

# Exploring How Arts Education and Cultural Experiences Help Students Learn

Part of a series exploring issues from  
The Community Foundation's  
*Aspire Arkansas* report.

ARKANSAS  
community foundation

Smart Giving to Improve Communities



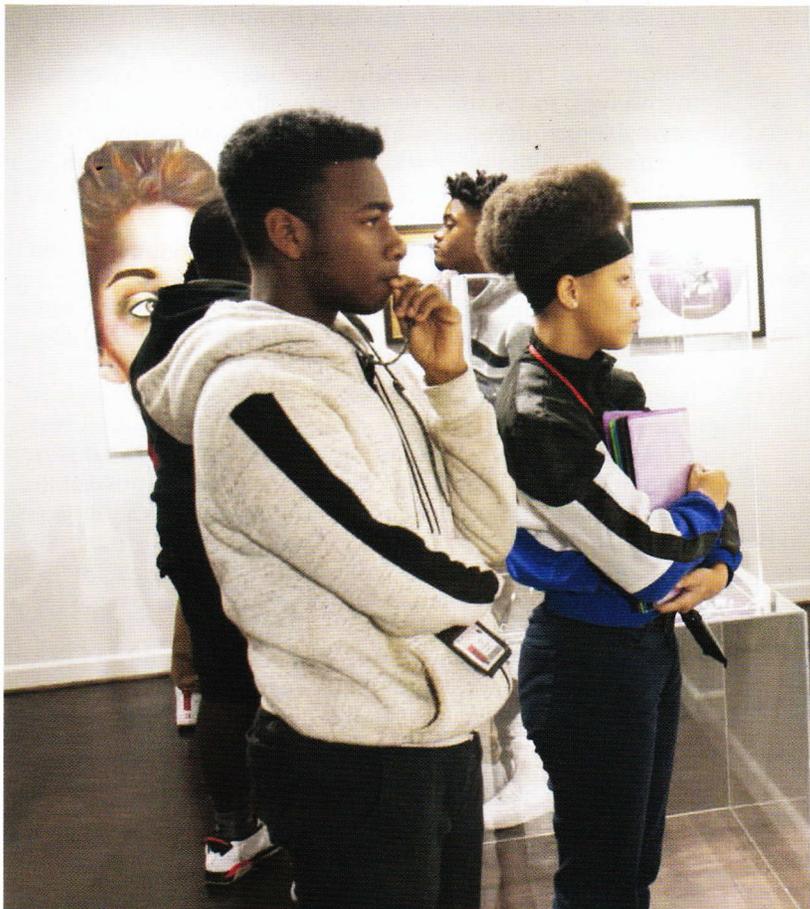
November 2019

# ENGAGE

LEARN MORE  GIVE SMART

# Inspired to Learn: Arts Exposure Aimed at Boosting Dollarway Test Scores

By Kim Dishongh



*Dollarway High School students took a field trip to the Arts and Science Center for Southeast Arkansas in October as part of a program using the history and meaning of artworks to help students express themselves better as a way to improve their literacy skills.*

Artists have long known that creativity flows easier with the inspiration of a muse. For students in Dollarway High School, art is the muse — and so far it's drawing favor from their teachers.

Dollarway students were at the Arts and Science Center for Southeast Arkansas in Pine Bluff recently to see the work of Forrest City artist Chrystal Seawood in preparation for a weeklong dive into some arts-integrated lessons geared toward boosting their literacy scores.

"It's really new for our students. It's not something they have had a lot of exposure to. So I think there's still an amount of ... well, they don't know what to make of it," says Sarah Sutton, who teaches sophomore and junior Spanish and English at Dollarway. "But I think that, in and of itself, is good because it's something they're thinking about."

Earlier this year, students looked at photos from the Eviction Quilts series done by Little Rock documentarian James Matthews, who created quilts out of materials found in homes and apartments from which people had been evicted.

"When it comes to Pine Bluff, Jefferson County and Southeast Arkansas, we have a very high poverty rate, and eviction is something that some of these kids are very familiar with," says Rachel Miller, executive director of the Arts and Science Center. "A lot of times the topics are very tough, but that's what our community is dealing with. We mainly work with single-parent households, low income youths and families."

April Gentry-Sutterfield, a consultant working with the Arts and Science Center through a National Endowment of the Arts grant, does quarterly professional development workshops with Dollarway High teachers showing them how to incorporate theater techniques to engage students.

As part of a team-teaching exercise, Gentry-Sutterfield discussed with students the idea that the quilts told stories — fabric from scrubs might mean that someone in that household was a nurse, material from work pants might indicate that someone worked hard — and talked through the etymology of the word "ghetto."

She had small groups of students work together to demonstrate the meaning of that word, and saw students

# ENGAGE

come up with images of girls patting their hair and people hanging out of cars. Eventually she moved them on to the word “gentrification” as it pertains to people investing money and time into Pine Bluff to build its economy.

“That final day, we looked at one of the eviction quilts, and we talked about how this family lived in this area that had traditionally been called a ghetto and is going through this process of gentrification,” she says.

Informational writing is an area students at that school need to work on, so she had them write about what the artist was trying to say with the quilt — and she was impressed by their results.

“They were citing parts of the quilt and saying ‘this makes me think that this was going on’ and ‘this says this,’ so that’s kind of a lot,” she says. “I was really pleased.”

Nicholis Roberts, 17, says though the topic of eviction isn’t a nice one, he did see the benefit of the exercises.

“The exercises definitely increased some of the skills we used,” he says. “Seeing what you are writing about, the thing that is driving you to write would push someone to be able to write about it much better than they would if they were to just be told that it existed.”

Laila Baker, 16, liked seeing the artwork, hearing about its history and relevance and sharing how it made her feel.

“It helps you get a deeper understanding and that helps you write about it easier,” says Baker, who wants to be an entrepreneur in a business involving art, technology, writing and music after graduation. “It helps you understand the stories behind them better than just having to read from the visuals. It’s more writing than looking at art, unlike usually there’s more art than writing.”

Sutton says, “I think they really liked being able to express themselves, so it’s still a new thing with them but we’re getting some interest. It’s a little uncomfortable still, so there’s still a little bit of resistance. They’re not used to doing this kind of thinking. But we’re getting there.”

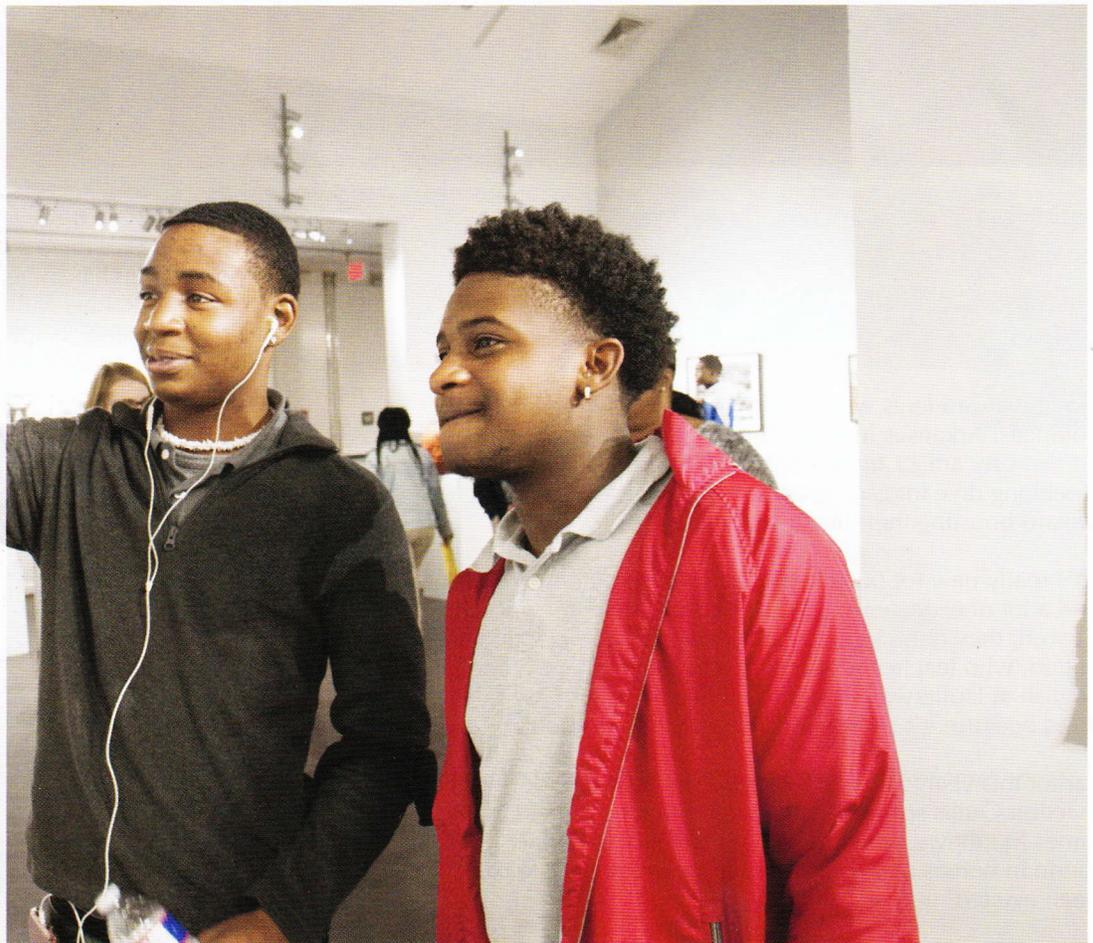
Many of the Dollarway students hadn’t visited the Arts and Science Center of Southeast Arkansas before a field trip there last year. Laila, back for her second trip this fall, was elated to find that the exhibits had changed. Now that she knows there are always new things to see, she hopes to return more often.

“I love art. Any type of art is interesting to me,” says Baker. “Sometimes you see it, but you don’t see the purpose of it. When you hear the backstory of it, that just makes the artwork even better.”

That’s what Miller likes to hear.

“I’m really focusing on not only going beyond our museum’s walls, and not only just being an institution where we have a permanent art collection, but also being

*During a field trip to the Arts and Science Center for Southeast Arkansas, Dollarway High students were encouraged to stand by a piece of art that appealed to them and come up with one word to express what about the art drew their attention.*





an institution that collaborates with our schools and comes up with innovative ways to engage our students and also find ways to improve literacy and numeracy scores,” says Miller.

The museum offers a Second Saturday Family Fun Day each month, inviting families to come and meet working artists, hosts an afterschool program through the Boys and Girls Club and community centers, and activities in conjunction with the science club at Jack Robey Junior High.

That club, predominately made up of young girls, learned coding and then integrated art and technology to create a kinetic bike sculpture with LED coded lights.

There are weekly activities at the museum for pre-kindergarten aged kids in the museum’s Creative Construction Zone, where big blue blocks are used to teach architecture and engineering concepts.

The Arts and Science Center doesn’t have data yet to show whether their work is moving the needle. But in El Dorado, the executive director of the South Arkansas Arts Center is seeing promising results with an all-ages after-school program paid for in part by a violence intervention grant through the SHARE Foundation. The program includes classes in music, drama, graphic design, ballet and more. Some students attend only one class each week while others go multiple times weekly.

“In the spring 2018 semester, 63% maintained or raised their grades; this rose to 69% in the fall 2018 semester, and 78% in the spring 2019 semester,” says Laura Allen, executive director. “Citizenship grades have balanced in the 92-94% maintained or improved range throughout the three semesters, and parent interaction has steadily grown to a 2019 spring semester high of documented interactions with 100% of students’ parent or guardian.”

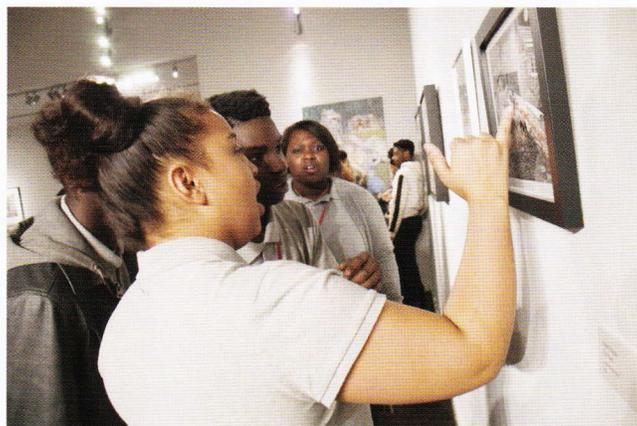
In contrast to the Pine Bluff area, most students have been exposed to arts in El Dorado, either through the South Arkansas Arts Center, the Murphy Arts District or other cultural venues.

“I think that it just changed the way that the community views art and that they see it as you know, not something that is special or separate, but something that is in every part of their lives,” says Allen. “It’s something that has value economically and scientifically and in all these other ways rather than just aesthetically.”

Anecdotally, she sees El Dorado students opting not to miss school because that would mean missing their after-school art classes, and she sees them being more engaged in their classes because of their connection to the art they see, create and discuss after school.

Miller hopes to see similar results in Pine Bluff.

“If we’re able to engage the students in a way that is interactive, that engages a different part of the brain, that shakes things up, then we’re more likely to be able to see a result because it’s something completely new and it changes the environment,” she says.



*Students from Dollarway High School traveled to the Arts and Science Center for Southeast Arkansas in Pine Bluff recently as part of an effort by their school and the Arts Center to boost their literacy skills. They analyzed artwork and chose one word to describe a piece on display that caught their attention. Then they created an artistic interpretation of their own using the word they chose.*



# “How can Arkansans work together to expose students to the arts with the goal of improving performance in all subject areas?”



**Rachel M. Miller, PhD**  
*Executive Director  
Arts & Science Center for  
Southeast Arkansas  
Pine Bluff*

First step toward the goal of improving student performance through the arts is for our state policy makers, community leaders and school administrators recognizing the value of arts-integrated learning and the measurable impact that initial exposure can have not only on the student but also on the community-at-large.

According to a recent report on creativity-related occupations in Arkansas by Arkansans for the Arts in collaboration with the Arkansas Economic Institute, there are over 77,000 people within the state that work in creative industries. These jobs are diverse, encompassing occupations ranging, for example, from education and engineering to culinary arts.

However, the sentiment that the arts are for extracurricular activities or even perceived as a waste of school resources still prevails. The misconception that the arts don't lead to real jobs denies the student the opportunity to experience the diversity and flexibility of the arts as an idea platform for hands-on engagement in any subject.

Creating thoughtful and innovative partnerships with schools, local arts organization and community leaders can provide access to enriching arts-based opportunities for a child into adulthood. Utilizing the arts as a viable tool for student engagement allows for development of technical and practical skills considered instrumental in academic and career success.



**Melanie Landrum**  
*Executive Director  
Arkansas A+ Schools  
North Little Rock*

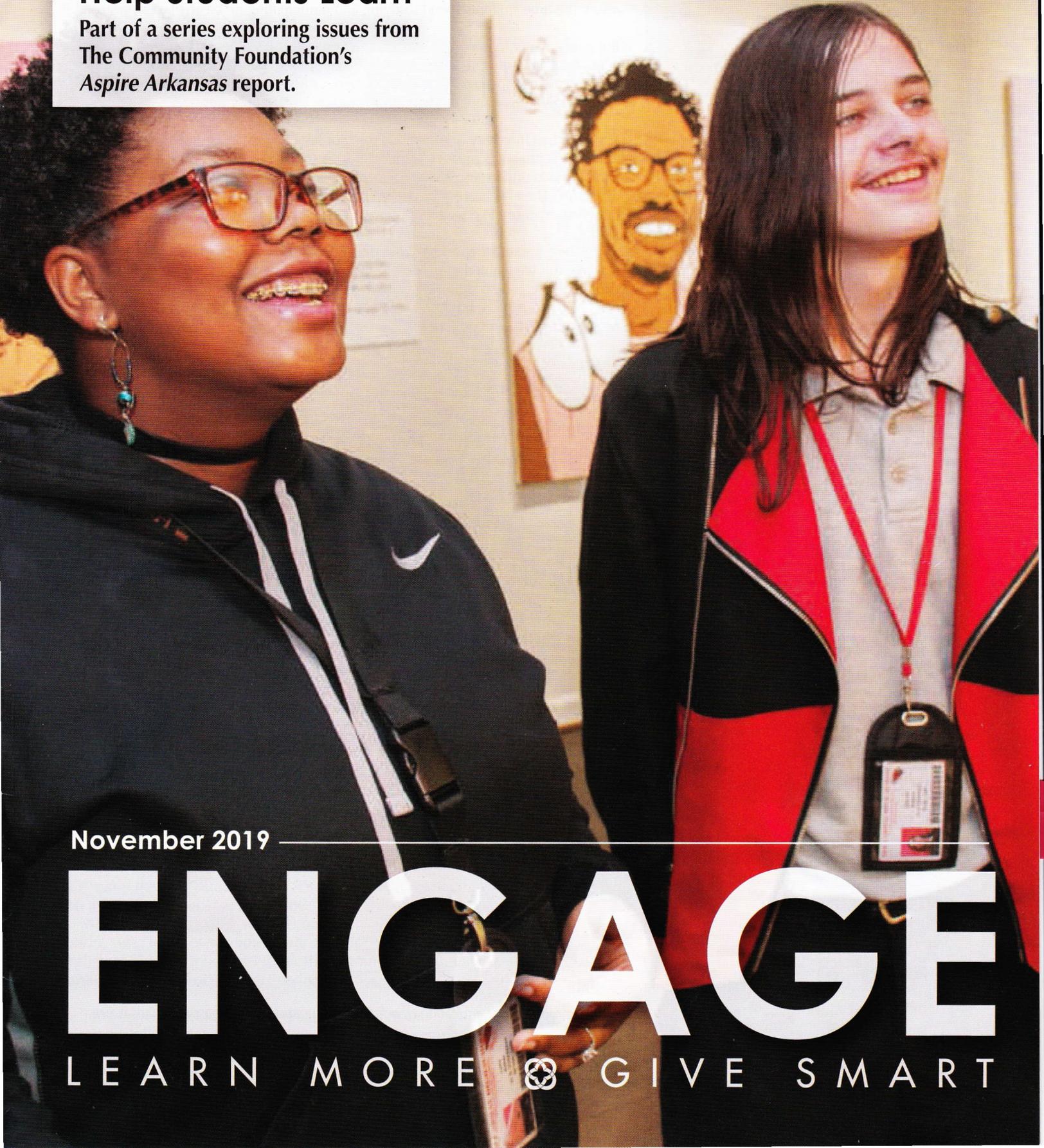
As a principal in North Little Rock, I had pockets of teaching excellence, but it was not pervasive in the school culture. That is when Paul Leopoulos with the Thea Foundation introduced the Arkansas A+ Schools model to our district. The framework includes Arts Integration, Curriculum, Experiential Learning, Multiple Learning Pathways, Climate, Infrastructure, Enriched Assessment and Collaboration. Our school embraced this model which engaged teachers in working together to discover ways that the arts could be integrated into all areas of the curriculum. It also introduced how learning can be assessed in multiple ways, not just paper and pencil tests. Teachers got excited about teaching again, and parents noticed and wanted to be a part of the excitement.

As the Executive Director of the University of Arkansas A+ Schools which now has a growing network of over 25 schools across the state, I have seen this same pattern repeated over the past five years. The first thing that happens is attendance increases and discipline referrals decrease. Next academic achievement improves even on state tests. When students are engaged in the way that they learn best and the arts integrated, there is no limit to what they can achieve.

**Exploring How Arts  
Education and  
Cultural Experiences  
Help Students Learn**

Part of a series exploring issues from  
The Community Foundation's  
*Aspire Arkansas* report.

ARKANSAS  
community foundation  
Smart Giving to Improve Communities



November 2019

# ENGAGE

LEARN MORE  GIVE SMART