Work with an artist who has painted at least a dozen other murals. Be sure to ask for references and look at previous examples of *mural work* before selecting your artist.

## Conclusion

Possibly the most significant factor to more mural art being made in school communities is making school administrators aware of the beneficial impacts of mural art. Although psychographic qualities such as "how a place feels" is difficult to measure, and the impact difficult to quantify, there are two efforts that would help fill the gaps.

1. Arrange a tour for school administrators on a campus that has mural art. Allow the principal, PTA or teachers to share firsthand about the process and the impact it has had on the school community.
2. Visit [AmericansfortheArts.com](http://AmericansfortheArts.com) and download their "Making the Case" art advocacy handbook for schools.