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In the Front Row

The Arts Give Students a Ticket to Learning

by Rick Allen

With its exotic landscape, spectacular sunsets, and Native American and Spanish cultural influences, New Mexico has attracted artists in droves since the early 20th century. The celebrated works of painter Georgia O'Keeffe, photographer Ansel Adams, and novelist Willa Cather give proof that New Mexico has been an inspiration for artists of all kinds.

Oddly enough, until this past year, most children in New Mexico had few opportunities to learn about and make art in their elementary schools. So, bucking the trend in many school districts to marginalize the arts, New Mexico recently passed a law that earmarked \$4 million to help create elementary school arts programs in dance, music, theater, and visual arts.

In a time of tight school finances, New Mexico's commitment to strengthen its elementary arts curriculum is a bright spot on a national arts education canvas that recently appeared to be dusty and cracking from neglect.

There are other highlights, too. In North Carolina, schools known as A+ academies rely on heavy doses of integrated arts as a catalyst for increasing student motivation and achievement across the curriculum. As school districts evaluate school reform models, they might consider how Woodrow Wilson Arts Integrated School, a magnet school in Union City, N.J., developed a program to attract artistically and academically talented students from high-poverty neighborhoods through elective classes and hands-on workshops with professional artists and performance troupes.

New York arts education consultant Carol Fineberg understands that traditional arts programs are often "at the mercy of the budgeters," but she encourages schools to look beyond program cuts to the "good news" developments: more arts integration at the elementary level, availability of local artists to help schools, and opportunities for high school students to take arts courses at a local community college.

Arts for Art's Sake

Although the visual arts, music, and theater might seem locked in a losing battle with other subjects for money and time in schools, a strong case still can be made for increasing the arts in schools, say experts.

Eric Jensen, author of the ASCD book *Arts with the Brain in Mind*, argues that the arts should be a major discipline in the schools—"one worth making everybody study and learn." Not only can the arts be a powerful solution for helping educators reach a wide range of learners, they also "enhance the process of learning" by developing a student's "integrated sensory, attentional, cognitive, emotional, and motor capacities," writes Jensen. Such brain systems are the driving forces behind all other learning, he adds.

Above all, however, we should value the arts because they help us become fully human and access "the major sources of our culture," writes Elliot Eisner in *The Role of Discipline-Based Arts Education in America's Schools*. Training students to "read" the languages of art or music allows them to understand the very human need "to convey and to represent what cannot be expressed in other forms," whether words or mathematical symbols.

As researchers apply new methods to evaluating the arts and student achievement, arts experts say they hope policymakers will better understand the value of the arts in K-12 education. "No Child Left Behind looks more at cause-and-effect research and medical and agricultural models, but we can't look at children the same as we look at Petri dishes or littermates to establish the value of the arts," says Larry Peeno, deputy executive director of the National Art Education Association. Alternative assessment practices ought to be explored and developed based on current brain research that—combined with technology—can unlock new ways to look at a child's growth and development, Peeno asserts.

Arts advocates, nonetheless, invite scrutiny of the arts because accountability is "the coin of the realm" that shows that a school values the arts as much as math, reading, and science, says Fineberg, an arts adviser for the Dana Foundation. "School leaders should see the work of teachers either in the arts or with arts integration as legitimate as and accountable as other subjects."

Starting from Scratch

A combination of involved parents and community arts groups, high government interest, and teachers who know the value of the arts in student motivation, learning, and creativity led to the successful passage of New Mexico's Fine Arts Education Act last year. The law makes elementary arts education part of the state's annual education funding formula.

Roughly half of the state's elementary school students, many of whom had little regular exposure to the arts, will benefit from this year's arts funding. Arts programs for the remaining half of New Mexico's elementary student population are slated to be funded in the coming year.

"Prior to funding, the only art in the school was what a teacher felt comfortable doing. Visual arts education, music, theater, and dance were not a part of the curriculum," says Elaine Howe, who began as the full-time elementary arts coordinator for the Roswell Independent School District in September as a result of the additional money for the arts.

The \$254,000 Roswell received for elementary arts education will also go toward hiring two visual arts teachers and two performing arts teachers and providing professional development on integrating the arts, says Howe.

The money also contributes to establishing Roswell's professional development center for

the arts. Housed in an old school administration building, Roswell's Creative Learning Center now offers teachers an arts lab, a well-stocked art studio where teachers can gain training and explore various mediums, and a lending library for the arts. In the coming months, Howe plans to outfit the center with a studio and stage for teacher and student workshops in dance, movement, and theater.

Because Roswell has had no elementary arts curriculum thus far, district officials, curriculum experts, and arts educators have shared the task of its development with professional arts groups, including the Roswell Symphony, Roswell Community Little Theater, Roswell Museum and Arts Center, and public library officials. By the fall, the largely rural district, which serves 5,146 elementary students, plans to have a sequential arts curriculum encompassing visual arts, music, theater, and dance.

In the meantime, resident artists in dance, poetry, visual arts, and theater have been hired to work with teachers in kindergarten through 6th grade so that "all elementary schools will receive all art forms," Howe says. It's an interim program designed to test scheduling, instructional approaches, and course length before arts teachers are hired, she adds.

Roswell and Albuquerque—New Mexico's largest district with more than 22,000 elementary students—readily met the state's rigorous fine arts funding guidelines due to recent local efforts to increase interest and teacher training in arts integration, says Vicki Breen, an education department arts consultant. The funding application demanded accountability; participating districts must show where they started, where the program is going, "and how it's helping with teachers' professional development and student learning," Breen says.

Howe is confident that Roswell's arts program will soon show its value for teaching and learning in general. "The country is hot on test scores, and we're just inundated with that whole thing. If there's consistency, and if the arts curriculum unfolds as we envision it—the test scores will improve," she says.

As an accountability measure for continued funding, Roswell will provide New Mexico's Public Education Department yearly evidence that the elementary arts curriculum meets the state's standards. Howe has been working with arts education expert Gail Burnaford, author of *Renaissance in the Classroom*, to develop a survey tool to determine the current state of arts integration and teacher understanding about the arts. The inventory will also help determine teachers' professional development needs in the arts, determine how effective the arts programs are, and help establish goals for the following year, says Howe.

Like other arts education advocates, Howe says that the arts can improve student learning, help absenteeism, and lower the dropout rate. When "administrators see improvement in student motivation, teacher morale, and levels of community support,

they'll start reevaluating what the arts are all about" and give them even greater public support.

Arts Integration

Although the connection between a student's active involvement in the arts and academic achievement may still call for further research, enough correlation has been found to lead some school districts in North Carolina to systematically integrate arts into every aspect of the curriculum. Mineral Springs A+ Academy in Winston-Salem has been banking on the integration of the arts since 1995, when it won a three-year grant to show that an integrated arts program based upon the multiple intelligences theory of Harvard researcher Howard Gardner can help students learn in different ways and learn better.

With arts integration now financed by the district, Mineral Springs teachers attend summer institutes on the arts at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and invite previously trained "A+ fellows" for school-based workshops on arts integration.

Sharing curriculum maps for each subject area and informal collaboration between arts and subject area teachers leads to mutual reinforcement of concepts and themes, according to Mineral Springs visual arts teacher Cynthia Ellis. Ellis helps 8th grade students apply the math concepts of proportion and ratio to their art class portraits of famous early Americans they are studying in a history unit.

Arts integration also can work on other levels, says Ellis. For example, teacher Kathy Adams had her 8th grade language arts students read the novel *The Weirdo*, set in an area modeled after North Carolina's Great Dismal Swamp. Ellis, using an idea from artist Judy Chicago, had groups of students each make a pottery place setting that showed how a chosen character evolved in the story. In this project, the place mat represented the character's driving force, the plate depicted how he changed in the story, and the bowl showed the sacrifice made by that particular character. Students had to take into consideration how their projects' designs, colors, and forms best represented the characters they chose. In keeping with the theme of the novel, students then made their own sacrifice by donating their art bowls to a charity fundraiser for a local food bank.

Involving the community in the interdisciplinary lessons and fostering personal connections moves such arts integration beyond mere curriculum alignment, Ellis notes.

Although some teachers at first feel they are sacrificing their teaching time for an art project, they gradually overcome those fears when they see that the students are making connections that reinforce learning, Ellis explains.

"I don't sacrifice my area [the visual arts] for the sake of another subject area, and neither should an academic teacher give up anything," asserts Ellis.

An integrated program also helps capitalize on a student's strengths as a visual-spatial,

bodily-kinesthetic, or musical-rhythmic learner, just three of the eight multiple intelligences outlined by Gardner. The other five intelligences are natural science, intrapersonal, interpersonal, verbal-linguistic, and logical-mathematical—the last two of which tend to predominate in conventional schools' curricula.

Ellis, herself a visual learner, recalls that in high school, it wasn't until a language arts teacher helped her to "take the verbal and visualize it, vocalize it, and even doodle it in an image" that she blossomed as a learner. Because of her own experiences, Ellis hopes that Mineral Springs can further provide these non-traditional learners with opportunities for even more concentrated arts experiences as a way to tap their innate strengths. "I've often wondered what would have happened to me if I had not come across this teacher," Ellis reflects.

Learning with Professional Artists

Many school districts that value the arts are turning to the expertise of local artists or professional groups in music, theater, and dance to bring the arts to students and give teachers professional development. Woodrow Wilson Arts Integrated School uses partnerships with the New York City Ballet, the New York City Opera, and the Metropolitan Opera to give its 1st–8th grade students hands-on experiences in the performing arts.

Most of Wilson's 360 students are Hispanic and are drawn from a densely populated urban area with high concentrations of poverty. Students are self-nominated for the program based on interest or success in one of five areas: academics (humanities, math, science), music, drama, visual arts, or creative movement. The application process includes an interview, an audition if needed, and a portfolio review.

School officials say Wilson's focus on each student's uniqueness and artistic and academic talents account for the school's overall success. Multiple intelligences surveys of each student help teachers determine which ways to convey information. The school's 4th grade scores on state-mandated tests in language arts, science, and math are the highest in New Jersey, and its 8th grade scores are among the highest, says Wilson principal Ron Treanor.

To give students a more intensive exposure to a variety of arts, Wilson offers Multiple Intelligences Arts Domain classes (MIADs). Students choose from an array of 10-week courses, held twice weekly, that make connections across artistic and academic disciplines. For example, this spring, 1st graders can choose a course that connects artistic string designs to math concepts, or develop role-playing skills in "Kids Court," where they learn how the court system works.

Third and 5th graders may choose to work with staff of the New York City Opera, who'll conduct workshops and performances for *Don Pasquale*. After students study the opera, they have a chance to work with the performers in various scenes and see the opera performed at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Students then prepare a

"convocation," which is a chance for them to teach a guest class from another school about the opera. They organize a daylong workshop and sing in a musical puppet show based on the opera. At the end of the convocation, the guest students demonstrate their own learning in a performance.

The MIADs give students exposure to a wide variety of the arts so that by the 7th or 8th grade each student's special talents and strongest areas can be developed more specifically. Older students end up working with resident artists in more focused studio settings, says Mimi Bair, the school reform facilitator who runs the MIADs program. "The MIADs give students a chance to refine their talents or develop their other multiple intelligences," Bair says.

Throughout the year, Wilson hosts up to eight visiting artists from local universities, community theater groups, and professional troupes who are charged with training teachers. Because the teachers get this professional development, Treanor explains, "when an artist leaves, the program stays." Wilson's teachers often have a background that includes either training or work in the arts. Treanor says the school also capitalizes on a teacher's talents or interest in a particular arts area that can benefit students.

Long-Term Optimism

A combination of innovation, flexibility, and a dogged determination to make the visual and performing arts a crucial part of the school curriculum can help school leaders give students substantial artistic experiences, says Fineberg.

When teachers maximize the strengths of the arts, they can "help kids make strong connections to other disciplines," says Bair. "When the child is engaged, you have them hooked to learning."

Although reading and math may grab the headlines, arts education advocates retain a long-term optimism as they push for arts integration, professional development, and community partnerships to advance their cause. "The arts are innate—we were drawing on cave walls tens of thousands of years ago," says Peeno. "The arts are going to be with us in the future."