



Education Commission  
of the States

# The Progress of Education Reform 2004

## The Arts in Education

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## *An Arts-rich Education Helps Prepare Students for A Changing World*

A growing body of evidence points to the important role of arts education in improving student achievement, offering positive alternatives to troubled youth, developing America's creative industries and building a workforce capable of competing in an increasingly knowledge-based global economy.

While tight budgets have led to the reduction or elimination of K-12 music, art, drama, dance and creative writing programs in some states and school districts over the past several years, other states and districts have found ways to maintain and, in some cases, even increase funding.

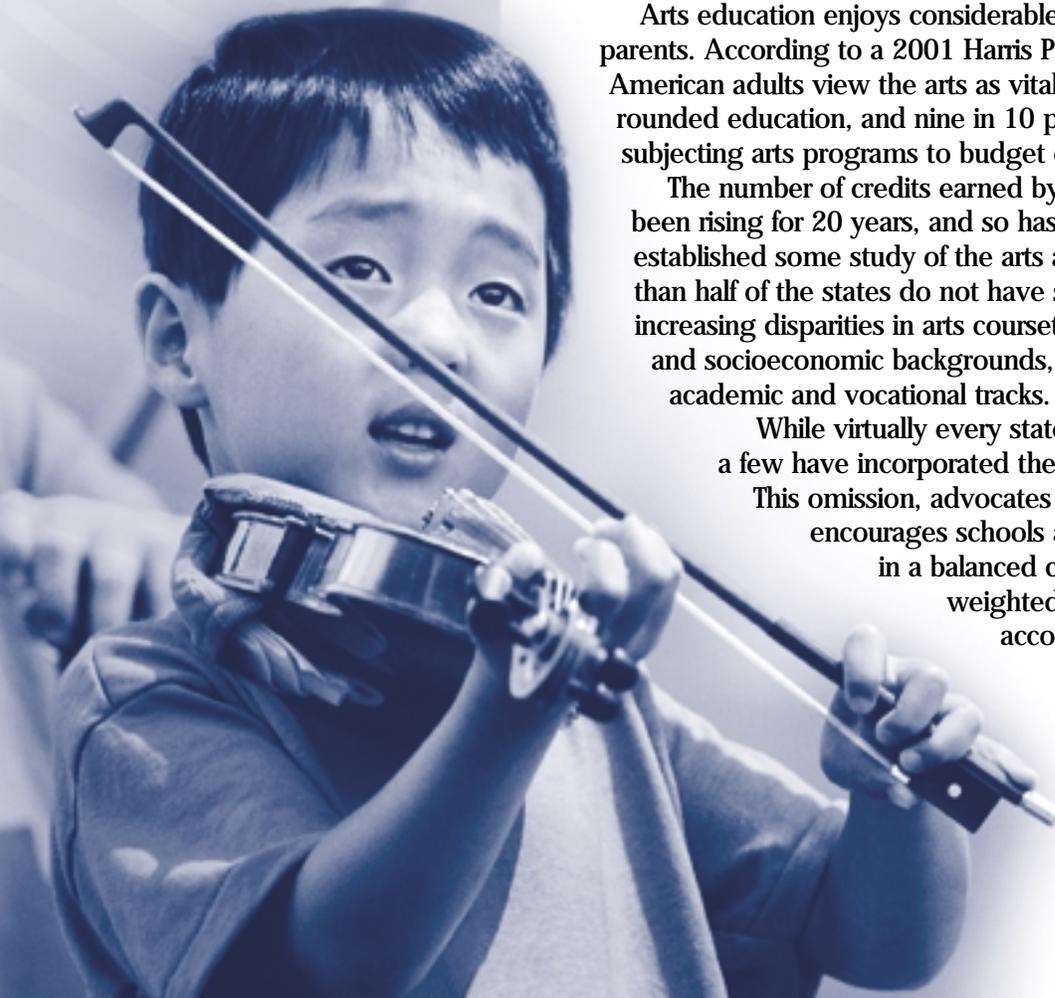
Arts education enjoys considerable public support, particularly among parents. According to a 2001 Harris Poll, an overwhelming majority of American adults view the arts as vital to providing children with a well-rounded education, and nine in 10 parents of school-age children oppose subjecting arts programs to budget cutbacks.

The number of credits earned by high school students in the arts has been rising for 20 years, and so has the number of states that have established some study of the arts as a graduation requirement. But more than half of the states do not have such a requirement. Moreover, there are increasing disparities in arts coursetaking among students of different races and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as between students in academic and vocational tracks.

While virtually every state has adopted standards in the arts, only a few have incorporated the arts into their accountability systems.

This omission, advocates of arts education fear, inadvertently encourages schools and districts to reduce their investment in a balanced curriculum in favor of one heavily weighted to those subjects measured in state accountability systems.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* provides a brief summary of several recent research studies on the role and value of education in the arts, as well as a look at the results of National Assessment of Educational Progress tests in music, visual arts and theater.



## Arts Education Initiative

Recognizing the contributions the arts make to student achievement and economic development will be the focus of Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee's tenure as 2004-06 ECS chairman. Look for an upcoming ECS Web Issue Site on arts education and other future products.

*"The research tells us what parents and education policymakers have known all along but haven't been able to prioritize on a national level. The arts are critical, not only as a link to student productivity but also as a key to a competitive workforce."*

– Mike Huckabee

### *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning* (Arts Education Partnership, 1999, <http://aep-arts.org/Champions.html>)

This compilation of seven major studies provides compelling evidence of the positive effects of students' involvement in the arts on their behavior, attitudes and academic performance.

Among the most critical findings is that learning in and through the arts can "level the playing field" for youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds. In a national sample of 25,000 students, those with high levels of arts-learning experiences earned higher grades and scored better on standardized tests than those with little or no involvement in the arts – regardless of socioeconomic status. Learning through the arts also appears to have significant effects on learning in other disciplines, with students consistently involved in music and theater showing higher levels of success in math and reading.

Although the researchers – from Harvard, Stanford, the University of California – Los Angeles and several other universities – conducted their investigations and presented their findings independently, a remarkable consensus emerges from their findings. The arts, they conclude:

- Reach students who are not otherwise being reached
- Reach students in ways they are not otherwise being reached
- Connect students to themselves and to one another
- Transform the environment for learning
- Provide learning experiences for the adults in the lives of young people
- Provide new challenges for those students already considered successful
- Connect learning experiences to the world of work.

### *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development* (Arts Education Partnership, 2002, <http://aep-arts.org/clinkspage.htm>)

*Critical Links* is a compendium of the latest research – 62 studies in all – exploring the relationship between the cognitive capacities developed by learning and practicing the arts (dance, drama, music and visual arts) and students' academic and social skills.

Among the major findings:

- **Reading and language development** – Certain forms of arts instruction enhance and complement basic reading instruction aimed at helping children "break the phonetic code" that unlocks written language by associating letters, words and phrases with sounds, sentences and meanings. Reading comprehension and speaking and writing skills also are improved.
- **Mathematics** – Certain music instruction develops spatial reasoning and spatial-temporal reasoning skills, which are fundamental to understanding and using mathematical ideas and concepts.
- **Fundamental thinking skills and capacities** – Learning in individual art forms, as well as in multiple arts experiences, engages and strengthens such fundamental cognitive capacities as spatial reasoning, conditional reasoning, problem solving and creative thinking.
- **Motivations to learn** – Learning in the arts nurtures motivation, including active engagement, disciplined and sustained attention, persistence and risk taking. It also increases attendance and educational aspirations.
- **Effective social behavior** – Learning in certain arts activities promotes student growth in self-confidence, self-control, self-identity, conflict resolution, collaboration, empathy and social tolerance.

The studies also suggest that for certain populations – including young children, students from economically disadvantaged circumstances and students needing remedial instruction – learning in the arts may be uniquely able to advance learning success in other areas.

***Creativity, Culture, Education and the Workforce***  
(Center for Arts and Culture, December 2001,  
<http://www.culturalpolicy.org/pdf/education.pdf>)

This paper by Northeastern University professor Ann M. Galligan explores the critical importance of arts and humanities education to maintaining America’s competitive edge in an international economy in which creativity, innovation and cultural acumen are decisive advantages.

An education rich in the arts and humanities, Galligan says, develops skills that are increasingly crucial to the productivity and competitiveness of the nation’s workforce: the ability to think creatively, communicate effectively and work collaboratively, and to deal with ambiguity and complexity. Just as important, exposure to the arts and humanities fosters cultural literacy: the ability to understand and appreciate other cultures, perspectives and traditions; to read and understand music and literature; to craft a letter or essay; to design a Web site; and to discern the “hidden persuaders” in a political or commercial advertisement.

According to Galligan, arts and humanities education also develops skills necessary to participate in one of the fastest-growing, economically significant set of occupations and industries in the American economy – the arts, cultural and intellectual property sector. The “creative workforce” – which includes traditional artist categories (dancers, musicians, painters, actors, photographers, authors), as well as individuals employed in advertising, architecture, fashion design, film, video, music, publishing and software development – is growing at a rate more than double that for the rest of the nation’s workforce.

Galligan concludes her paper with a set of recommendations for policymakers. They include the following:

- The nation needs a comprehensive workforce-development strategy – similar to those under development in England and several other countries – that has as one of its cornerstones a K-12 education rich in the arts and humanities.
- The federal government should provide leadership and funding for research aimed at clarifying the degree to which arts education helps students achieve higher grades, score better on standardized tests and have higher attendance rates.
- Federal, state and local education, arts and humanities agencies should work more closely together to identify, develop and promote model approaches to arts and humanities education.
- Universities and community colleges should more actively help schools to develop and teach the arts and humanities, and strengthen their entrance requirements in these areas.

## **The “Lost Curriculum”**

Arts and foreign language instruction has been marginalized and is at risk of being completely eliminated from public schools’ core curriculum, warns a recent report by the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE).

With most states emphasizing accountability in only a few academic subjects – primarily reading, math and science – schools are narrowly focusing on those subjects at the expense of other important components of a comprehensive education, such as the arts and humanities, according to the October 2003 report.

*The Complete Curriculum: Ensuring a Place for the Arts and Foreign Languages in America’s Schools* includes several recommendations for state policymakers to promote arts and foreign language instruction.

A six-page summary of the report is available at <http://aep-arts.org/PDF%20Files/Complete%20Curriculum%20Summary.pdf>.

For a copy of the full report, call NASBE at 800.220.5183.



## ***The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1997 Arts Report Card***

(National Center for Education Statistics, 1998,

<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main1997/1999486.pdf>)

Large-scale assessments of American students' knowledge and skills in the arts occur less frequently than testing in science, reading, mathematics and other subjects. NAEP's 1997 arts-learning assessment was the first since the mid-1970s, and another isn't scheduled until 2008.

Roughly 6,500 8th graders from 270 public and nonpublic schools across the nation participated in the 1997 assessment, which consisted of various exercises in music, theater and visual arts, and was built around three arts processes: responding, creating and performing. A large percentage of the students attended schools in which music and visual arts were taught, in most cases by full- or part-time specialists. Student access to theater and dance instruction was more limited.

Major findings include the following:

- **Music** – Most students could identify and describe appropriate uses for different types of music, and showed some skills in critiquing simple music performances. Students' singing abilities across various aspects of musical performance were mixed, however, and their abilities in creating music were limited. Only one in four, for example, was rated "adequate" in an exercise that called for them to create a rhythmic embellishment based on the first two phrases of "Ode to Joy."
- **Visual Arts** – Students' abilities to place artworks in historical or cultural contexts varied. For example, 55% could identify which of four paintings was a work of contemporary Western art, but only 25% could identify which of four works contributed to Cubism. Students showed some ability to create two-dimensional artworks – nearly half, for example, were able to create a collage – but most found three-dimensional tasks more challenging. Only 3% of students were able, for example, to create a freestanding sculpture out of plasticine and wire which skilfully combined shapes, details and textures into an imaginative interpretation of kitchen utensils.
- **Theater** – Students' abilities to combine dialogue, action and expression to communicate meaning to an audience varied across creating/performing tasks. Nearly 70% could do so in an improvisational exercise, but only 30% could do so in a cold reading of a script. As for the technical elements of theater, 65% of students could offer reasonably accurate plans for creating lighting effects for a scene in a Carson McCullers play. Roughly half were able to sketch a set for the scene that demonstrated some understanding of a theater space.

In all categories of the assessment, girls consistently outperformed boys, and white and Asian students had higher average scores than black or Hispanic students. The only areas of the assessment in which there was no scoring gap were the exercises that tested students' ability to create and perform music.

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