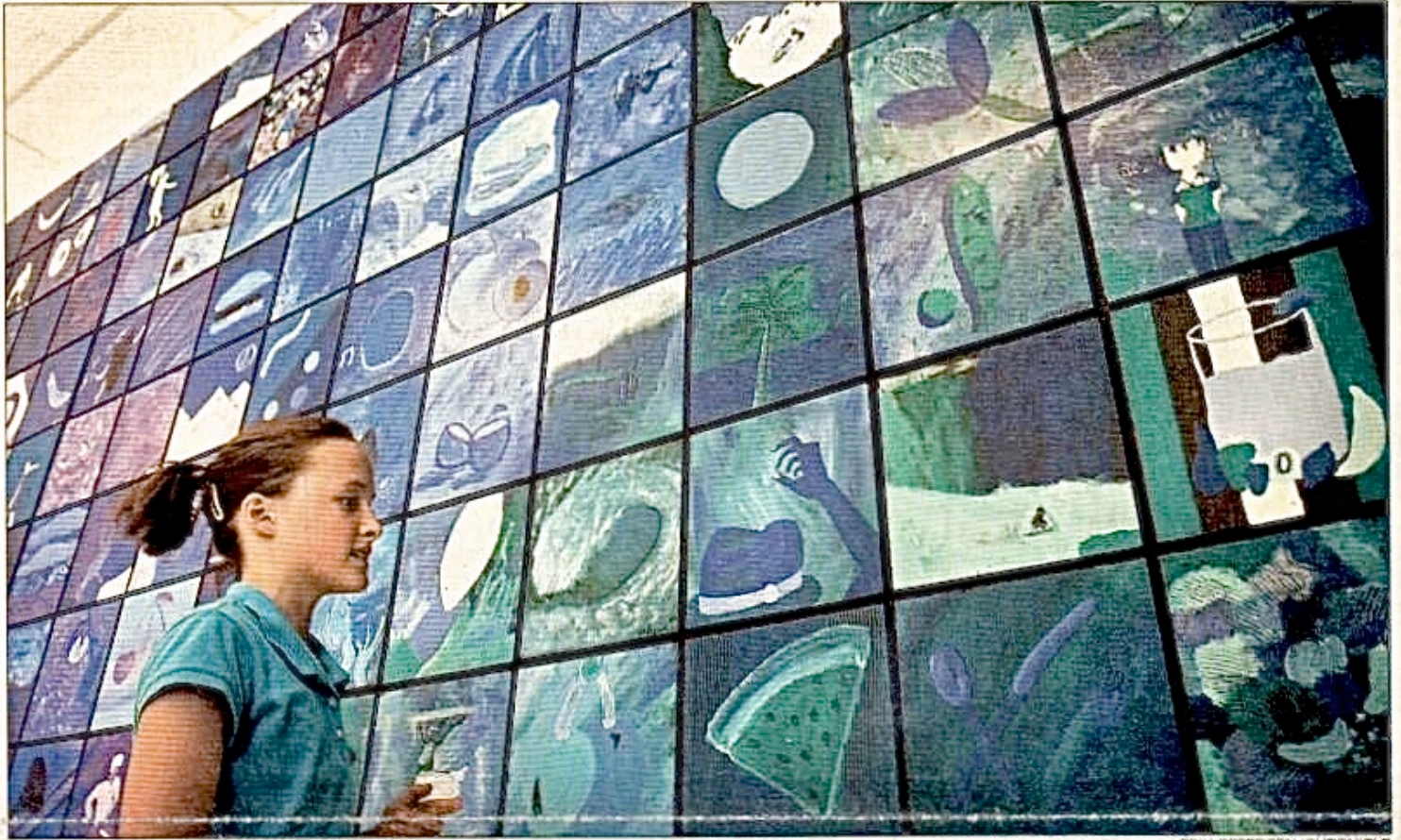


Art project brightens Sacajawea cafeteria



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Sacajawea Middle School seventh-grader Lizzie Gill talks about the new mural in the lunchroom at the school Thursday. Students pitched in to paint and hang the 750 wood tiles to create a colorful design.

By **GAIL SCHONTZLER**
Chronicle Staff Writer

Sacajawea Middle School's cafeteria used to be pretty blah, with plain vanilla white walls, said eighth-grader Austin Smilovic.

"Boring, dull, plain, dead," the 14-year-old said. "You needed some spunk."

It looks a lot jazzier now, since students finished a colorful art project that involved installing 750 individually painted tiles on the walls.

"The coolest part," said Carlos Sanchez, 13, "was to see the whole work of art come together."

Each of the school's 650 students and staff members got to paint a 1-foot square wooden tile with acrylic house paint.

Sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders were invited to paint an image of something they liked, while the school's 100 kindergartners each painted a capital letter. Each class got a particular color, and the tiles were arranged like a color wheel.

Carlos painted a red pomegranate, "my favorite fruit," which is appropriate for a cafeteria.

The room is also used for band concerts, dances, plays and gym classes, so the range of topics was pretty wide open. Lots of kids

chose sports themes — basketballs, volleyball players and soccer kickers.

Sixth-grader Jake Martel, 12, painted a hockey player. Lizzie Gill, 12, a seventh-grader, painted a cross-country skier leaving zigzag tracks.

The tiles are full of surprises. Students painted ballet shoes, a rock band, a red barn, a juggling snowman, a trout fisherman, geometric designs, a piano keyboard, a cool bicyclist, a pug dog, drama masks, a race horse, a heart.

There's a peace sign rising like the moon over the Bridger Range. There's an abstract curve, painted by a soda-addicted counselor, which looks suspiciously like a Coke sign.

"I did this weak imitation of Eddie Van Halen's guitar," Austin said, pointing to his tile. "Like something Picasso would do."

The project was organized by the school's artist-in-residence, Loretta Domaszewski, and 20 students on the MBI Leadership Team. MBI stands for Montana Behavior Initiative, and the students chosen as peer leaders help keep the school a positive, friendly place, help defuse problems like bullying, and set a good example for younger kids, Austin and Carlos said.

"I had the vision of changing the environment so it would be a more inspiring place to work and learn," Domaszewski said. "Visually,

it works. It's really beautiful."

There were a few moments when she almost despaired of finishing the project on time, but parents, students and community members always seemed to show up and help at just the right time.

"It's good because you can always come back and see what you did," Carlos said. "If you have kids, you can say, 'Hey, that's my tile.'"

"It's awesome," Principal Diana McDonough, who will retire at the end of this school year, said of the project.

"The color is vibrant, and the kids feel so much ownership," McDonough said. "Before it was drab; now I see them looking around. It's a conversation piece, an artistic piece."

And the way the project included the kindergartners, she said, is symbolic of the way the school worked to integrate younger and older students this year.

The students said McDonough has been a good principal, and they especially liked the field trips she made possible, like camping, skiing days and a visit to the Gates of the Mountains.

"I think she's done a great job," Austin said. "All her hard work, making Sacajawea a cool experience."

"She's really, like, inspirational," Lizzie said. Gail Schontzler is at gails@dailychronicle.com or 582-2633.