Iredell - Statesville Schools

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EdMatters

Transforming a Blank Canvas into Community Pride: East Iredell Elementary Unveils Mural



When East Iredell Elementary students voted on three designs for a mural at their school, they chose the one that best represented their school culture and community. It even reflected drawings that the students had made in art class.



On Wednesday, November 4, 2026, students, staff, and community members gathered for a ribbon-cutting to celebrate the finished mural, Put First Things First. Members of the school's Junior Lighthouse team spoke at the ceremony about what it was like to help create it.



Painted by muralist Junior Gomez, the artwork includes cobras, students with backpacks, and a globe representing the school's dual immersion program. Even fruit made its way onto the wall from a recent art project. At the center of the mural, two hands come together around a heart.

East Iredell Elementary student, Khari said it was fun to see Mr. Gomez take in so many ideas from students. For Khari, that was what made the mural feel like it belonged to the whole school.



"It's about this school," Khari said. "There's no person who's left out."

The project started about a year ago when Iredell-Statesville Schools K-12 Fine Arts Coordinator Cortney Fraiser, Assistant Principal Graham Lynch, and art teacher Justin Hagan talked about what they could do with a blank exterior wall. They wanted to create a piece of art that reflected the students and their school. A $10,000 Grassroots Arts grant through the Iredell Arts Council helped get the project started. The North Carolina Museum of Art and private donors also provided support.

Students in kindergarten through fifth grade filled out surveys, sketched ideas in art class, and talked with Gomez about what they wanted to see on the wall. In September, families met Gomez and painted with watercolors during a Family Painting Night. Gomez used the feedback to develop three designs and brought them back to the school for a student vote.



"One of the things that makes this project so meaningful is that our students were part of the process from the very beginning," Principal Jennifer Ribbeck said at the ceremony. "They shared their ideas, they helped shape the design, and they watched as their vision came to life."



Gomez said the title draws on "Put First Things First," one of the habits taught through the school's Leader in Me program. For him, the heart shows what comes first. "It's always love, start with love," he said.

Students got to watch Gomez paint the mural over several days in October. Edie, an East Iredell Elementary student, remembered how he sketched the design in pencil before going back over the lines with black paint. At the ribbon cutting, Edie said the school was there to celebrate and thank Mr. Gomez for his work. On Wednesday, members of the school's Junior Lighthouse team spoke at the ribbon-cutting and shared what the project was like from their perspective.



"I think it's a good example of our school," Edie said.