

## **Sarasota-Manatee teachers complete yearlong Embracing Our Differences initiative**



Twenty-five teachers from 20 Sarasota and Manatee schools recently completed a yearlong Education Ambassadors initiative coordinated by Embracing Our Differences.

The program was designed “to empower teachers and school staff to carry messages of diversity, inclusion, respect and integrity into their schools in innovative ways,” according to Ben Jewell-Plocher, EOD’s education director.

The teachers participated in professional development workshops hosted by EOD and led by teaching artists and presenters from The Kennedy Center (in

partnership with The Van Wezel), and New 42 Studios (in partnership with the Hermitage Artist Retreat, ALSO Youth and others).

Each teacher worked with their students to create original, EOD-inspired projects centered on community-building activities that inspire cooperation, communication, and empathy. The teachers received funding for their projects and a \$500 stipend. The initiative was funded by Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation.

“Amidst an ever-changing, challenging school year, these teachers committed time, energy, and effort towards professional development and the creation of innovative, school-based diversity and inclusion projects for their students,” Jewell-Plocher said. “The total student impact of 6,485 would not have been possible without their dedication and ingenuity.”

Examples of the Education Ambassador projects include:

- Brittany Braniger (Rowlett Middle Academy): “Through Our Eyes.” Two hundred elementary and middle school students collaborated to create a multidisciplinary conversation on diversity. First, elementary students wrote about what diversity meant to them. Then, middle school theatre students took their responses and created a poem. The poem was then shared with middle school art students who created illustrations inspired by a line from the poem. A culminating video and printed catalogue were produced and shared with all students and families.
- Freda Williams (Pine View School): “The Bubble.” How many times have we heard the saying “oh, you are just living in your bubble,” regarding relating to other people? Thirty third-grade students explored their bubbles, what they have in common and what they could learn from one another through the creation of bubble art projects with their families.
- Tatiana Hernandez (Buffalo Creek Middle School): “Deconstructing Race Through Visual Art Color Theory.” Two-hundred-and-fifty visual arts students

explored the topic of race through original art projects. All artworks were created after class discussions, written reflection, and visual examination of works by Black artists, including Kehinde Wiley, Amy Sherald and Kara Walker. The final project included: a collage of various “flesh tones” created by mixing red, yellow, blue and white acrylic paint accompanied by a mind map illustrating student interpretation of what race is; seven large-scale portraits of Black figures; individual silhouette paintings; and collages illustrating a personal, fictional or historical narrative.

- Asiyah Luqman (North Port High School): “Cautious Consumption and Media Literacy.” One-hundred-and-sixty language arts students explored how to critically examine the validity of social media content that they interact with every day and identify the tools needed to examine content before taking ideas at face value. Students researched different media sources, polled their fellow students on their social media and news consumption habits and presented their results and solutions to validate and seek out diverse sources through interactive, professional presentations.