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School's mural portrays life lessons

By Linda Conner Lambeck, Staff Writer

5/15/2009

The last lunch shift was barely over when 19 eighth-graders descended on the cafeteria of Bridgeport's Longfellow School.

In short order, the 36-foot-long wall was awash in acrylic semi-gloss paint, guided by a pencil outline.

Her hands about as orange as the square she was painting, Bertha Campos, 14, offered her interpretation of the mural's overriding theme.

"It's like a video game," she said, stepping back and resisting the urge to scratch her nose.

Working alongside with blue paint, Rodolfo Guzman, 13, filled in details.

"This wall had nothing on it before," he said, holding a styrofoam bowl under his brush to catch drips. "Everyone will know we worked hard on this. It will mean something, like keep going, never back down."

Called "The Game of Life," the mural has been in the works for months.

A metaphor for the hurdles and rewards students must tackle to succeed in the future, the mural shows their school, math equations, crocodiles, a basketball hoop, spelling bees, perfect report cards, a ruler and a "dropout" zone manhole cover.

"Fall in there and you're out," said Daryll Stovall, working in blue.

Numeracy coach Bonnie Hole and art teacher Margaret Wilczak wrote a \$1,980 grant proposal that was accepted last fall by the Bridgeport Public Education Fund. The project, "If Walls Could Speak, Drawing Our Community Together," allowed school officials to bring in Tony B. Juliano, a New Haven artist, buy supplies and host a celebration when the mural is done.



Longfellow School students paint a mural in the school cafeteria.
(Phil Noel/Staff photographer)



Longfellow School eighth-grader Thomas Cook paints on a school.
(Phil Noel/Staff photographer)

Along the way, 100 or more students in grades six through eight learned how to use art to illuminate ideas and express themselves. They also sharpened math skills by learning how to transfer sketches to a wall.

Guzman, who favors math over art, said working on the mural helped him get "the creative parts out of me."

"You get to show your emotions and feelings and stuff," he said.

"Ninety-nine percent of the work is them," said Juliano, who has worked with students before on murals at the Peabody Museum in New Haven, Hamden Library and Meadowside School in Milford. He also teaches art at the Music and Art Center for Humanity in Bridgeport.

Students worked in small groups to hash out ideas and voted on the theme.

"At first we thought the theme might be nautical, but the older students wanted something all grades would relate to," said Hole. "They all can resonate with video games."

While ideas were formulated, the wall was prepped and primed. Juliano sketched out the final draft onto the wall in pencil. Students began painting this week and are expected to finish by the end of the month when students get to sign the mural before it gets a shellac finish.

Beyond the idea, Juliano said he told students the most important thing about murals are the colors.

"I like big and bright and vibrant," he said. "When you walk in here, the first thing that should catch your eye is the colors. Then you step back and realize there is a theme."

Another truth about murals is that mistakes are easily fixed with time.

"Just let the paint dry, then paint over," he said.

The students have several gallons of primary colors and four or five quarts of latex with which to work.

Using an outstretched arm and steady hand, Elizabeth Martinez, 14, painted the words "Unity of Purpose" into one square. It's one of the guiding principles the school has adopted when it joined forces with the University of Connecticut this year as a so-called CommPACT School, a program that encourages parents, teachers, students and the community to work more closely together.