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Project aims to ignite passion for art to students

Preah Sisowath High School will pilot a new arts education curriculum designed as part of a five-year project created by Cambodian Living Arts (CLA) in partnership with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport; the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts; and Unesco.

Art classes have been part of the public school curriculum for a long time, but have never been popular with students. To tackle this problem, CLA has launched an arts education project it hopes will persuade more students to take art seriously as a subject.

CLA executive director Prim Phloeun said art teachers would be recruited from MoEYS and MoCFA to join the pilot project.

"Until now, CLA has only worked with senior arts professors, but we've thought about expanding [our involvement with] art education to the students themselves. We believe that only by working in schools can we move the project forward; that's why we partnered with MoEYS," Mr. Phloeun said.

Sisowath High School will serve as a starting point for the arts education project, before it is rolled out across Cambodia. "Both classical and modern art forms will be taught, starting with music and dance," Mr. Phloeun said.

Suon Bunrith, CLA's arts education manager, said students in grades 7, 8 and 10 would be invited to enroll in art classes.

The 9th, 11th and 12th graders will be skipped for now as they need to spend more time focusing on science classes. Art teachers will be given training in how to make their classes appealing to younger students.

"We will spend a year preparing a study curriculum for students. Meanwhile, we will also arrange training sessions for art teachers. There will also be informal classes after school, starting after an hour's break, from 5pm to 7pm. These will teach chapey [a traditional stringed instrument], dance and more," Mr. Bunrith said, adding that the informal classes will start in February.

CLA already cooperates with other organizations such as Bophana on training sessions in subjects such as film and photography after the post-school break hour. CLA also plans to invite artists to give presentations about their working lives to students during these informal sessions.

"Most importantly, students will get more opportunities to demonstrate their achievements during the informal classes," Mr. Bunrith said.

MoEYS views the shortage of art trainers as a problem. Education Minister Hang Chuon Naron said the public school system lacks art teachers, adding that many have been lured to work at private schools or for companies. However, he was confident the new project will change the way students are taught about art, with lessons on both classical Khmer art as well as international art in order to expose them to different cultures.

Mr. Chuon Naron said he could personally attest to the importance of an arts education; he lived inside Phnom Penh's Chaktomuk Hall during the Khmer Rouge regime, learning all he knew about Cambodian history from watching performances there. He therefore believed that arts education is crucial in teaching young Cambodians about the origins of their culture.

"We will have various art classes [as part of the project], including lessons on singing, dancing, chanting and filmmaking, and educate students about different cultures," the minister said.

He added that "[an arts education] allows students to learn history through art, to learn culture through music and performance; I think this is one of the best ways."

Anne Lemaistre, head of office and representative of Unesco in Cambodia, described the arts education project as a very important one for Cambodia, adding that it is the

first program designed to help young students improve their creative capacities by learning about the arts.

The aim of arts education is not just to produce future artists, she said, but also to produce useful citizens, because a creative citizen is always a useful one.

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