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Ambitious Arts Trial Seeks to Spark Cambodia's Creativity

by Michelle Vachon | January 25, 2017 | [អានជាភាសាខ្មែរ](#)

A five-year pilot program is being created to integrate arts and culture into public schools throughout the country, and may help Cambodians develop a better understanding of their roots and the creative ability to take on global challenges.

A public-private partnership managed by Cambodian Living Arts (CLA), an arts and culture NGO, will set up the first “arts cluster center” at Preah Sisowath High School in Phnom Penh sometime this year. The pilot project will develop formal and informal arts training programs for public schools as well as a strategy to train art teachers so the program can be implemented throughout the country.

“The idea is not to immediately go national, but really starting with cluster schools and centers,” said Phloeun Prim, CLA’s executive director. “It’s ambitious, but I think it’s scalable.”

A memorandum of understanding, set to be signed on Friday, will be the first step toward implementing a program that organizers hope will continue to bear fruit years from now. The agreement will be signed by CLA, Unesco, and the culture and education ministries.

“We have opened a space for working together,” Hab Touch, director-general for intangible heritage at the Culture Ministry, said on Tuesday.

As part of the project, the Education Ministry plans to expand its long-term strategy to include arts within the curriculum. Instead of focusing on STEM—Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics—the ministry is now adding Arts, and STEM has become STEAM.

“It’s the marriage between science, engineering, technology and arts to introduce, you know, beauty, but also forms as in architecture and design,” Education Minister Hang Chuon Naron said on Monday. “With art involved, you can become more creative” in every field.

CLA has also been involved in arts education since the late 1990s, so it's "not starting from scratch," Mr. Prim said.

"We're also using resources and ideas from existing nonprofit organizations that have done work [in arts education]," he said. These include Bophana Audiovisual Center in Phnom Penh, Phare Ponleu Selpak in Battambang City, Epic Arts in Kampot City, and Krousar Thmey.

Programs will be developed alongside the establishment of the first cluster center, said Suon Bun Rith, the CLA arts education manager overseeing the project. Eventually, each center would serve a number of schools both in urban and rural areas.

The project "is not simply about learning" how to draw or photograph, he said. "It is the process of doing that...to enable students to think beyond their thoughts, beyond their limitations, and develop creative thinking as well as critical thinking."

Mr. Chuon Naron, the education minister, said he also believed the program would help mitigate "some missing elements"—that is, the losses caused by the conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s—which not only decimated a generation of artists, but also severed the normal transmission of traditions and arts skills.

"Even traditional education cannot solve that problem," he said. "I think we should open the way for young people to immerse themselves in arts so that they can find the beauty."

Plus, an arts education will help them truly own their cultural heritage so they can better forge ahead, he said.

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