

# Creative therapy finds place in South Allegheny schools

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The next time Katrina Antill is stressed out, she can reach for her bracelet of worry beads.

“You’re supposed to turn each one, and by the time you get to the end you won’t be stressed anymore,” said Katrina, 11.

She and 13 other South Allegheny Elementary School students in the afterschool Art Expression Program each made and strung together 14 clay beads—one for each student in the class—as a reminder that they’re not alone. The six-week program uses the principles of art therapy—the practice of using the creative process of art to help students deal with emotional or social issues.

“Whenever you do art, it helps you get less focused on your troubles,” Katrina said.

Last week, the students—in grades three through six—completed the district’s first art therapy program. The students recommended for the program are those who need help with social skills, conquering insecurity, learning patience or embracing their individuality, said Angela Lowden of Mt. Lebanon, who founded Art Expression in 2001, when she began using it in the schools there.

“We invite them to participate in the groups that, hopefully, feel welcoming and accepting to them,” said Anna Duchene, the art therapist who worked with the South Allegheny students. “Through the art, we level the playing field because we emphasize imagination and self expression and the shared desire to create rather than how they dress or where they sit in the cafeteria.”

South Allegheny is the first district to which Lowden has licensed the Art Expression program. She said five other Allegheny County districts have indicated an interest.

The after-school program has been offered in Mt. Lebanon’s seven elementary schools and two middle schools for eight years.

“We have received comments from parents about how they are noticing their children initiating contact, being more confident and using some of the problem-solving strategy they learned in the group,” said Janet Niedzwicki, who oversees the Art Expression program in Mt. Lebanon.

Denise DeCecco of Liberty said she has noticed positive changes in her daughter Charlayne, 10, because of art therapy.

“She seems to open up a little more about how she feels,” she said.

Joan Phillips, president of the American Art Therapy Association, compared the process to community members erecting a memorial at the site of a tragedy to cope with grief.

“It’s that creative urge; it’s a feeling of needing to do something, and art is the action that is available to us all,” said Phillips, who teaches art therapy at the University of Oklahoma. “It’s not like art in the fine art museum, but it’s about art to meet some personal purpose.”



Anna Duchene helps CharlayneDeCecco, 10, with her art project during South Park Elementary School's art therapy program.

Justin Merriman/Tribune-Review



Angel Onan, 9, shows her pleasure with the baubles she made in the program. The worry beads are intended to ease stress by turning them.

Justin Merriman/Tribune-Review

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