Artistic wall a creative approach to education

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It took putting up a wall to make 14-year-old Anna Dreesen see the point of school.

Three years ago Dreesen joined Whole Arts, Whole Life, Whole Language, an independent school program that teaches subjects like math, science and history by letting kids get their hands on things.

"I used to make D's and C's in school. Now I don't miss honor roll," Anna said as she carved into clay the curly rays of a beaming, stylized sun.

"It's Persian," she said, noding at the wavy rays. "It stands for the sun, the light, the truth."

The carving was a class assignment that required students to find symbols that would describe their personalities. Dreesen said she liked the sun because, as it rises and sets, it symbolizes the changes she is going through as a teenager.

Dreesen and almost 90 other 6th-, 7th- and 8th-graders meet in a workroom at Westdale each weekday, where for the first half of every day they learn history, science and math inside a regular classroom.

But in the afternoons, students get their hands dirty making tiles for an 8-year-old sculpture that sits on school property at the intersection of Jefferson Highway and Claycut Road.

Theodore DeMuro is head of the program, which, he said, gives middle-schoolers a way to use their energy and intellect to make something positive for the community. They call it art.

The sculpture the students carve onto tiles is installed on the wall, which has been attracting looks from passing motorists for years.

An average day in DeMuro's program is not quite like an average day in an average middle school.

DeMuro's program was meant to be different from the other classes children take, he said. Students are expected to work together on projects and instead of a series of teachers and classes, they see only two teachers in a day, he said.

Classes are even referred to as "the community," he said.

Kids are usually taught a given subject in a specialized class, such as math or
English, but usually don't get the chance to see how the various things they learn work together in life.

"We don't delineate between the subjects," DeMuro said. "We bring all the subjects together in this program... students are getting a chance to see why they should study math, science and history.

"This program isn't only an integration of race and gender," he said. DeMuro's students include gifted and talented students and kids with behavior disorders.

"It's more than just sitting next to a person in a class and asking 'Can I borrow a book?' We all had to learn to live and work with each other as a community," Anna Dreessen said. "In this program we have to re-search everything and make the things we work on."

Before she got into the program, she used to rebel against school by refusing to study, she said. "I've gotten an appreciation for education," she said. "You learn because you want to learn. Not just because your parents or your teacher want you to."

Most of the 8th-graders have been in the program since it started three years ago. Others have come from different schools and joined in the meantime, he said.

The wall goes back further. DeMuro started the wall in 1986 with grants from Acme Brick Company and South Central Bell.

"Leaders in the community felt that we were not connecting the school subjects," DeMuro said. "We needed to redirect the focus of what was going on in the classroom."

Several 15- through 17-year-olds from the Summer Youth Employment Program helped build the wall sculpture in 1986.

Here and there on the wall the eye glimpses various things: African symbols of a man and a woman. A winged Icarus in flight. Plants that have grown into the arches and folds of the structure.

Jame Scott, 15, a third-year student, said a closer, more detailed look at the piece reveals an abstract spelling of the name Westdale.

People can't appreciate the sculpture by taking quick glimpses of it driving by, she said.

"When people see it they don't understand it," she said. "People don't understand it so some of them walk up to it."

DeMuro said each letter stands for a concept of value in life.

For example, "W" in the name Westdale stands for wisdom and is symbolized by Icarus, the figure from Greek mythology.

The story of Icarus shows how wisdom could have been gained had Icarus obeyed his father's warning not to fly too close to the sun with his wax-fastened wings. He ignored his father, however, flew near the sun, which melted the wings, and he fell to his death.

The "E" stands for the environment, symbolized by the plants that form the letter.

The "I" stands for life. African