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Cross-curricular impacts of the arts: A primer for school board members



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Following years of retrenchment and questions about how they fit into the broader curriculum, interest in the arts and their cross-curricular applications has experienced a dramatic resurgence in the Golden State. Claims that the arts "make kids smarter" abound, and intuition dictates that there just might be something to that. After all, the arts provide opportunities for pupils to be creative and expressive. But is that enough to justify allocation of limited time and scarce resources when rankings on the Academic Performance Index and pass rates on the California High School Exit Examination loom large on the horizon?

School board members are faced with demands from constituencies with varied—and often disparate—needs, but they are ultimately accountable to all. Presented with the mandate to shape and hone local education policy and to lend informed perspective on curricular decisions, they are obligated to carefully scrutinize calls for more art education.

Perhaps Plato made the clearest call: "I would teach children music, physics and philosophy; but most importantly music, for in the patterns of music and all the arts are the keys of learning." And so it was through the centuries—that the arts were integrated into education in a very transparent way. Albert Einstein recognized the interconnectivity inherent in holistic study, declaring, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious, the source of all art and science." Though these straightforward

yet compelling statements are all but impossible to refute, the world has changed. Neither Plato nor Einstein had to contend with curricular adoptions, union contracts, suspensions and expulsions. Moreover, neither was compelled to justify the arts in terms of outcomes for English learners or postsecondary admissions rates, nor to furnish statistical proof of their impacts. So, in order to do justice to Plato and Einstein in today's chaotic and complex educational context, what is a school board member to do?

As is the case with other areas of the K-12 curriculum, research on the impacts of the arts as a stand-alone pursuit, and upon other subjects and work habits, is burgeoning. This research ranges from investigations into brain chemistry and social neurobiology to anecdotal findings from case studies of classroom-based arts integration. It is certainly impractical for even the most ardent of board members to delve deeply into the research.

For the purposes of policy development, there is some sense in distilling the most vital elements of the research into a primer of sorts, summarized in the next section. While by no means comprehensive, the primer provides board members with the "need to knows" when considering policy alternatives, and it is designed to serve as both inspiration and catalyst for further investigation.

What the research suggests

The body of work on arts education suggests that when properly integrated and reinforced throughout the K-12 curriculum, the arts have important reciprocal impacts on a variety of subject areas, including literacy and language arts; mathematics; civics and social studies; the humanities; and the sciences. This is not to say that the arts are a panacea or cure-all for a district's achievement shortfalls. It is to say, however, that by tapping into pupils' multiple ways of learning and of identifying and building upon connections between and within bodies of knowledge, the arts provide the tools to boost achievement and to enhance community within a school or district.

There is also evidence that arts integration builds what have been described by researchers as "sound habits of mind," in addition to work habits that are valuable across the curriculum and in the

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— Plato

postsecondary environment or workplace. These include the ability to think creatively and critically; to work individually or as part of a team; to see the big picture as well as its component parts; and to learn holistically. For English learners, the arts present academic language and vocabulary in context within a safe learning environment. Participation in the arts also provides an excellent vehicle for parent and community involvement, and the opportunity for pupils to publicly showcase their skills and talents. Impacts of the arts on attendance and learning persistence are also noteworthy.

The following sections present findings from a wide range of studies, beginning with what is known about arts integration generally, and disaggregated by artistic discipline.

Arts integration (general)—Research indicates that arts inclusion enhances cognitive engagement among pupils; provides a better sense of ownership of learning; improves attention, engagement, attendance and perseverance among pupils; provides unique avenues for parent and community involvement; and inspires positive transformation of school, community and culture.

Visual arts—Research shows that meaningful integration of the visual arts enhances reading skills and interpretation of text; improves content and organization of writing; develops mathematical and scientific reasoning abilities; improves attention to detail and detail in context, and improves the ability to find outliers—also useful in mathematics and science.

Music—Pupils who engage in music infused throughout the curriculum exhibited improved cognitive development; enhanced spatial and temporal reasoning; improved mathematics reasoning; increasingly positive self concept and confidence; improved literacy and performance on the verbal SAT; and enhanced English fluency for non-native speakers, when combined with an English as a Second Language curriculum.

Drama—Pupils participating in drama showed enhanced story comprehension; better understanding of characters and motivation; improved peer interaction and collaboration; enhanced writing proficiency and prolixity; better understanding of conflict, resolution, relationships and empathy; enhanced problem-solving abilities; and better understanding of complex relationships.

Dance—Research indicates that participating in dance impacts self-confidence; social tolerance

connections to history, civics and social studies, frequently through the use of storytelling dances; organization, creativity and non-verbal reasoning; development of individual and collaborative work skills; applications and concepts in mathematics; expression; and learning persistence.


What board members need to know

As is the case with language arts, mathematics and the sciences, it is important for policy-makers to understand that the arts are a discipline worthy of study in themselves and that the extent to which the arts impact other curricular areas is based on a premise of reciprocal benefit. In other words, adding an hour of painting or drama here and there, devoid of professional development and careful planning, will not do the trick.

Board members should also understand that:

- Opportunities for partnership are plentiful. The majority of museums, performing arts centers and university arts departments have dedicated, cost-effective outreach programs that include professional development for teachers and classroom presentations by teaching artists.
- Arts programming adopted by the district requires involved leadership at both the district and site levels. Professional development opportunities should involve administrators as well as teachers.
- Arts curricula should be explicitly aligned with standards and frameworks, both in the visual and performing arts and across subject-matter areas. The long-term arts plan benefits from specific community and parent involvement strategies, as well as multifaceted assessments.

Conclusion

Do the arts make kids smarter? Evidence suggests that they do—just as language arts, mathematics and the sciences do—when properly incorporated throughout the curriculum. As Einstein offered, “The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility.” California’s pupils deserve nothing less than the opportunity to delve deeply into life’s mysteries—and the suitable tools to do so. 



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