A young girl with dark hair in a ponytail, wearing a white smock, is looking intently at a drawing on a green board. The drawing depicts a person's face with large, colorful eyes. Other children in white smocks are visible in the background, also engaged in art activities. The setting is an art classroom with shelves and a green board.

Arts Education

and the
Whole Child

High-quality arts programs can contribute to the intellectual, physical, and emotional well-being of children.

Hal Nelson

Why are the arts so important? For years, professional journals have published articles that communicate the importance of high-quality arts education programs, and most of us are fairly familiar with their essential elements and characteristics.



High-quality programs:

- Make learning more interactive;
- Foster interdisciplinary learning;
- Build self-esteem; and
- Facilitate student success despite differences in languages or learning styles (Buchbinder, 1999).

In addition, quality arts programs emphasize the unique nature and content of the arts, demonstrate how learning happens in and through the arts, and craft arts education experiences to meet the unique needs of learners (Myers, 2001). These core qualities of the arts are of particular importance in the education of K-8 students because they support the intellectual growth and social development essential to the education of young children and pre-adolescents.

As educators, most of us recognize that even though students may struggle in other academic areas, they are often able to succeed in the arts. This is not because the arts are easy, but because academic success in the arts is strongly predicated on attention to the individual, which is uniquely fostered in creative environments.

I believe it is important to provide multiple pathways to success in our schools, and to recognize that all learners peak in core academic areas at different times. However, students are too often denied access to school experiences in which they are motivated and successful because they are struggling in other areas. Our profession needs to address this. Although the school experiences of young adolescents must be challenging, they also must be marked with opportunities to experience success and enhanced self-esteem.

I value the perspectives I developed as principal of an elementary visual and performing arts school, and as a music teacher. In these roles, the immediacy of contact with students made it clear that many do not value or enjoy much of what's being taught in our classrooms, lack motivation to succeed academically, and feel that we don't care. They also lack the foundation of school-related success upon which proficiency

on high-stakes standards is built. All of this is compounded by the fact that our nation's schools are struggling to meet the needs of increasing cultural diversity and families feeling the impact of downward economic trends.

I strongly believe in the power of diversity and the importance of accountability. The challenge is how to capitalize on both in a demanding era. Principals can meet this challenge by making the development of the whole child their top priority, and that the arts can tend to the intellectual, physical, and emotional needs of learners.

Meeting Intellectual Needs

Although the arts are now recognized as having both cognitive and affective components (Sceffler, 1986), they often are taught with consideration only of their affective qualities. Art, dance, drama, and music have rigorous content that challenge the brightest of young students, and develop ways of analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating that rival other subject areas. Too often, school leaders fail to recognize the unique capacity of the arts to develop higher-level thinking in those areas. During lean budget years, arts education programs are often identified as dispensable, which is a mistake.

I recently surveyed several elementary and middle school arts teachers who were voted teacher of the year at their schools. I wanted to know why teachers of other subjects would choose an arts teacher as their school's exemplar. One teacher's classroom, reflecting the complexity of what the arts has to offer, had displays focused on art history and appreciation, integration of arts education into the elementary core curriculum, and large, project-based art works. Another teacher thought that it is important to explain to colleagues the difference between musical activity and music education, noting that both are valuable.

A third teacher felt that arts education programs naturally support reading proficiency, but that arts teachers don't always make the connections clear to colleagues. Her comment is of pro-

found significance since choral experiences are commonplace in K-8 schools, involving cueing systems, recitation, expression, and fluency. In addition, rhythmic singing at a prescribed tempo requires fluency, and building expressive characteristics around text requires comprehension. These parallel what is called for in quality literacy instruction. Drama is also widely accepted as a medium for expressing literacy and strengthening students' speaking and listening skills, which enhance reading comprehension and writing proficiency (Ackroyd, 2000; Baldwin, 1998).

Meeting Physical Needs

Very few school experiences develop physical strength, coordination, and endurance as well as dance does. Not only have we seen schools establish dance programs as viable components of physical education programs, we also have seen serious athletes access dance programs with an understanding that they provide physical development in ways that traditional athletic training does not. Dance also builds muscle memory and other forms of cognition upon which new knowledge and abilities can be built.

As school principals know, the physical needs of elementary and middle grades students are unique and significant. In many cases, dance serves as the perfect solution that balances the need to provide 15 to 30 minutes of routine physical activity and a means of providing this activity in a form and setting that recognizes that strenuous activity is not beneficial to all developing children. Dance lowers the chances of injuries due to collisions with objects and peers, which are frequent in most organized physical activities. It also provides a creative alternative to excessive physical activity that decreases the likelihood that bone and developing reproductive system injuries will take place.

Meeting Emotional Needs

Although there are many reasons why I am a strong advocate of the arts in educating the whole child, the benefits with regard to emotional

well-being are most important to me. Emotional well-being comes from feeling empowered, and students feel empowered when they know that they have access to things that matter most to them. They also feel empowered when their talents are accommodated, and when they feel recognized as being just as capable as their peers. According to Smutny (2003), “the visual arts are not the domain of the privileged or talented, but belong to everyone.” They empower a broad diversity of young students with limitless opportunities to meet with success, and therefore must be regarded as basic to the curriculum.

When asked, students consistently report to me that they feel empowered when schools not only provide opportunities, but also require responsibility for producing results. When admirable results happen, the emotional needs of these students are met. If there is an area in our nation’s array of educational opportunities that is not plagued by achievement gaps or marked with elitism, it is the arts. The arts provide our best evidence of educational equity.

What Can Principals Do?

While it is not unusual for teachers to champion the arts in the education of the whole child, principals are recognized as the most important drivers in achieving this. As instructional leaders, principals can make the arts core by recognizing their tremendous potential as centerpieces in educating the whole child. Although many principals are challenged by tight budgets, the majority can find ways to support the unique potential of the arts to connect large numbers of students with positive perceptions of school and academic success. Here is what principals can do to advance arts education in their schools:


Hire high-quality arts teachers and provide necessary resources. Teacher training programs traditionally have had broad requirements that support educating the whole child, and education professors can be valuable resources for referring prospective teachers capable of

integrating the arts with other content. Once such teachers are in place, principals are obligated to provide the print and technology resources needed to support them.

Provide integrated arts professional development for all teachers. Just as arts teachers must have a basic understanding of curriculum and instruction in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies, all teachers must have a basic working knowledge of the arts curriculum and instruction. Principals must establish the expectation that professional development will be ongoing, interdisciplinary, and collaborative among the entire faculty. The nature and needs of children and preadolescents are uniquely accommodated when a whole faculty embraces a whole-child philosophy.

Ensure a complete arts program, involving visual art, dance, drama, and music. Each of these areas is distinct and has its own ways of building the intellectual, emotional, and physical capacities of children. Failure to provide a complete complement of programs limits the potential of the arts to tap into unique strengths of learners.

Oversee scheduling to ensure equity in access. One of the greatest challenges of the accountability movement is striking a balance between dedicating resources to accelerate growth in areas where students struggle, and building on the existing strengths of learners. Flexible scheduling can make the difference in this regard, ensuring that students do not come to school each day only to experience things they are not good at or do not enjoy.

Publicize your arts program. Just as collaborations among teachers sustain a whole-child philosophy, networking among like-minded leaders, programs, and agencies can be beneficial. Publicizing success stories on how your arts program contributes to the development of the whole child garners greater interest in arts education and enhances the prospect that our nation’s children will grow to be intellectually, emotionally, and physically healthy. 

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WEB RESOURCES

The Kennedy Center for Arts Education is among the premier organizations that promote arts education in distinct programs as well as programs blended with other subject areas. The alliance provides a wealth of Web-based resources that support performance, advocacy, innovation, policy development, and professional development.

www.kennedy-center.org/education/kcaeaen

The Arts Education Partnership emphasizes arts integration, policy development, research, program evaluation, and advocacy. Its mission is to demonstrate and promote the essential role that the arts play in enabling all students to succeed in school, life, and a rapidly changing global economy.

www.aep-arts.org

