

Soos Creek Studio Youth and Community Development Program Report

Soos Creek Studio
Kent, Washington



October 26, 2023, Prepared by Bryan Ohno

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Project Summary

Soos Creek Studio provides the diverse community of Kent two important services tailored specifically for its residents' artistic needs:

1) Youth Development

This program is dedicated to teaching youth, ages 10-15 years old, the craft of pottery making. Uniquely incorporated in the program is parental partnership in the pottery-making experience. This added feature enriches the bond between parent and child. Overall, the responses from participants have been positive and grounding.

2) Cultural Food Event

At the conclusion of the youth program, a celebratory gathering of program participants and community members join in sharing ethnic foods cooked in their traditional clay pots. Participants from the Philippines, Mexico, Brazil, Pakistan, and Morocco took pride in the rich exchange of traditional cuisines.



Project Description & Impact - Youth After-School Program

Youth After-School Program

Free classes were advertised through the Kent School District Facebook page and the Kentridge High School bulletin board. Ninety-minute classes were offered twice a week for 6 weeks to students ages 10-15 years. The program required parent participation.

The studio began its mission of empowering youth by holding its first after-school program in Winter 2023 (January 17 - February 23). The Spring session was held from May 2 to June 8 and the Summer session in August 1 ~ September 7.

For the program description, please see the [link](#) advertising the 2023 summer program.

Interest and applications came almost immediately and reached capacity in less than a week. Applicants came from different cultures (see *Chart 1*), with participating youth in the preteen age group. Each applicant and their parents were interviewed and screened prior to acceptance to the program for pre-existing conditions, limitations, learning styles, and level of interest. This step was necessary to ensure a group symbiosis.

Each session started with a short history of pottery, how it began and evolved over the past 30,000 years. Students were then introduced to the texture and malleability of the clay. Students and parents explored the intricate nature of clay and discovered their own dexterity in how they can manipulate the clay into forms and shapes through hand pinching bowls, plates, and cups. The created ceramic ware were meant for participants to give to their younger siblings or toddlers within their circle of family and friends. The goal is to spread the practice of using earthly materials instead of plastic in people's lives. What better time to introduce this sustainable practice and concept of fragility while children are in their early brain development.

The creative process aligned well with the parents while working in tandem with their child. The children's focus in class developed tremendously. Surprisingly, children with learning challenges that varied from ADD/ADHD to those that fall within a spectrum adapted to the to the quiet nature of craft making. Manipulating the clay was a mesmerizing experience for all. Each step, about 200 in all, gave everyone a chance to relate the creative process to their daily activities and outlook in life.

Each session, since the first session, doubled in number of participants. Testimonials and word of mouth from past participants have spread among the community to the point that necessitated a running waiting list.

After conducting 3 sessions, we take pride in knowing that we have served around 50 people from the community. While this may not sound like a large number, we were able to have an in-depth approach in a small group atmosphere with children and their parents. Mothers would often start accompanying the child, then fathers would join. Soon both parents would participate in the sessions as they, too, became immersed in the program and found solace in the meditative atmosphere of the workshop. The sessions were held in a hushed environment without any chit-chat or music in the background to encourage deep focus. Often I would say, "Do you hear this?" And the students would say, "Yes, it is so quiet." My response, "Exactly, this is the sound of creativity."

Project Description & Impact - Youth After-School Program

The three quarterly sessions gave Soos Creek Studio the learning experience of jointly working with students and their parents. The studio atmosphere intentionally separated itself from the typical lecture-style format used in schools. Explanations as to the reasoning behind each step are sprinkled in at appropriate times. We maintained an action first, explanation later approach. Students who were used to the typical learning environment in school would try to guess what comes next or try to guess the right answer to everything. Our vision was to step aside from the institutional approach and let the process unveil itself viscerally to the hand, mind, and the experience itself. This consistently revealed unguided artistic discoveries. This reversal of approach gradually and quickly became a welcomed norm.

The sessions weren't without challenges. During our summer session, we had a parent and child, who unbeknownst to us, was on the spectrum. The parent did not notify us of the child's disorder as they didn't want their child to go into a stigmatized social setting. In school, students listen to the teacher which may not pose a threat to a child in the spectrum. However, in the studio session where it is highly adaptive and interactive, uncertainties became untenable for this child. The setting placed the child in unfamiliar grounds and caused a meltdown. The situation was met with positivity and cooperation from other participants in the group.

During the process of onboarding students to the class, I scheduled personal phone meetings with parents about the approach of the program, and gave them an idea of what to expect. I often learned from parents that the pandemic made a lasting impact on their children. Many of the children showed signs of depression from lack of social interactions, and depression from widespread news gleaned from the internet and in social media. Wars, COVID, and extreme political views readily available at every turn affected their outlook in life. They didn't know how to process the grim state of the world in a healthy way. The pottery workshops helped lighten their spirit and gave them hope for the future. When they came to the workshops, they didn't want to leave, and didn't want the workshops to end after 6 weeks. In fact, most of them want to return!

Because of the ongoing demand, Soos Creek Studio is in development to bring the program to the schools and create mobile operations. After seeing the success and positive impact we made to the youth in the pilot programs, we want to reach out to a larger number of students. We are exploring how we can serve more students and keep the quality as close as possible to the studio experience.





[Click image to watch video](#)

















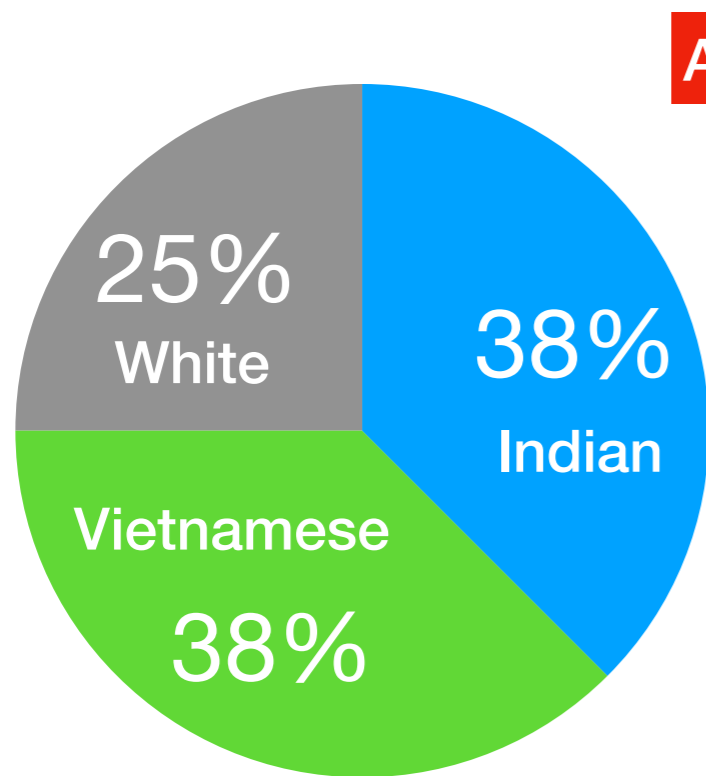
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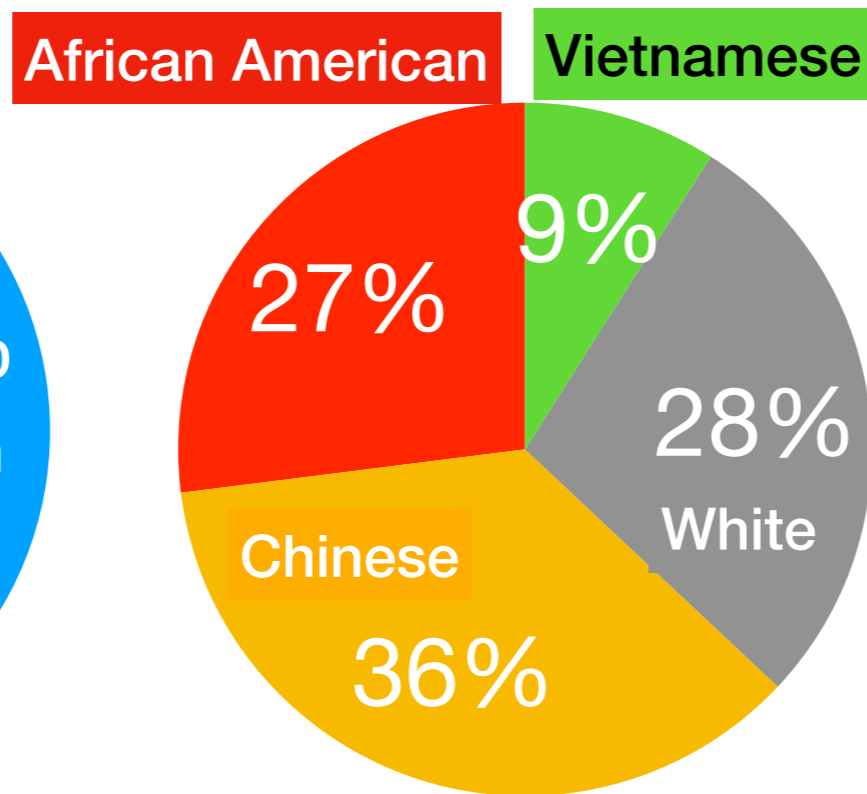
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Youth Program

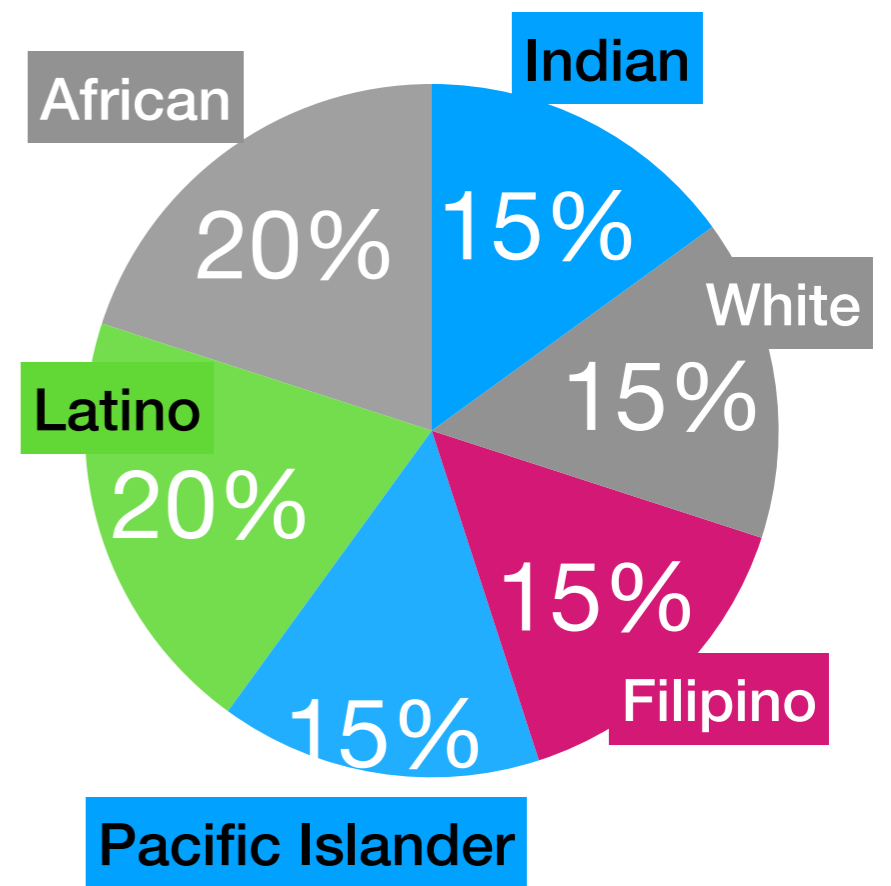
Demographics



Winter Quarter



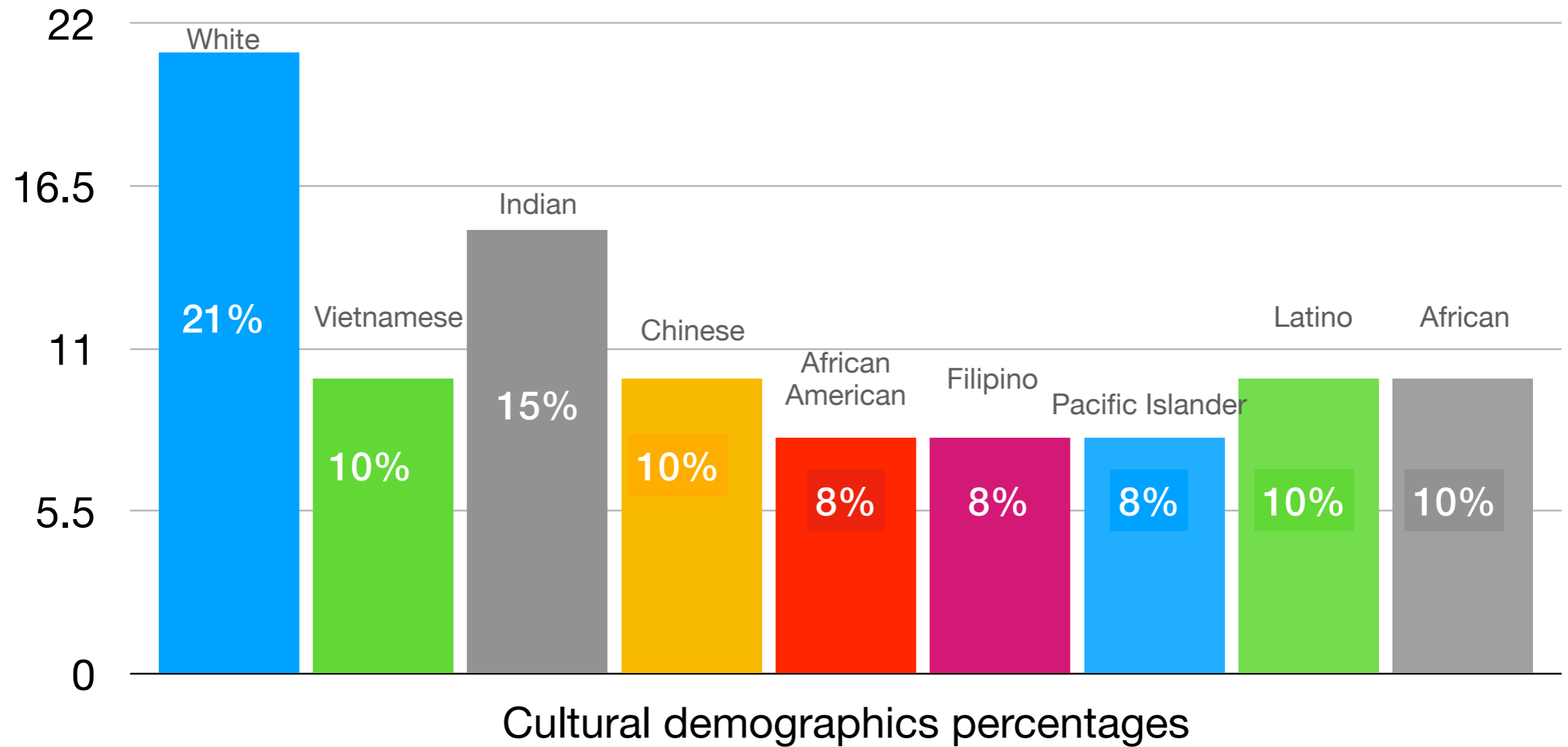
Spring Quarter



Summer Quarter

Youth Program

Demographic breakdown - all three quarters



Project Description & Impact - Cultural Food Community Events

Development of Cultural Food Sharing Events

Soos Creek Studio researched and developed new lines of traditional cooking pots familiar to the majority of cultures that represented the city of Kent. We found a local source of a special clay that could withstand the shock from the intensity of heat while cooking on a stove top. A small number of potters and pottery studios in the modern era attempt to make ceramic cooking pots for this reason. Historically, however, traditional ceramic cooking pots are seen in every culture.

To start, we focused on four popular types of cooking pots with which we had personal cultural connections: "Palayok" (Philippines), "Donabe" (Japan), "Tajine" (Morocco), and "Panelas de Barro Capixaba (Brazil).

The week before the Labor Day weekend, we hosted a community-wide, neighborhood potluck at the studio. Around 60 people attended the event, each encouraged to bring home-cooked family specialties to the event. We also invited the families who participated in the youth workshops.

Because of the rich cultural diversity of the city of Kent, an assortment of food from various parts of the world were laid out at the table: Mexican, Filipino, Indian, Chinese, German, Brazilian, Japanese, and of course, American. Most foods were prepared in clay pots or presented in ceramic ware. Everyone shared the food with delight! Attendees commented on how they have longed for a community potluck but it never happened because no one organized one.

This will be the start of a new community gathering for years to come. It was a culturally enriching event that joined all walks of life, age groups (babies to senior citizens) and ethnicity, together in one place. The children at the potluck played harmoniously. Everyone left with warm feelings of community and inclusivity. The clay potluck's emphasis was home-cooked food without alcohol and political discussions. People interacted on a human level without pretense. It was a magical event with children of the next generation playing innocently and everyone gathered together around food.





Potluck

today

15:30 ~ Sunset

End of Summer
neighborhood event









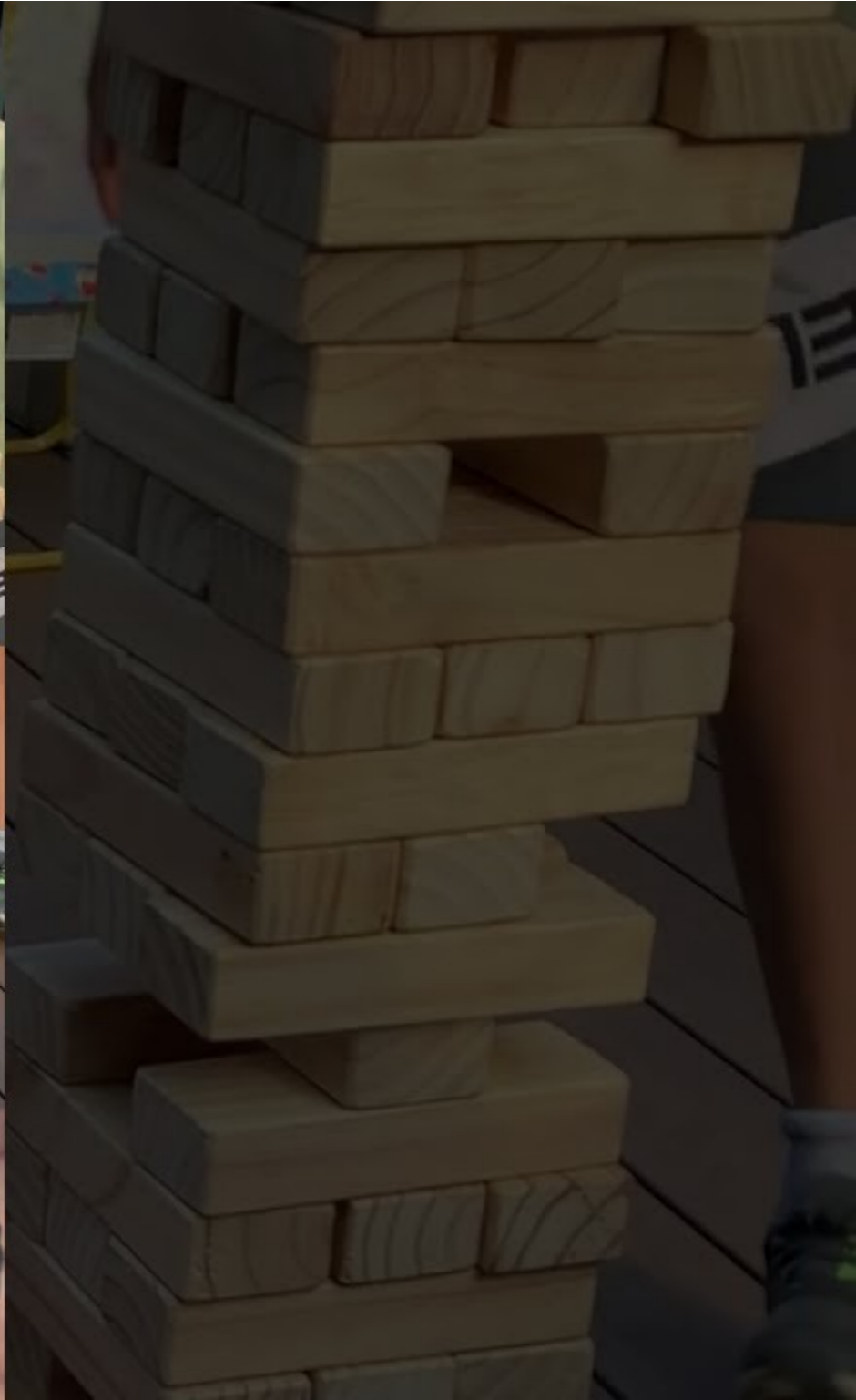












[Click image to watch video](#)

Expertise Implementation

Introducing Craft Development to Youth

When was the last time your child was encouraged to utilize their brain AND their body in the classroom? With the increased emphasis on standardized testing in schools, children face increasing pressure to only value learning that occurs from the head up, prioritize STEM above all else, always get the perfect answer, and rely heavily on memorization rather than problem-solving ([Washington Post](#)). Critical thinking, STEM skills, developing accurate answers, and knowledge retention are certainly important for our children to learn. But like any good thing, too much of it becomes bad. Experts, entrepreneurs, economists, and educators agree: for our kids to be successful in their personal and professional lives, they need exposure to a variety of subjects and experiences in their adolescence ([PBS](#)). But how are our kids going to have these experiences when standardized testing becomes our highest standard for academic success?

Enter our approach: Craft Development. Our program uses pottery to activate students' hand-eye coordinated critical thinking, which both complements *and* supplements what children learn in the traditional classroom setting.

Complements by teaching:

- Hands-on math skills (ex. Measuring materials, resource allocation)
- Spatial skills (ex. Beneficial for math, engineering, problem-solving)
- Fine motor skills (ex. Such as those used to play instruments)
- History (ex. Learning about pottery evolution over time, learning about various cultures and their pottery, etc.)
- Science (ex. Composition of different clays, learning about clay recycling, how molecular structures change throughout firing stages)

Supplements by teaching:

- Project planning skills (ex. Resource allocation, executing an idea from start to finish, etc.)
- How to use tools (ex. Carving, shaping, cutting, foot pedal usage)
- Mindfulness
- Discipline
- Communication
- Project ownership
- Grit
- Connection to the natural world (a break from technology)

Craft education and training allows for students to unlock their curious mind through the original tool: the hand. And pottery craft is certainly more than just attending a pottery class. We advocate for a longer view and dedicated weekly practices to consistently build critical thinking habits and grit, as clay is certainly no walk in the park when you start digging deeper. But like anything, you get so much more out of it when you regularly practice, and it is certainly fun and invigorating. Pottery teaches the physical control of a competitive sport, the mindfulness of meditation, and the attention to detail of mathematics. From hand manipulation to throwing on the wheel to the firing process, we work with clay through all of its forms and stages to give young minds a stronger framework with which to interpret the world.

Expertise Implementation

Why Pottery?

Pottery has been deeply connected to our survival and evolution as a human species for over 30,000 years. Once humans harnessed fire, we learned to fire clay into vessels that we could use to cook and eat in. The switch to eating cooked food improved our nutrition, which increased brain development as a species. From there, pottery expanded to serve not only as a tool but also as decoration. Each great civilization has had their own distinctive form of pottery, from the ancient Greek black figure pottery to Ming Dynasty porcelain to Aztec pottery. In fact, pottery often helps us understand who we are and where we come from:

“Pottery can be used to date archaeological sites [and] reveal long-forgotten [trade](#) links... the decoration can show artistic evolution within cultures and it often reveals details of everyday life from clothing to religious rituals, from eating habits to now-lost versions of otherwise well-known myths” ([World History](#)).

Thus, to learn the craft of pottery is to return to our roots as human beings. This is a practice that has been passed down for over 1,500 generations. In an era where we are constantly trying to one-up ourselves, to create the next best technology, and to produce more and more, it's valuable to slow down and reconnect with the earth and our ancestors.