

Art

Higher achievement, engagement, creativity, and self-confidence are all linked to student involvement in the arts.

by Vanessa St. Gerard

At the end of each school day, there are students all over the country who inevitably will place in their backpacks a drawing, painting, or other art project to take home and proudly show to their families. Whether their work illustrates the story a teacher read to them during class or depicts their interpretation of a moment in history, the time students spend completing these projects shouldn't be viewed as "down time" between lesson plans or the opportunity to simply get their "creative juices" flowing. Instead, as evidenced by countless studies, time spent engaging in the arts has lasting effects on children of all ages, not only instilling in them a sense of creativity and innovation, but also providing them the skills needed to compete in a global economy.

In May 2011, the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities released *Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America's Future Through Creative Schools*, a landmark report resulting from an in-depth review of the current condition of arts education and examination of the recent research conducted about its documented benefits. The President's Committee found that the outcomes derived from high-quality arts education fall into four categories:

- Student achievement;
- Motivation and engagement;
- Creative thinking; and
- Social competencies.





Student Achievement

The No Child Left Behind Act identifies art as a core academic subject alongside math and reading. Unfortunately, arts education is too often one of the first subjects to be reduced or eliminated when budgets are cut or when a school's curriculum changes to focus on standardized assessments. However, as Sandra Ruppert reveals in *Critical Evidence: How the Arts Benefit Student Achievement*, "research has shown that what students learn in the arts may help them to master other subjects such as reading or social studies."

Teachers who see the value in the arts look for ways to incorporate them into their lesson plans—a strategy that has proved beneficial to students. According to *Critical Evidence*, a report published by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, "study of the arts in its many forms—whether as a stand-alone subject or integrated into the school curriculum—is increasingly accepted as an essential part of achieving success in school, work, and life."

James S. Catterall, a professor at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, has published leading studies on the impact of the arts on children. In his 2009 study that examined 12 years of longitudinal data, Catterall found that arts-engaged, low-income students are more likely than their non-arts-engaged peers to have attended and done well in college, obtained meaningful employment,

volunteered in their communities, and voted. In addition, a 2002 study by Catterall found that middle and high school students with high arts involvement performed better on standardized achievement tests than students with low arts involvement.

Research of the younger grades also finds value in arts integration. *Critical Evidence* reports that the study of music has provided a context for teaching language skills; and the relationship between drama and the development of literacy skills among young children is well documented. In addition, *Reinvesting in Arts Education* brings attention to an arts-integration model in Chicago that "showed consistently higher average scores on the district's reading and mathematics assessments over a six-year period when compared to all district elementary schools."

Creative Thinking

Ensuring that students have solid knowledge in reading, writing, math, and science is one way to prepare them to be college- and career-ready, but more abstract abilities referred to as 21st century skills have emerged as additional vital components of a student's preparation for life after his or her K-12 schooling. Critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration—known as the four C's—have been identified as some of the 21st century skills students should be learning, and the arts have proved to be a method to teach these skills to students.

"Principals know that a curious, creative spirit is key to complex problem-solving, and that preparing 21st century learners requires more than fortifying them with core academic skills," says Gail Connelly, executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP).

NAESP's standards guide, *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*, explains that "learners should be allowed to be tactile, experiential, interactive and social, and to move purposefully around the classroom as part of the learning process." Learning in the arts—music, visual arts, theater, and dance—contributes to students' abilities to interpret and explain concepts in different ways. For example, one way to measure reading comprehension might be to task students with writing a book report. But a project asking them to demonstrate their interpretation of a chapter through illustration, song, or theater allows them to examine the story differently while challenging them to use their creativity.

The highest student impact comes from equal access "to certified art teachers who ensure curricular connections to help to challenge students to explore, discover, and make new meanings," says Deborah Reeve, executive director of the National Art Education Association. "That's really where meaningful learning takes place—when students can make rich and multiple

Defining the Four C's

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a national organization that advocates for 21st century readiness for every student, defines the four C's—creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication—as the skills students need to succeed now and in their future lives as global citizens.

CREATIVITY is

- Coming up with new ideas that work;
- Thinking out of the box; and
- The ability to see what's not there and create something new.

COLLABORATION is

- Working toward a common goal;
- Valuing others' contributions; and
- Developing a process for compromise and consensus building.

CRITICAL THINKING is

- Applying information to make complex decisions and solve problems in innovative ways;
- Understanding the interconnections between information remembered and discovered; and
- Forming meaning out of information.

COMMUNICATION is

- Conveying or expressing thoughts and feelings in ways that others understand;
- Customizing messages for audience to help others understand; and
- Hearing and interpreting the ideas of others.

connections rather than learning in an isolated area.”

An approach to education that embraces creativity and inspires students is critical to the country's economic competitiveness, says Timothy Magner, executive director of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills. “Unleashing the creative potential of every child is in our national interest and it's our moral responsibility,” he explains. “The world we live in is changing at a rapid pace and our children must have the creativity skills that will allow them to engage with and contribute to change.”

Motivation and Engagement

When students are engaged in the arts, their engagement in class in particular, and school in general, increases. *Reinvesting in Arts Education*, the report by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, states that the motivation and engagement that results from arts involvement has been linked to high attendance, reduction in dropout rates, participation in student government, and an appreciation for the results of effort and persistence.

“By educating students in the arts, and incorporating arts into content area instruction, schools engage the whole child by tapping into his or her multiple intelligences,” says Connelly. “Schools do students a distinct disservice if opportunities for exercising their creative talents and interests are not provided.”

In *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*, a report published by the Arts Education Partnership, Catterall writes that children are more engaged when they are involved in artistic activities in school than when involved in curricular activities. “Perhaps children who find parts of their school day satisfying and fun through the arts become more sanguine about the whole school experience,” he concludes.

Social Competencies

Collaboration and teamwork, social tolerance, and self-confidence fall under two categories: They are values companies seek in their future employees and they are also benefits resulting from arts



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involvement. For example, in “Learning in the Visual Arts and the Worldviews of Young Children,” Catterall and Kylie Pepler found that “participation in a sustained program of high quality visual arts instruction associated significantly with growth in our indicators of general self-efficacy.” They also write that “self-efficacious children believe they can be agents in creating their own futures and are more optimistic about what the world has in store for them.”

Magner adds that building a strong economy and remaining competitive depends on developing “students [who] are ready to succeed in the jobs of today and are prepared for the jobs of the future, many of which haven't been created yet.”

Preparation for the Future

The research makes clear the benefits an arts-infused curriculum can bring to students. The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities explains that “the arts will have a more secure place in the curriculum when teachers experience firsthand the deepening of learning in their subjects that comes from incorporating arts teaching strategies.”

As you send students home with a new art project to show their parents, keep in mind that you are also simultaneously sending them into society with a renewed sense of creativity, confidence, and innovation that they will carry with them and benefit from throughout their lives. **P**

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