The arts, according to research, give learners tools to make sense of their world and draw connections between ideas. Many of the skills students use to, say, create a collage or critique a play—such as creativity, interpretation, and reflection—are the same ones they need to thrive under new college- and career-ready standards.

The new National Core Arts Standards from the National Art Education Association (NAEA) explore four key artistic processes: creating, performing/presenting/producing, responding, and connecting. Aligned with the Common Core, these standards can help teachers support students as they master new, deeper learning in language arts.

To examine the intersection of arts-integration and language arts instruction, NAESP Executive Director Gail Connelly sat down for a discussion with NAESP President Mark White, principal of Hintgen Elementary School in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and Dennis Inhulsen, president of NAEA and principal of Patterson Elementary School in Holly, Michigan.
GAIL CONNELLY: Why is arts-integration so important, especially at the elementary level?

MARK WHITE: Integrating visual arts and language arts in the classroom is a great way to accomplish many educational goals, including improving school culture and closing the achievement gap. Plus, learners have differentiated learning needs; every student responds to instruction in different ways.

DENNIS INHULSEN: I’d like to add that this is just the natural approach for children. For our youngest children, picture learning is common, and it is easy for them to put images and words together. It’s a natural fit to bring [language arts] into the arts in terms of story, or movement, or sound, or picture learning.

CONNELLY: What do principals need to know about the new National Core Arts Standards? How are they making an impact in elementary classrooms today?

INHULSEN: The idea is that students can grow to great progressions by mastering the new arts standards, which are based on the work of Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins. They are organized into 15 performance standards per grade level, with uniformity across all of the arts disciplines. This arrangement will help policymakers and principals understand those big ideas within arts education, visual arts included.

In addition, the new standards include cornerstone assessments and assessment model examples for teachers to actually assess arts learning along the way. We think that these will help teachers—regardless of the age group that they work with—understand those big ideas across the grades.
**WHITE:** The key is that [the standards] are rooted across all of the disciplines in the arts. This makes it easy for educators to look at them, determine how to integrate them, and see where they may be beneficial across the board.

**CONNELLY:** Part of what is so exciting about this is that the new arts standards are deliberately aligned with the Common Core and college- and career-ready standards on language arts. Can you speak to how these standards complement each other, and how principals can provide guidance on implementing them?

**WHITE:** When you look at the arts standards, especially the creating, presenting, and responding categories, it’s easy to see the connections to the language arts standards, which are divided into writing, speaking and listening, language, and reading.

Principals have to take advantage of the fact that they have specialists in the building in these areas [such as art teachers]. Allow them to work with the rest of the staff to integrate these standards. Let them be the leaders that they are.

**CONNELLY:** Dennis, how would you say teachers are using the arts to focus on areas like close reading, comprehending complex texts, and boosting vocabulary?

**INHULSEN:** The purpose of close reading is to get students to think thoroughly and methodically about the content and the context of the language. In my school, for example, we promote the use of visual maps and learning strategies to help students grasp close reading with pictures. In addition, if students are studying an animal’s habitat, for example, they would go beyond just using words to describe those habitats to actually diagramming and drawing those habitats for deep understanding of the concept. Then, students would be asked to feel empathy for the animal and consider what type of habitat they would develop. This is the best way I can illustrate how students can go deep into close reading and carefully understand the language and the context. It’s reading—with more detail.

**CONNELLY:** Dennis, your school focuses on project-based learning. How is this strategy related to the standards and the alignment of activities?

**INHULSEN:** In our building—as in most elementary schools—there’s a school improvement plan and our teachers have recognized that flat learning (just using handouts, for instance) is not engaging enough for students. So, we’re moving towards project-based learning and the Maker Movement, where children make, construct, and build things.

It’s hard to do, because it’s new to a lot of teachers. But [it works] once they really understand it, and students love it. They live for it. The arts bring this “hands-on, minds-on, hearts-on,” expressive, meaningful element to learning.

**CONNELLY:** This might be a good time to talk about NAESP’s Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice and the role of the principal in understanding the intersection with the arts.

**WHITE:** The need to integrate the arts with literacy is especially true at young ages. Early brain development, enhanced by engaging with the arts, is very important.

I’ve had the privilege of co-chairing the committee with [NAESP Past-president] Nancy Flatt Meador that produced *Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities*, and that publication is now out. The work outlines principals’ responsibilities in aligning pre-K through third grade.

There are six competencies, but I just want to touch on one today: providing personalized learning environments. Arts-infused instruction can promote this type of individualized learning because it inherently builds on students’ unique skills and interests. That’s only one part of the body of work, but I encourage principals to take a look at the whole publication if they are working in early childhood.

**CONNELLY:** Dennis, you’re already using this pre-K-3 standards work in your building. Could you talk a little bit about that?

**INHULSEN:** Michigan is very fortunate to have state-funded preschool. There are 45 preschool students here in my building’s full-day program. We use the “learner empowerment” model where students are in charge of the learning, starting in preschool. It’s very exciting to see them be creative and interact with each other in meaningful conversations. I feel like we’re really doing the right thing as it relates to arts-integration and language, especially at that age.
CONNELLY: Let's shift to focus on teaching and practice. How should principals go about making sure that they and their teachers are appropriately prepared to use the new arts standards?

WHITE: It's important to refrain from “swallowing the whole thing” all at one time, so to speak. Use the expertise of your staff and create a team at your school to determine what you're currently doing and what you might be able to do based on what you learn from the standards. Use as a model, for instance, Dennis’ school or other schools that are really moving forward in this area.

INHULSEN: I hope that principals recognize our early childhood teachers and our arts teachers as members of professional learning communities (PLC). In our school, all of our preschool teachers and arts teachers are consistently in “PLC mode.” But then our challenge is to get our arts teachers embedded within those other teams. For elementary schools, it would be mostly grade-level teams, or special education teams.

CONNELLY: Teamwork and collaboration seem to be key. What would you say to principals and teachers who think they don't have the time to integrate the arts into an already packed curriculum?

WHITE: Dennis talked about school improvement plans, and I agree: We have to frame [the arts] as part of our school improvement effort. It is not an add-on; rather, it will enhance what we've been doing.

INHULSEN: I think it would help for us to go back to research that helps us understand how children learn. Sometimes we forget that children learn from multiple modalities and the arts curricula are a component of that. We have to create what I would call a complete experience for students, blending all of those [learning] modalities that Mark discussed earlier.

It would be a great experience [for educators] to go back [to the research on learning] and refresh ourselves on how it all fits together.

CONNELLY: In closing, how can principals—especially new principals—deal with all of these standards that are sometimes competing, and at other times complementary?

WHITE: When trying to integrate standards across the whole school, principals should consider how it all fits together. You can’t do this work all by yourself, so you must go back to the idea of collaboration and teaming, even across buildings and at the district level.

INHULSEN: I’d like to reiterate Mark’s comment about not trying to do everything at once. We can’t expect to understand and apply all of these standards all at once.

The other piece of advice I would give a new principal is to talk with parents about what they want for their children. In my experience, parents have been great champions for the arts and learning. They understand and know what’s good for their children in their own way, even if they don’t know the educational jargon about standards.

Lastly, the new arts standards, which are very deep and wide, challenge us to think of those big ideas that develop over time for all students, from the very young to the lifelong learner. These include technology, media, how art is placed in the community, urban design, graphic design, architecture, and product design. The art of the future will not be just what we might think of as traditional painting, drawing, and sculpture. I hope that members of both of our organizations take a hard look at these big ideas for students as they grow.

CONNELLY: It is certainly clear to me that each of our organizations is incredibly privileged to have each of you in your leadership positions. Thank you for sharing your ideas and your insights, and for what you do for children each and every day.

Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting Principal magazine online: www.naesp.org/JanFeb15

Listen to this entire interview about arts and literacy standards on NAESP Radio.

Review the National Core Arts Standards in dance, media arts, music, theatre, and visual arts. The website provides resources by discipline and grade band.

Review best practices from the Champion Creatively Alive Children grant program, a joint project between NAESP and Crayola. The winning schools and their projects have been featured in a special Principal supplement for the past four years. (Applications for the 2015 grant program are due June 22, 2015.)

Download NAESP’s new standards for aligning early learning, Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice.