



Arts Integration Improves School Culture and Student Success

Art infuses joy and student voice into daily instruction

By Cheri Sterman

The arts are not optional. That's the message L. Earl Franks, executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, conveyed to a recent gathering of the Arts Education Partnership.

"Arts in education is an equity issue," he told the group. "School leaders need to make a commitment to ensuring that every student has access to the arts, not as an extra enhancement when there is time, not as a luxury for the privileged, but as an essential part of well-rounded education."

In the era of tight budgets and standardized testing, elementary principals have tough decisions on what to prioritize. Yet those who infuse the arts throughout the school see a profound impact on students and culture.

People have seen arts-infused schools are struck by the palpable energy and joy. There is a bounce in the step of students and teachers. Parents report that students cannot wait to

come to school. The walls radiate with displays of colorful learning. Classrooms look and sound like studios, with a productive buzz as students coach each other and collaboratively create projects.

Principals whose schools use a schoolwide arts-integration approach also report more success in attracting and retaining teachers. According to "Voices From the Field: Teachers' Views on the Relevance of Arts-Integration," integrating the arts into education renews educators' commitment to the teaching profession, gives them resilience to face the growing demands of today's schools, rejuvenates teachers on the verge of burnout, and provides pathways for teachers to use culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers who embed arts into teaching strategies say that being able to see what students are thinking—via creative expression, rather than standardized tests—reminds them of why they chose this profession.



Not “One More Thing”

Arts integration, defined as a cross-curricular way of teaching about and with the arts, is not a burden or weighty requirement. In fact, there are many parallels among arts integration, STEAM education, and project-based learning (PBL). Each includes:

- Collaborative, creative culture in which teacher leaders share expertise with colleagues.
- Differentiated instruction, helping students with different learning styles find their voices.
- A real-world approach to problem-solving that parallels cross-disciplinary work challenges and builds career readiness.

Arts Integration Can Lead to Academic Success

Incorporating the arts throughout the curriculum can boost student success. “From 2011 to 2014, the average improvement in math proficiency across our schools was 22.5 percent, and reading proficiency improved by 12.6 percent,” reports John Abodeely, deputy director of the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities Turnaround Arts Initiative.

Similar academic results are reported by Bobby Riley, principal of Integrated Arts Academy in Burlington, Vermont, and Debbie Broadnax, principal of Powder Springs Elementary in Powder Springs, Georgia. Broadnax reports significant increases in students’ Lexile reading and Quantile math inventory scores. The highest increases occurred in classrooms that had the most frequent use of arts integration, she says.

Riley also reports improved test scores. However, he is most excited about the behavioral changes he sees. His school serves a refugee resettlement community, so many students experienced high levels of trauma before coming to the Integrated Arts Academy. Riley shares anecdotes of students who are new to this country—some new to any formalized school setting—who have found a path to success via the arts.

“They are quickly communicating with peers using a drawing or musical instrument, since art is a universal language that levels the playing field. Art welcomes English-language learners in a nonintimidating way,” says Riley.

Arts integration has resulted in such a dramatic decline in discipline referrals at the Integrated Arts Academy—literally, none occurred during arts-infused projects—that Riley now urges faculty to do arts integration all day, every day.

Getting Started With Arts-Infused Instruction

Intrigued by the benefits of arts integration, but not sure where or how to begin? Use these four steps to get going:

1. **Find champions who will co-lead this initiative with you.** Every school has teacher leaders who are passionate about creative teaching and want to give students more voice. Invite them to form a Creative Leadership Team that will coach others along this journey.
2. **Collaboratively create an arts-integration school vision.** Build grassroots buy-in by asking the entire faculty to contribute their thoughts: What would make the school culture more collaborative? How can creative experiences increase student engagement and success? Listen to educators’ priorities. Usually, the desired outcomes are very similar. Hesitation to embrace arts integration may be tied to a lack of creative confidence.
3. **Offer professional development that builds creative capacity.** Teachers’ creative confidence and arts-integration experience lies along a continuum; you can map this continuum to identify strengths and PD needs. Provide interactive professional learning experiences in which teachers immerse themselves in the cross-curricular experiences they will do with students. When teachers confront their fears, balance their priorities, and explore the parallels between written and visual literacy, they have epiphanies and see firsthand why this approach to learning deepens understanding.
4. **Connect with other principals who lead arts-integration schools.** Crayola and NAESP have provided Champion Creatively Alive Children Creative Leadership grants for eight years. We can help connect you with former grant winners whose stories can inspire and help you as you begin adopting arts integration as a schoolwide approach. For more information about the grant program or to be in contact with a former grant winner, contact creativelyalive@crayola.com.

Infusing the artistic approach throughout school provides essential opportunities for students and teachers.

Cheri Sterman is the Crayola director of education and vice chair of the Partnership for 21st Century Learning. She leads the creatED professional learning program, which builds creative capacity in schools.



READ MORE

Arts Integration: Teaching Subject Matter Through the Arts in Multicultural Settings (5th ed.) by Meryll Goldberg
Preparing Educators for Arts Integration: Placing Creativity at the Center of Learning by Gene Diaz and Martha Barry McKenna