

Community members in Rhinelander, WI knew that participation in the arts is good for people's mental wellness and social engagement. ArtStart, a local nonprofit promoting art integration in their community, has been proving that. As part of a [One Nation One Project](#) national cohort, they connected with [research](#) and 17 other communities across the country focusing on arts and health initiatives.



Young people participate in an ArtStart program. Photo by Norma Dycus Pennycuff.

Art – A Solution

"ArtStart is bringing arts to our community because we care about health and mental health," said Melinda Childs, Community Cultural Development Director – ArtStart. "[Data](#) we have from the One Nation One Project showed us the benefits of arts participation in young people and adults." Those benefits include preventing depression, increasing longevity, reducing stress, and supporting success in education.

ArtStart thinks broadly about art. "Art doesn't only have to be something hanging on a gallery wall," Childs said. Although they do offer traditional arts programs for youth, they are instrumental in a local initiative to create a skate park, seeing it as cultural development. They have also partnered with the local high school's NAMI Raise Your Voice Club to hold an open mic promoting creative expression and an initiative during Mental Health Awareness Month where students handed out fortune cookies with positive mental health messages.

ArtStart's more traditional art programs for youth include:

- Art After School – a free after school art program for 3rd through 5th graders. The program concludes with an Arty Party reception where students showcase their work to their families.
- Teen Art Experience – young people ages 13 and older participate in open studio time with local artists. Students learn techniques and are encouraged to work on projects that interest them. "The young people have

the opportunity to work directly with adult artists, forming positive adult relationships," Childs said. "We know how important these relationships are for young people. Many have them in sports and with teachers in school, and we are building those for young artists."

Additionally, ArtStart has summer programs exploring book making, paper making, printing, photography, cell phone moving making, and art workshops.

Community Partnerships are Key

ArtStart believes in community collaboration and looks for opportunities to work with other organizations as a creative advocate. The County Health Department is an example where they are looking at how art can aid initiatives on drug prevention.

Another collaborator is the high school's Raise Your Voice Club. Inspiring peer-led work, they are focused on raising awareness around mental illness. "Youth listen to other youth," Childs said. "Solutions for the issues youth struggle with need to come from young people themselves, and they need to be the ones to deliver the message."

In addition to youth focused initiatives, ArtStart has a number of adult and community programs. These include cultural programming for people with memory loss, in house art exhibitions, art displays at the local county airport, public art, community events, and live music. ArtStart is also active in local justice work and provides rental event space in their facility.

"Art allows youth to see things through a different lens. That promotes growth."
- Melinda Childs, Community Cultural Development Director – ArtStart