

Spencer Museum's 'Looking After' exhibition reflects on art's role in education, learning

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LAWRENCE — This fall, the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas will present the exhibition “Looking After: Art and Care in Education Across Kansas,” opening Aug. 18. The exhibition features more than 80 works from the Spencer Museum’s collection that are used in K-12 education initiatives to inspire creativity while supporting the academic standards of Kansas.



Installation shot of "Looking After" featuring a [sculpture](#) by Nathalie Miebach, who will give a public talk Sept. 18.

[“Looking After”](#) invites visitors to explore the many ways that art can facilitate learning through four overarching themes that Spencer Museum education staff use to guide engagement with K-12 students and teachers:

- “Art integration across disciplines,” using art concepts and techniques to support learning in any subject
- “Close looking,” taking time to notice details and make connections
- “Social, emotional and character development,” being able to regulate one’s emotions and relate to others as respectful, responsible and empathetic individuals
- “Ethics of care,” a museum’s duty to care for communities and visitors in addition to its collection.

“By looking after the well-being of our visitors and collaborators in education, this exhibition makes connections with past experiences and knowledge while opening new conversations and encouraging curiosity,” said Rachel Straughn-Navarro, exhibition co-curator and the Spencer Museum’s school and educator engagement coordinator.

The Spencer Museum has served K-12 teachers and students for nearly 60 years through a variety of educational programs, including annual gallery tours designed for all fourth- and fifth-grade students in Lawrence Public Schools and other nearby districts, visits to classrooms by Spencer Museum staff and docents, and most recently through the statewide [Partners in Education Across Kansas \(PEAK\) program](#).



Nikki Chamberlain, a middle school and high school gifted facilitator in Salina, presents a lesson plan she created using the Spencer's collection at a PEAK workshop.

PEAK is a free professional development program for K-12 teachers working in Kansas. It connects teachers with museum educators, arts organizations in their area and one another, building a shared learning community through art that stretches across the state. The program centers the Spencer Museum of Art and its collections as an educational resource. Since PEAK was established in 2022, the program has supported more than 75 educators in 24 Kansas counties through in-person trainings, virtual workshops and lesson plans to enhance learning experiences for more than 10,000 students.

"Incorporating art into classroom teaching has been found to increase student achievement and engagement. PEAK aims to expand educators' knowledge and skills to integrate art into their classrooms no matter what subject they teach," said Kristina Walker, exhibition co-curator and the Spencer Museum's director of education and interpretation.

PEAK teachers represent more than 20 subject areas, including art, creative writing, language arts, government, American history, world history, social studies, math, science and public speaking.

"It has been amazing how many different PEAK activities I have been able to incorporate into both my history classes as well as my homeroom classes. With the Spencer Museum's collection of art from all over the world, I've been able to incorporate lesson plans as well as activities we've done in art breaks," said Casey Meier, a high school history teacher in Haysville.

According to a program evaluation conducted by the Spencer Museum, 67% of participating educators indicated they believed their students' social-emotional well-being improved through their implementation of PEAK competencies.



Kristin Van Tassel, an English teacher at Southeast of Saline High School near Gypsum, participates in a PEA workshop at the Spencer Museum in April 2026.

“PEAK has helped me see through more informed eyes. I was able to take the lessons we learned and use them in the classroom and in my personal life, helping myself and my students to focus emotions through art. I feel like I’ve become a better teacher, learning to understand not only the student but what might be behind that student’s behavior,” said Sabina Bolinger, a PK-12 district art teacher in Madison.

Each year PEA has a cohort of approximately 40 teachers from counties across Kansas who represent a variety of grade levels and subjects. The Spencer Museum sends PEA teachers materials to participate in bimonthly virtual “art breaks” that offer hands-on, artful learning experiences and discussion about ways to incorporate them in classroom teaching. Teachers also attend one in-person workshop each semester that features local artists and arts organizations in different locations across Kansas. The year culminates in a two-day summer institute where all PEA teachers come together to learn and engage with one another over art activities and lessons focused on the land of Kansas. The 2025 summer institute was hosted at the Hays Arts Council, where teachers participated in several hands-on workshops including indigo dyeing with Mary Anne Jordan, KU professor of visual art, and working with clay with Linda Ganstrom, Fort Hays State professor of ceramics.

This year, instead of a summer institute, the Spencer Museum will host a conference open to any K-12 teacher in Kansas on Sept. 18-19, with sessions focused on different topics presented in the “Looking After” exhibition. Nathalie Miebach, whose art is featured in the exhibition, will give the [keynote talk at 5:30 p.m. Sept. 18](#) about how she translates data into sculptures. The talk is free and open to the public. [Conference registration](#) is free and ends Sept. 1.



Installation shot of “Looking After,” which runs Aug. 18 through Jan. 10, 2027, at the Spencer Museum.

Additional exhibition programming includes a [Hawk Week event on Aug. 25](#) where students can explore emotions by creating colorful mosaics, a [gallery talk Sept. 27](#) with co-curators Straughn-Navarro and Walker, and a [panel discussion Oct. 25](#) with K-12 educators about how they have incorporated art into their classrooms using the Spencer Museum’s collection and resources.

“Looking After: Art and Care in Education Across Kansas” remains on view through Jan. 10, 2027. Admission to this exhibition and to the Spencer Museum is free for everyone.

“Looking After,” related exhibition programs and PEAK are funded by a lead gift from Jeff and Mary Weinberg. Additional support comes from the Lewis H. Humphreys Charitable Trust, the Estelle S. and Robert A. Long Ellis Foundation, the Francis Family Foundation, the Anschutz Family Foundation, the Douglas County Community Foundation, the Linda Inman Bailey

Exhibitions and Programming Fund, Tim and Jerrye Van Leer, Denise Stone, KU Student Senate, 2026 One Day One KU donors and Friends of the Art Museum. The exhibition is sponsored in part by the state of Kansas through the Kansas Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts.