

## Blake Zachritz - Lower School Art

Blake Zachritz loves coming to school each day. "I never have a bad day," beams the Lower School Art teacher. "The children are always happy with what I bring for them to do. They're excited. You can't beat that."

The younger they are, the more they throw themselves into art. "The little ones are not afraid to put lines on paper. They just do it," says Mrs. Zachritz. "The older they get, the more tentative they become. They start over and erase. A kindergartner will finish in one class what a third grader will finish in two, and a seventh grader in five or six."



Regardless of how long it takes, students crave the opportunity to express themselves. "They enjoy the time to relax and not be under pressure to produce something in a specific way," says Mrs. Zachritz. "It's fun to watch that creativity, whether they're working privately or collaboratively."

This 24-year education veteran finds it sad that so many schools and school districts have eliminated art, but is heartened that creativity and self-expression are valued here at Topeka Collegiate. "Art gives you ways to express ideas and feelings that you don't have with words and numbers," she explains. "It's good for your soul."

Her students agree. One fourth grader says she's in her own world when she's working on an art project. "I picture in my mind what I want to do and then I forget about everything else. I'm focused." Another says, "Art is where you can be creative."

Blake Zachritz has always loved art but grew up in a home where, while academics were valued, creative endeavors were not. "I was not encouraged or allowed to take art classes," she says, "even though I loved it." That changed when she went to college and declared art education as her major. She's never looked back.

Lower School art classes combine an introduction to fundamental elements of art with instruction on technique and lessons in art history, all combined with humor. Mrs. Zachritz introduces her youngest students to da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* by convincing them that she looks like the woman in the painting, and by singing Nat King Cole's *Mona Lisa*, loudly, with her own lyrics ("You're as beautiful as Mrs. Zachritz"). "When they're older," she laughs, they'll find out the song is not really about Mrs. Zachritz!

At the Lower School Art Show, Mrs. Zachritz relishes her annual opportunity to overhear students describing their work to their parents. "I was very proud to hear second grader **Teddy Mac Decker**, for example, telling his family about Henri Rousseau's *Cat in the Jungle*, and explaining the lesson. I adore hearing the students talking about the mediums, how they used them, what they were learning, like warm and cool colors, textures and monochromatic colors." After one art show, Mrs. Zachritz heard something else that made her smile. A parent confided that an earlier Art Show convinced their family that "we need to do whatever it takes to bring our son here."

On hearing that, Mrs. Zachritz wonders whether her head has grown larger. "It's the kids," she says. "The kids inspire me so much because they're always willing to try. That's something we need to remember as grownups, to always be willing to try!"