

The role of the **ARTS** in learning

A comprehensive education should include the arts as a way to understand and appreciate the core curriculum and expand students' views of life and culture.

If you say to a room full of kindergartners, “Raise your hand if you are an artist,” almost everyone will raise a hand. But if you ask a room full of high school students to do the same thing, virtually none will respond. Most students, as they get older, do not know how to relate to the arts. They may not understand the value of the arts; do not see the arts as a critical element of a quality comprehensive education; and, of great concern to us as educators, don't view themselves as creative individuals.

As public school educators, are we doing all we can to develop students who value creative expression, design and thinking?

Marshall McLuhan called artists “the canary of the cultural mine” (1964). He worried that our society was focused on the negative, the “anti” and the technological, and that we were in danger of losing the romance and artistic nature of our culture.

A comprehensive education should, and

we would say must, include the arts in order to understand and appreciate the core curriculum subjects of English, mathematics, science and history. More importantly, the arts are necessary to expand our view of life and culture. We must constantly be unlocking for our students their artistic and creative vision. In many ways the arts can actually begin to “re-humanize” the world, as Makoto Fujimura (2007) says.

The U.S. creative class: Losing its edge

In his book “The Rise of the Creative Class (2002),” Richard Florida suggests that “human creativity is the greatest economic resource.” Florida maintains that the power behind the U.S. economy is its “creative class” – scientists, artists, engineers, technologists and designers, to name a few. The creative sector accounts for nearly half of American wage income, but according to the Harvard Business Review, the U.S. is in danger of losing its edge.

In California, a comprehensive education is defined as one that covers, at a minimum, not only reading, writing and mathematics, but also science, history/social studies, visual and performing arts, foreign language, health and physical education. In recognizing the breadth of a rich curriculum, our state has adopted nine curriculum frameworks covering the subjects noted above and the newly adopted Career Technical Education Framework.

If we don't pay attention to the arts, we are in danger of seeing the curriculum narrowed. This could mean that students' educations are not complete and their ability to participate fully in a rapidly changing democratic society will be impeded.

A 2002 survey of more than 60 research projects on the impact of arts education on student learning found numerous ways

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in which studying the arts nurtures other learning, from music's role in cognitive development and spatial reasoning to the ways that drama fosters reading comprehension. The Stanford Research Institute survey, titled "Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development," also reviewed other research indicating that education in the arts not only fosters other specific skills, but also improves students' self-confidence and motivation to learn, particularly among poor and other at-risk students.

What can education leaders do to bring back the arts into our schools? Here are four categories of recommended action.

1. Governing board

- Board policy statement: Work with the school board to signal the importance of the arts by adopting a board policy re-affirming that the arts are a required and necessary element of a comprehensive curriculum and a rich educational experience.

- Local course of study: Ensure that the visual and performing arts are part of the locally adopted course of study, and are addressed in the Single Plan for Student Achievement. (Assistance with planning can usually be gained from the local county superintendent's office.)

2. District support

- District infrastructure: Review the organization at the district office for supporting the arts. Are there dedicated resources and staff for the arts? Is there an established district committee to periodically review and evaluate the arts programs?

- Professional development: Include portions of the California Visual and Performing Arts Framework and Visual and Performing Arts Content Standards in professional development opportunities across the core curriculum areas to build a common understanding among teachers.

- Funding: Make strategic use of the categorical money currently allocated for arts education. Monies can be used for instructional supplies, and can be useful for leveraging resources for professional development, development of district arts teams, and planning.

- Instructional materials: Check to see if each school has purchased district- and state-adopted instructional materials for the arts.

- Community report: Issue a report to the parents and community on what is currently offered at each school, and what is desirable, in order to "seed" and motivate others to assist the schools in expanding arts education.

3. Teachers

- Support curriculum integration: Share examples of how the arts can be integrated with other subjects in order to enrich and expand teaching and learning. (Examples can be found at www.ccsesaarts.org and at <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org>.)

- Equity: Ensure that every student has access to a program for the visual and performing arts.

4. Parents

- Involve the PTA in planning for arts education: The PTA can assist with parental and community mobilization and support. Any data and/or reports generated on the status of arts education should be shared with parent groups. The best way to foster support for expanded arts education is to be honest with where you are now, and where you want to be.

One success story

Principal Scott Goergens recently talked about his success as at Lakeside Farms Elementary School in San Diego county: "I'm often asked by my colleagues the 'secret' to Lakeside Farms recent successes. Prior to my arrival, the highest API the school had ever achieved was a 775. We have wonderful students, teachers and community members supporting us, so our goal was to improve that number and move beyond the state's threshold of 800 and become a high achieving school.

"After seeing the staff in action, and later attending an 'arts in the school' workshop at the San Diego County Office of Education, I made the decision that rather than adding additional core curricular requirements for my teachers and students, we would add to our arts offerings. The past school year, for example, every student had an experience to

work with an additional artist [beyond his or her regular teacher].

"The results have been wonderful. Our students are happier and more engaged, our teachers and parents are pleased and proud of our offerings, and test scores have risen dramatically. Our API went from that all-time-high of 775 to 797 in year one, and 826 in year two. We are proud of our school and the effect the arts has had in our success." ■

References and resources

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