

ALICE: Arts and Literacy in California Education

Executive director and founder Helen Stoltzfus established ALICE after seeing disparities between schools in Oakland's more affluent neighborhoods and those in the city's underserved areas. As the parent of a student who transferred to a school in a wealthy neighborhood, Stoltzfus witnessed firsthand the noticeable inequities between the arts programs offered to students. Stoltzfus seized the opportunity to share her passion for theater arts, her desire to explore cultural similarities and differences, and her belief that all children deserve a quality education. ALICE was created based on the principle that the arts are vital to every child's development, regardless of race, ethnicity or socioeconomic background.

The jewel of this grassroots arts-based literacy program is the Ancestor Project, where students are encouraged to have meaningful cultural exchanges. As students learn about oral history and tradition, they begin collecting stories from the elders in their family and community. Once interviews are completed, the stories are pared down and woven into a beautiful screenplay that

shows the rich diversity and wonderful similarity of humanity. Ancestor Project plays are often performed at individual school sites for the entire student body. "I've seen this program have tremendous impact over the years," Stoltzfus explains. "Students who may have academic or behavioral difficulties often find their voice and have something to contribute." The reward for all her work is "seeing the light go on and the recognition that, 'yes, my story is important too.'"

To increase literacy and creativity, ALICE also brings professional visual and performing artists into classrooms. The artists work with classroom teachers to develop individualized activities for the students that are easily integrated into the existing curriculum.

Funding from Clorox helped ALICE enrich the lives of 3,000 students.

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