

Research Shows That

Art Turns Around Schools

A new report reveals the benefits of the arts in low-performing schools.

By John Abodeely



The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH) landmark report, *Reinvesting in Arts Education* (2011), was the first federal report on the subject in more than a decade.

Surveying the arts education landscape to draft the report, many opportunities became apparent, but two stood out. First, there was a growing body of impressive research showing the positive impact of the arts on student and school outcomes, including academic achievement, student engagement, and 21st century learning skills. Second, there was a vast equity gap in the United States, with high-poverty students drastically less likely to have the arts in their schools. Many of these students were precisely the type of learners that benefit dramatically from arts strategies—English-language learners, special needs students, and students who had given up on school and learning.



Burbank Elementary is one of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities Turnaround Arts schools. Arts advocate Jason Mraz visited to build creative capacity with students and faculty.

The data were clear: Students who needed the arts the most were getting it the least. The next year PCAH, in coordination with the White House and the U.S. Department of Education, launched Turnaround Arts, a national initiative that uses the arts to improve school climate and narrow the achievement gap in the lowest performing schools in the country.

The program was piloted in eight schools that were already receiving a School Improvement Grant (SIG) from the Department of Education, a federal grant that goes to the 5 percent lowest performing schools. Using the arts as a strategy, we zeroed in on some of the problems that plague underperforming schools: low student attendance, high volumes of behavioral referrals, lack of parental engagement, and limited use of local resources.

Consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton and a principal investigator from the University of Chicago's Urban Education Institute collaborated on a two-year research study to capture and compile data from the schools. Recently the

evaluation report was released and we are thrilled with the results:

- Seven of the eight Turnaround Arts pilot schools improved reading proficiency rates.
- Six of the eight improved in math proficiency.
- All the pilot schools improved in either reading or math.
- From 2011 to 2014, the average improvement in math proficiency across our schools was 22.5 percent, while reading proficiency improved by 12.6 percent.

The researchers compared these Turnaround Arts schools with similar turnaround schools in their states receiving SIGs, as well as those in their school districts. They found that on average, these schools had higher rates of improvement in both math and reading than comparable SIG schools and district schools. In addition, researchers found that attendance went up and discipline issues went down dramatically in the bulk of these schools.

In just four years, the program has expanded exponentially. This summer PCAH Turnaround Arts will be in 53 schools in 15 states. Across the country, it's demonstrating clearly that the arts aren't something you bring in after you have solved your school's problems; they are a part of the toolkit to help solve the problems. The arts aren't a flower we give our kids when we can afford it, or to beautify a school. Instead, the arts are a tool to help build engaging, creative, effective school environments where everyone can thrive.

We hope the results of this program encourage administrators, school boards, and districts to make that investment for students in every school—incorporating the arts into their school effectiveness toolbox. For more information about PCAH and to download free copies of the reports, visit www.turnaroundarts.pcah.gov. 

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