Ensuring Excellent Visual Arts Education for Every Student: From the Visual Arts Supervisor’s Point of View

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Rebalancing Educational Priorities Through Equitable Access to Quality Art Education

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Providing an excellent visual arts education for every student must be a priority if our country wants to remain a vibrant, innovative nation that provides endless opportunities. The notion that all people are created equal, and that they have the freedom to invent things and become whatever they want to be, has made this country great. It has brought people from all corners of the world to America to live the dream of a better life.

Meaningful educational experiences include collaboration and inclusion of the arts. Visual arts education is made up of more than crayons, markers, and paint; it weaves together materials, processes, traditions, cultures, and values that have endured throughout the ages. All students in this country deserve equitable access to the curriculum in their school day. Administrators must grow beyond the “big four” and acknowledge that learning is three-dimensional; educational curriculum offerings to students at all grade levels should be diverse and exciting.

Considerations for Excellence in Arts Programming

Ensuring excellent visual arts education for every student is complex and layered. It involves addressing a myriad of issues, from the impact of state and local policy to ensuring that...
teachers have the opportunity to engage in conversations surrounding teaching and learning. Issues of equity, access, understanding of student work quality, and well-planned sequenced instruction combine to secure excellent visual arts education (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994; Eisner, 2002; Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2007; Rushlow, 1999; Seidel, Tishman, Winner, Hetland, & Palmer, 2009).

The following elements, many of which are drawn from a series of Virginia Art Education Association policy statements (Laws & Tomhave, 2008a, 2008b, 2009), describe factors that influence the ability to implement quality K-12 visual arts programs in which powerful student learning occurs and visual literacy is fostered (Laws & Tomhave, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Rushlow, 1999). These considerations must be given critical attention as art program policies and practices are considered, developed, and implemented.

TEACHING

- The course of art instruction should be based on locally developed curriculum requirements, aligned with the National Visual Arts Standards (www.arteducators.org/store/NAEA_Natl_Visual_Standards1.pdf), and represent current research and effective practice in both content and pedagogy.

- Art instruction is sequential. It makes authentic interdisciplinary connections and preserves the integrity of the content, skills, and concepts of visual arts goals and objectives as well as those of other subject areas.

- Assessment is ongoing; formative; performance-based; and designed to assess students’ critical thinking and artmaking skills, creativity, and content knowledge.

- Curriculum development involves constant assessment of the quality of instruction across the district, raising expectations to improve the level of student learning and revising the curriculum to meet those expectations. Teachers are involved in the conversation at all levels—they pilot and give feedback, which is then folded into the next revision.

STAFFING

- Only highly qualified candidates, as defined by the local and/or state visual art licensure standards, are considered for art teaching positions. Art teacher selection and hiring are based on a candidate’s demonstration of knowledge and skills as an art educator in an interview process conducted by licensed art personnel, and as an artist through a portfolio review.

- Art teacher assignments are equal to, but do not exceed, the maximum number of hours required of all instructional staff members. Planning and preparation time, duty, lunch, and additional assignments are commensurate with other teaching professionals in the building.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Art teachers are given leave and equitable opportunities for professional and leadership development.

- Professional development takes many forms, including collegial planning, reading and study groups, assessment development, vertical teaming, collaboratively hanging art shows, peer coaching, mentoring, studio workshops, investigation of effective practice, and examining student work. Deep conversations about teaching and learning are part of the culture of the visual arts staff. Collaborations and discussions that seek to define quality teaching and learning are ongoing and occur district-wide.

- An additional critical component of professional development for art teachers is taking a district-wide view of vision, mission, data analysis, and special initiatives, as well as finding ways to translate those priorities into effective visual arts classroom practice.

SCHEDULING

- Equity of access to and time for visual arts instruction is consistent across the district.

- Instructional time allocations allow for student success in meeting local and/or state standards. At the high school level, students take and pass prerequisite courses prior to moving on to the next level. Elective selections are available to students every year of their middle and high school experience, so that a career pathway and course sequence may be followed as it relates to each student’s interest and expertise.

- Regularly scheduled class periods for art supports quality student learning by providing sufficient time for instruction, motivation, distribution of materials,
student brainstorming, creative and reflective think time, production, assessment, and clean-up.

- In the elementary school, at a basic level, art classes are scheduled to meet 50 minutes of uninterrupted instructional time weekly—100 minutes at a superior level. A minimum of 5 minutes should be scheduled between classes to allow for clean-up and preparation for succeeding classes.

- At the middle and high school levels, art classes are scheduled to meet as often, as long, and as regularly per week throughout the semester or year as do other academic subjects.

ENROLLMENT

- Class enrollment sizes are equivalent to those in all disciplines, allowing for a safe and effective working environment for students and teacher.

- Balanced enrollment supports art instruction that honors diversity and meets the needs of all students, including English language learners, special education students, and gifted and talented students.

- To support sequenced instruction, art class enrollment and attendance are consistently maintained. Students are not removed from art class for punishment or remediation in other subject areas.

- At the high school level, art class enrollment takes into consideration student preference, interest, and ability in art.

ENVIRONMENT, SUPPLIES, AND EQUIPMENT

- Art facilities are provided on the basis of one dedicated art room per 500 students enrolled in the school, and are equipped for specialized art media to include clay, paint, printmaking, sculpture, weaving, and technology. An adequate design, based on 55 square feet of classroom space per student, should allow for ease of traffic flow and a safe working environment that supports visual arts learning activities.

- Art facilities provide adequate, safe, and secure storage for equipment, supplies, instructional resources, and student work.

- The art room learning environment is designed to fulfill specialized safety, energy efficiency, lighting, location, acoustical, and maintenance needs.

- Materials and equipment purchased for the art program will be sufficient to achieve the state standards and local curriculum goals, and meet all required safety regulations.

- The budget is sufficient for the art program as established in the curriculum plan, and includes consumable materials, instructional materials, new or replacement equipment, and repair and maintenance of equipment. Resources are equitably distributed across the district. In areas such as computer graphics or digital photography, one computer station is available per student enrolled in the class.

Although other factors are important, at the heart of this complexity is the visual arts teacher, on whose expertise and passion the quality of the learning experience rests. Developing lasting relationships and a culture of inquiry and learning across the district is critical to sustained progress and the trek toward excellence. Advocacy begins in the classroom with strong visual arts instructional programs.

A Look at Related State-Level Policy Actions

Nearly every state and the District of Columbia have established content standards in the arts. Those standards outline the knowledge and skills each student should acquire in the arts in each grade or across grade spans (Education Commission of the States, 2005). For example, New Mexico passed the Fine Arts Education Act (FAEA) in 2003 to provide fine arts programs in the state’s public elementary schools. All 89 public school districts have instituted this program, along with about 20 charter schools that have elementary level students.

One of the most beneficial components of the FAEA is the oversight of a parent advisory council as a required part of the program application. Another critical element is professional development for staff at several levels (artists, arts teachers, classroom teachers, administrators). The state Public Education Department encourages districts and charter school representatives and arts program managers to share statewide program strengths annually, and to seek other staff development opportunities.

Funding allows districts to develop unique arts program plans through which students participate in visual arts, music, theater, and dance programs in Kindergarten to grade
5 or grade 6, in addition to connecting the arts across the curriculum using best practices. Districts are encouraged to make use of and incorporate the art resources available within their communities.

At the state level, the New Mexico Content Standards and Benchmarks for the Arts are mandated for students in grades K-8. The standards are required in the arts electives for participating students in grades 9-12, and the state has a graduation requirement relating to fine arts or practical arts.

The arts provide a set of tools for making critical choices, as well as for creating, communicating, and understanding the ideas of others. This makes the arts as essential to success in daily living as knowing how to read, write, and compute. The “Arts Introduction” of the New Mexico Arts Standards (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2009), defines a number of beliefs about how education in the arts affects the quality of learning in other discipline areas. It cites student skills and personal qualities of task analysis, problem solving, teamwork, critical thinking, resource management, self-discipline, and motivation as essential for success in the workplace, and asserts that these skills can be learned through the arts. Students active in arts education also have opportunities to use divergent modes of thinking for their multiple learning styles as a result of their intellectual capacity, emotional needs, and physical abilities. The work accomplished in New Mexico, through grassroots parental efforts coupled with the arts community in the state, has brought significant advancement in legislation and policy in this rural southwestern state.

Another example has been provided by Arkansas. Since 2005, arts education is mandatory for grades K-12. Legislative Act 245 mandates 40 minutes of instruction in music and visual art for grades 1-6 to be taught in all elementary schools across the state (Arts Education Partnership, 2007-08). Mandatory standards exist for music, dance, theater, and the visual arts, all of which must be taught by teachers licensed in their particular arts area. Licensure for general teachers requires 3 to 6 hours in music and art. Arts assessments are voluntary in grades K-12, and one-half credit in the arts is required for high school graduation.

This reform has made an impact on education for students, and provided equity for quality arts instruction. Data from 2010 reveals that scores improved on both the Arkansas Augmented Benchmark exams and Stanford Achievement Test, with more than 60% of Arkansas public school students at all grade levels scoring at grade level or higher on the benchmark exams. At some grades, more than 80% are scoring at grade level or higher on these standardized tests. The results show that the achievement gap between majority and minority students narrowed for the fourth year in a row (School Improvement Network, n. d.).

No one claims a correlation between the gains in test scores with the implementation of stronger arts programs for all in schools across the state. Nevertheless, time and time again, the evidence is clear: engaged students are successful students. When we create the kind of schools we want for children—whose education is of crucial importance in their future lives and for the vitality of their communities—then anything is possible. Many states are establishing legislation and practical applications to ensure that excellent visual arts education for every student is a key component to advancing and empowering them, in the 21st century, to be enlightened citizens.

REFERENCES


From the first call for visual art in the schools to teach mechanical drawing in the industrial age to the No Child Left Behind Reauthorization Act of 2001 (NCLB), the arts have been embedded in core educational goals. Historically, every subject included in the public school curriculum must demonstrate instrumental or “real world” value to the lives of students, the mission of the school, and society. Unfortunately, current instrumental values are most often centered on the short-term goal of student performance on standardized tests, rather than the long-term development of intelligent, productive, and enlightened citizens.

In the 2001 NCLB revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the arts were symbolically used to represent core ideals of education. In reality, the peripheral role of the arts in schools has remained unchanged and, in some cases, worsened. A report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (February, 2009) indicates that teachers at schools identified as needing improvement, as well as those with higher percentages of minority students, were more likely to report a reduction in time spent on the arts. In addition, the report examined the average amount of change in weekly arts instruction time among teachers who reported either an increase or a decrease. It found that teachers reporting decreases in arts education time at schools with a high percentage of low-income students reported an average decrease of 49 minutes per week, while teachers reporting increases in arts instruction were from schools in more moderate- or high-income areas (GAO, 2009).

In August of 2009, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan reminded legislative and educational decision-makers that
the arts have been designated as a core academic subject and a part of a complete education for all students in the NCLB (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002). He emphasized that the arts play a significant role in a well-rounded education, and that the arts can help students become tenacious, team-oriented problem solvers who are confident and able to think creatively. These qualities are especially important in improving learning among students from economically disadvantaged circumstances. Nevertheless, recent National Assessment of Educational Progress results found that only 57% of 8th graders attended schools where music instruction was offered at least three or four times a week, and only 47% attended schools where visual arts were offered that often (Duncan, 2009).

New Balance Needed
In its 2008 policy paper, Great Public Schools for Every Student by 2020: Achieving a New Balance in the Federal Role to Transform America’s Public Schools (NEA, 2008), the National Education Association (NEA) proposes a “new balance” in the partnership among federal, state, and local leaders to ensure every student’s success. This federal/state/local partnership recognizes that schools, districts, and states are agents for change in public schools.

NEA has initiated a long-term commitment to support the transformation of schools and calls upon federal policy makers, as well as leaders at every level of government, to work toward this goal. Art educators must call on federal, state, and local educational partners to recognize that the arts offer an untapped reservoir of educational resources that should not be pushed to the periphery of PK-12 education in terms of either accessibility or funding (NEA, 2008). The six core values found in the NEA Great Schools document are used in this paper to organize and discuss relevant topics in art education.

Equal Opportunity
All students have the right to access experiences in the visual arts that help them discover their full potential, develop strong identity and character, and develop creative and critical thinking abilities necessary for success in the 21st century. The arts are not a frill to a child’s education; they are at the center of how young children learn to understand their world. Learning to read and reading comprehension are based on the child’s ability to create a mental image of text. The ability to create concrete forms representing abstract ideas is critical for every child’s conceptual apprehension and understanding. Children communicate messages about their internal and external experiences through the creation of works of art. Non-native speaking students often find the visual arts classroom to be a vehicle for communication and a sense of belonging. Denying students access to a quality art education in public school education withholds opportunities for developing minds, thus perpetuating social and economic divisions. In many schools, inadequate time for art instruction in the schedule and insufficient budgets unfortunately often communicate what is truly valued (and not valued) by local educational decision-makers.

A Just Society
Through visual art education, students are guided to recognize the worth, dignity, and equality of every individual in our diverse society. When students look at artwork of the past or from other cultures, they develop tolerance, empathy, and care as they come to understand the context of the time in which it was made and the human experience of those who created the work. In comparing the artwork of Matisse with an African Kente cloth, students begin to not only appreciate cultural differences and purposes, but also artistic and human similarities. As students interpret an artwork of others or compare and contrast the work of other artists with their own, they develop a sense of their place in history and the legacy of artistic traditions from cultures around the world.

Democracy
Involvement in the arts can prepare students to be involved, informed, and engaged in our representative democracy. Viewing Guernica by Picasso helps students not only understand the horror of war, but also the historical tradition of artists who denounce injustice and challenge the status quo. When students discuss artwork from multiple points of view, they learn to exchange ideas respectfully. Hetland, Winner, Veenema, and Sheridan (2007) suggest that the arts can build habits of mind that are practical and useful beyond students’ art classrooms. Through these habits of mind, art students at all levels learn to engage and persist in learning to embrace problems involved in the artmaking process. When students learn to envision, they can physically and mentally imagine each step of a process. In studio processes, students often observe the environment closely and gather information. As students critique and talk with their peers
about their artwork, they reflect and evaluate their own work and the artwork of others based on criteria or standards. When students create, they often reach beyond their initial capabilities. They learn to embrace opportunities to learn from trial and error.

These thinking skills are not necessarily taught as transferrable skills; nevertheless, they routinely occur within successful art experiences and often become internalized as habits of mind that are used throughout their lifetimes. As students develop their own thoughts and voices in a constructive and responsible manner, they engage in the world around them, seek problems to solve, and learn how to respectfully work with others. These experiences forge the confidence necessary to succeed not only in their academic endeavors, but potentially in the workplace and a functional, civil, and democratic society.

**Professionalism**

Art educators with high professional expertise and standards should be employed to teach in pK-12 schools. Art teachers must have strong content knowledge and artistic skills, as well as expertise in contemporary teaching strategies and pedagogy. Federal “Race to the Top” grants have been awarded recently in many states. In these states, evaluations for classroom teachers are under development with increased emphasis on students’ standardized test performance. Alternatively, 60% of art teacher evaluations will be based on classroom observations and 40% on input from student and parent surveys. This differentiation in evaluation measures may serve to marginalize art education in public schools (Sarrio, 2011). For the general public to conduct a valid art teacher evaluation, a significant understanding of the content and purposes of art education should be required. As parent and student surveys assess the effectiveness of the art educator, the potential exists that those surveys may also impact the content and rigor of the art curriculum and drive art programs. For students to attain their full potential, art programs must be funded and treated professionally as a significant part of a school curriculum. In whatever teaching evaluation systems are developed, art educators should be held accountable for documenting student learning in their programs, and treated with the status, compensation, and respect due all professionals.

**Partnership**

Although the federal government has responsibility for education in this age of site-based management, the primary governance is at the state level, with interpretation of policies and standards often carried out at the district and building level. Unlike their educational counterparts in other parts of the world, who have a national curriculum and often use standardized teaching materials, school districts in the United States have a great deal of autonomy in developing their own curricula and instruction. Consequently, students are taught a wide variety of curricula using differing teaching methodologies, and the role of the arts in education is largely determined by local school or district decision-makers. If educational decision-makers in the community are uninformed about the value of art education, then visual art teachers must educate community leaders and parents about the goals and benefits of their programs. Art educators need to partner with parents, businesses, and civic leaders to expand and enrich student learning, bring professional guest artists to their classrooms, and work with museums, galleries, and other organizations to construct bridges between the school and community.

When art educators develop exhibition and interactive spaces for student artwork in local businesses, they demonstrate in public arenas expressive and technical communication skills developed by their students through the visual arts.

**Collective Action**

Art educators work and advocate for improving the status of education generally, and the arts within and beyond their classrooms. They often integrate content and serve as the glue connecting knowledge across domains and grade levels. The arts can be structured to assist students in understanding larger relevant themes and concepts. As Paola Antonelli, curator of the Museum of Modern Art, suggests, “Good design is a renaissance attitude that combines technology, cognitive science, human need, and beauty to produce something that the world didn’t know it was missing” (Antonelli cited in Pink, 2005, p. 74). An integrated art curriculum may facilitate a synthesis of ideas across domains, and be especially fruitful in the borderlands between disciplines (Parsons, 2004).

Individual artists and art educators often partner to involve students in addressing school, environmental, or community problems. When students are engaged in real-world activities,
they understand the need to work with others to initiate change for the greater good of the group, the class, or the global community. Works of art by community-based artists, such as John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres (who created relief murals on the streets of the Bronx), demonstrate the collaborative nature of artwork that can revitalize public identity and pride in communities.

**Conclusion**

The population of minority students in the US is growing. These minority students need the support to develop competencies to become successful citizens in our democracy. They must master core disciplines; develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills; acquire interpersonal, imaginative, creative thinking skills; and strengthen communication skills, including those that involve the arts and technology (NEA, 2009). These competencies require that equitable access and support for the arts are provided for all students. When expenditures for pK-12 students vary from average expenditures per student of $5,551 in Utah to $14,675 in New Jersey, many obvious disparities are prevalent (NEA, 2009). These inequities, coupled with varying local priorities, impact the availability, quality, and sustainability of arts programs across the nation. Arts education must be included in every discussion and have educational access and parity of educational opportunities for all students. When rebalancing educational practice, the instrumental value and potential of the arts must be understood as substantial and significant for all students to become intelligent, productive citizens in our 21st-century global society.

**REFERENCES**


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