



EDUCATION TRENDS



Beyond the Core: Advancing student success through the arts

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Thirty years ago, in response to a K-12 public education system defined by mediocrity¹, with low student test scores and widening gaps in achievement, the accountability movement was born. Federal and state education policies focused on raising standards and regularly assessing students. However, over the years, many policymakers and the public observed a connection between the accountability movement and an overemphasis on testing in core subjects, such as English and math, a narrowing of curricula and the elimination of many important subjects, including the arts.

Arts education fosters critical deeper learning skills, such as collaboration and perseverance, in students.

Yet, research consistently shows that arts education and the integration of the arts into core subjects can have dramatic effects on student success — defined not just by student test scores, but also critical skills, such as creativity, teamwork and perseverance. Research indicates that these skills can be as effective predictors of long-term success in college, careers and citizenship as test scores.^{2,3}

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which passed in late 2015, is the first major federal law in more than 30 years offering states a significant degree of flexibility to broaden — rather than narrow — curricula, and strongly encourages states to ensure all students have access to a well-rounded education, which includes the arts and music.⁴ Armed with the evidence presented in this report highlighting the impressive effects education in and through the arts can have on student

Research indicates that deeper learning skills contribute significantly to a student's college, career and citizenship readiness.

ESSA creates flexibility allowing states and schools to more fully explore and leverage the arts in K-12 teaching and learning.

success, state policymakers have an opportunity and incentive to take advantage of the flexibility awarded under ESSA related to the arts.

“Despite [deeper learning] skills’ central roles in our education and, more broadly, our lives, education policy has tended to overlook their importance.”⁵

Bolstering Deeper Learning Through Arts in Education

Deeper Learning

The arts — including dance, music, theatre, media arts and visual arts — bolster the development of what are commonly referred to as deeper learning skills. Deeper learning is an umbrella term defining the skills and knowledge students need to attain success in college, career and citizenship. Students that possess deeper learning skills⁶:

1. Master core academic content.
2. Think critically and solve complex problems.
3. Work collaboratively.
4. Communicate effectively.
5. Learn how to learn.
6. Develop academic mindsets.

Unique instructional strategies play a necessary role in facilitating deeper learning skills, such as project-based

learning, individual learning plans, and performance-based assessments and portfolios.⁷ Arts education frequently utilizes strategies such as these, thereby further supporting the development of deeper learning skills.

Some critics argued that many policy agendas wrongly focused on a “cognitive hypothesis” that favors a small set of cognitive skills, thereby neglecting the potential impact of deeper learning skills.^{8,9} Yet, deeper learning skills play an essential role in student success, with countless research studies showing that skills, such as self-discipline and collaboration, significantly affect K-12 student achievement. In a longitudinal study of 140 eighth-grade students, self-discipline predicted final grades, school attendance, standardized test scores and selection into a competitive high school program the following spring.¹⁰ Similarly, in a meta-analysis of more than 200 in-school interventions to enhance social and emotional skills, researchers found an estimated gain in academic performance equivalent to 11 percentage points for all assessed students in grades K-12.¹¹

In many instances, the critical time when students should utilize well-established deeper learning skills is during the transition from high school to college or to the workforce. Research suggests that one of the major reasons students struggle in college is that they are ill-prepared to participate in classes requiring them to work with others on complex problem solving, draw inferences and be independent, self-reliant learners who recognize when they are struggling and know how to seek help.¹² Fewer than two-thirds of students who entered four-year colleges in 2009 seeking a bachelor’s degree received their degree six years later.¹³ Similarly, when the National Association of Colleges and Employers asked employers what skills they prioritize when recruiting, they unequivocally listed ability to work well on teams, decisive problem solving and effective communication — each an example of a deeper learning skill.¹⁴

Arts and Student Success

Arts-based instruction is unique in that it has been shown to not only directly affect students’ academic success, but also indirectly does so by improving deeper learning skills. The effects can be particularly significant for at-risk populations, including low-income and English language learners (ELLs).^{15,16}

Arts in education is most effective when integrated into other academic subjects in a process known as integrated

arts learning. Integrated arts learning is defined as “an approach to teaching and learning in which students engage in a creative process that connects an art form with another subject to promote deeper learning in both.”¹⁷ The intended outcome is not only for the student to become proficient in the art, but also to support the student’s understanding of a core subject. For example, drama can provide an ELL student with a unique opportunity to learn vocabulary or experiment with the different communication styles of the English language.¹⁸

Arts in education benefits both students and society, because students of the arts disciplines gain powerful tools for:

- Understanding human experiences, both past and present.
- Teamwork and collaboration.
- Creatively making decisions and solving problems when no prescribed answers exist.
- Adapting to and respecting others’ diverse ways of thinking, working and expressing themselves.
- Understanding the influence of the arts and their power to create and reflect cultures.
- Analyzing nonverbal communication and making informed judgments.
- Communicating effectively.¹⁹

Select Research Into the Effects of the Arts on Deeper Learning Skills and Student Achievement

STUDY	ARTS IN EDUCATION STRATEGY	DEEPER LEARNING SKILLS AFFECTED	EFFECTS ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT
Learning to think critically: A visual art experiment ²⁰	A museum field trip led by trained arts educators.	Critical thinking	Younger students and those from more disadvantaged backgrounds used significantly more critical thinking strategies compared to those who had not visited the art museum.
Thinking Through Art: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum School Partnership Program year three research results ²¹	A multi-visit museum education program for elementary school students.	Critical thinking	Treatment students displayed greater instances of observation, interpretation, association, comparison, flexible thinking and evidence at school and at the museum.
Creative Advantage schools: 2015 Progress Report ²²	A city-wide effort to create a K-12 continuum of arts education for every student.	All deeper learning skills	Thirty-four percent increase in students demonstrating 21st century skills – especially creativity, critical thinking, communication and perseverance. ²³

STUDY	ARTS IN EDUCATION STRATEGY	DEEPER LEARNING SKILLS AFFECTED	EFFECTS ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT
The art of empathy: A mixed methods case study of a critical place-based art education program ²⁴	Place-based art education program. The curriculum for the program focused on ecological imagination, defined as using art to understand the role of the self within, and the impact of humans on the environment.	Work collaboratively and communicate effectively	Students showed growth in ecological awareness.
Increasing the school engagement and oral language skills of ELLs through arts integration in the primary grades ²⁵	Arts integration program led by teaching artists and classroom teachers that provides lessons in visual arts, theatre and dance to students in high-poverty schools.	Learn how to learn; communicate effectively and adopt an academic mindset	Among K-2 students, speaking and listening skills for ELL students, as measured by California English Language Development Test (CELDT) scores, improved significantly. Plus, attendance rates were significantly higher on days with scheduled art lessons than on days without.
How the arts help children to create healthy social scripts: Exploring the perceptions of elementary teachers ²⁶	Drama and music integrated lessons with first-fourth-grade students.	Communication	In particular, drama education resulted in positive social-emotional outcomes for students. Dance education successfully taught students about respect and personal boundaries.
Attention and Perseverance Behaviors of Preschool Children Enrolled in Suzuki Violin Lessons and Other Activities ²⁷	Individual and group Suzuki violin lesson.	Learn how to learn	Students studying violin scored high on all attention task variables and spent significantly more time on perseverance tasks.

“The interdependence between cognitive and [deeper learning] skills indicate that we may fail to boost cognitive skills unless we pay closer attention to [deeper learning] skills. In other words, focusing on [deeper learning] skills may further improve reading, writing and mathematics performance.”²⁸

Expanding Arts in Education Programs

As state education leaders begin to refocus their efforts on providing K-12 students with a well-rounded education that includes the arts, existing initiatives can serve as promising examples. Innovative leaders across the country are exploring arts-based programs for students to keep them engaged and to foster deeper learning skills. The following programs successfully increased access to the arts in education in public schools. Schools, districts and communities initiated the programs and it is districts, foundations and community organizations that often provide funding through a cooperative effort.

District-Led Initiatives

Boston Public Schools Arts Expansion Initiative

In 2008, the Boston Public Schools Arts Expansion Initiative launched with the goal of ensuring all pre-K-8 students receive once weekly, yearlong arts instruction and providing access to targeted arts programs for high school students. As of 2016, a total of 17,000 additional pre-k-12 students experienced arts during the school day with 94 percent of pre-k-8 students receiving weekly instruction.²⁹ A true public-private partnership, program funding is provided by foundation supports, a significant investment by the local school district and local community groups, including the mayor's office.³⁰ Unique to most other programs, is the district's substantial \$11 million investment.³¹

Seattle Public Schools Creative Advantage

In 2013, Seattle Public Schools launched the Creative Advantage initiative to increase access to high-quality arts education for all students in response to finding that 40 percent of public school K-3 students in the district received no arts instruction and that a student's race and ethnicity, and/or ELL and Free and Reduced Lunch status was predictive of arts access. The program began serving schools with the greatest need and expands its services across the district each year. From 2013-15, the largest investment came directly from the district — \$1.4 million towards certified arts teachers, professional

development, materials and arts assessments.³² This past school year, teachers began administering the 21st Century Arts Common Assessments that intentionally teach and assess 21st century skills. The program has already boasted positive results by increasing the number of students demonstrating 21st century skills and access to trained art teachers.³³

School-Wide Initiatives

A+ Schools Program

Established in 1995, the A+ Schools Program began in **North Carolina**. To date, North Carolina boasts 46 schools as part of the A+ Schools Program, a whole-school reform model that views the arts as fundamental to teaching and learning in all subjects.³⁴ Program approaches include: 1) Arts integration — bringing together arts and non-arts objectives to create hands-on, experiential, connected and meaningful learning experiences, 2) Arts education — developing an understanding and comfort in the elements, principles, history, processes and works of each art form, and 3) Arts exposure — creating opportunities for students and staff to experience artistic works, performances and careers both in the school and in the community.³⁵ An evaluation of Oklahoma's program, another state utilizing the A+ Schools Program, found that the program increases student achievement and boosts attendance and decreases discipline problems.^{36,37} A+ Schools Program also works with pilot sites across the country to continue to expand.

Community-Led Initiatives

School of Arts and Culture at the Mexican Heritage Plaza

The School of Arts and Culture at the Mexican Heritage Plaza in San Jose, **California** brings the benefits of arts into a disadvantaged community. The Plaza offers arts-based programs, such as dance, painting, music and leadership trainings, ensuring children can access unique and culturally-relevant learning opportunities. The Plaza's goal is to "narrow the opportunity gap in arts education and learning, nurture the joy, creativity and well-being of our children

and unleash the talent of our next generation of students, leaders, artists and consumers of culture.”³⁸ Schools and the local community have open access to the facilities.

Policy Considerations

ESSA creates new momentum behind subjects like the arts by encouraging states to ensure all students have access to a well-rounded education. This represents an acknowledgment that students require skills that reach far beyond what they can achieve in an English or math class.

Education Commission of the States’ report, [ESSA: Mapping opportunities for the arts](#), provides seven unique ways states and districts can engage arts in the ongoing work of ESSA. The Arts Education Partnership also presents critical strategies states and districts can consider to meet its [2020 Action Agenda for Advancing the Arts in Education](#). This report provides evidence that arts education is a worthwhile investment that can support meaningful and long-term student success.

Small policy changes and local investments in arts education can lead to meaningful effects for students. To begin with, state and local education leaders can use the following policy considerations to better identify areas for expansion based on what works in their unique policy landscape. Examples include offering arts integration strategies in existing teacher and school leader professional development, creating a pilot program to expand access to the arts in high-need districts before expanding statewide, or requiring schools to report arts-related data on accountability report cards prior to including it as an indicator for school ratings.

Select Considerations for Policymakers

State-Level:

- Create a task force consisting of department of education staff and local arts education stakeholders to create an arts education plan for public school.

- Include arts in high school graduation requirements.
- Include in ESSA state plans.³⁹
 - ➔ Address access and participation rates in arts education as part of state accountability and/or reporting systems.
 - ➔ Address the arts as part of a well-rounded education.
 - ➔ Include arts education within after-school 21st century community learning center programs.
- Revisit the state accountability system.
 - ➔ Include arts assessments in the state accountability system.
 - ➔ Consider competency-based models for learning and assessment.
- Provide targeted professional development for educators.
- Incorporate the arts as an essential component of all educator workforce development programs.⁴⁰
- Incorporate learning in the arts as part of a comprehensive definition of college, career and citizenship readiness.

Local Level:

- Engage and build relationships with key arts and education stakeholders invested in education improvement.⁴¹
 - ➔ Seek out foundation and community organization funding opportunities and engage them in public/private partnerships.
 - ➔ Provide targeted professional development for educators including arts integration strategies.
 - ➔ Encourage leaders to: (1) establish a school-wide commitment to arts learning; (2) create an arts-rich learning environment; and/or (3) revisit the use of time/resources.⁴²

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