



A School! Revi

Here's how to make the transition to an arts-integrated curriculum.

Roma Morris

Years ago, I found myself sitting in Painting 101 listening to the instructor say, "Paint what you see!" As I stared at a silver Christmas ball on a brown wrinkled tablecloth, I discovered the beauty of uninterrupted, focused thought. Never before had I been able to stay focused over a long period of time, and my experience in Painting 101 made me feel I had found something that had been missing in my life.



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Through the Arts



The feeling returned years later, when I found myself filling the shoes of an administrator at Casey Elementary, an urban, arts-integrated school located in central Mississippi. A small school of 300, with a predominantly black population, Casey had been a predominantly white, affluent neighborhood school in the early 1990s. Arts instruction was performed by parent volunteers, and what they taught was “art for art’s sake,” not arts integration.

By 2000, after several principals had come and gone, Casey Elementary had vigorously embraced arts integration. As the new principal, I prepared by attending the Mississippi Arts Commission’s Whole Schools Initiative summer workshop with a team of teachers and the school’s arts facilitator. The workshop engaged us in arts-integration activities around the clock, and by the beginning of the new school year, our every move was focused on teaching about and practicing arts integration.

During the next five years, and through much hard work, the school was awarded the Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts and the Mississippi Alliance for Arts Education’s School of Excellence Award. It also was among the top 25 schools across the nation recognized by the Ford Foundation’s National School Change Award. Casey has hosted many educators across the state who wished to see arts integration in action, and has become the leader in arts-integration professional development through the Ask For More Arts Collaborative.

Don’t think this was accomplished overnight; it wasn’t and it can’t be. Arts integration requires a commitment. It is a slow and never-ending process, but if done seriously and effectively, it can bring about positive change. It takes time, dedication, perseverance, and teamwork in addition to funding, resources, organizational support, and knowledge to create a true arts-integrated school.

Putting the Pieces Together

What does it take to truly become an arts-integrated school? First of all,

everyone must be on board and willing to commit the time and effort. Then, make a plan: What area will be your focus—visual arts, drama, dance, or music? Where will your classes be held and does it work with the schedule for other classes in the same location? Do you need to reassess your budget allocations? Your planning team should visit arts-integrated schools that are just beginning the journey, as well as those that have been on the journey for years, to discuss the changes your school will face in moving from a traditional to an arts-integrated curriculum. All of these questions and many more can be answered if you are honest about what you are willing to invest to make a successful transition.

For example, more personnel will be necessary. Although most schools have music and visual arts specialists, teachers for drama and dance may be needed, especially in the elementary grades. You will also need a knowledgeable arts director who will be responsible for writing and implementing arts grants, as well as filing reports to the grant agencies. The arts director also provides assistance to teachers seeking guidance on linking their curricula with the arts.

Professional development and resources for staff are next on the list. There is no way to understand arts integration, what it is and what it is not, without proper training. Through quality professional development, teachers will be able to create personal portfolios of arts-integration ideas.

Schools interested in the arts and arts integration have many avenues to explore before implementing a program. Local arts organizations are great resources, and many grants are offered through local and state arts organizations that are glad to support new initiatives. The Kennedy Center and the Ford Foundation are supporters of the arts and can be useful resources. Casey Elementary received great support from the Mississippi Arts Commission.

Arts Around the Clock

At Casey Elementary, the arts director was responsible for scheduling

additional arts classes for all children throughout the day and providing quality arts-integration training for teachers. The director took on an important additional role by coordinating the names and works (posters, books, artistic techniques) of artists to the curriculum. Teachers, especially those new to arts integration, looked to the director as the expert who could quickly provide an arts connection for each theme.

The payoff was great. Through curriculum maps, parents could see the correlation of arts integration within each subject area, and teachers could use it to study the vertical alignment between grades. The arts director also planned special arts events throughout the year, showcasing visual arts, drama, dance, and music performed by the students for their parents. The director also invited artists to visit the school.

Lesson plans always integrated the arts and the arts director was always ready to provide an artist’s name and resources that correlated to the instructional unit. He also made sure that we worked cooperatively with outside resources, such as the local symphony and ballet companies as well as private arts teachers who were willing to volunteer at our school. The school also purchased library materials that could be tied into the curricula, including books, art prints, musical CDs, and videos by select artists.

Entering the building, visitors could hear music playing, see walls adorned with children’s artwork, and enter a library filled not only with great literature, but with students’ dance and drama performances that were staged there, including an opera written, directed, and performed by the students, who also designed the set and lighting. Visitors also could enjoy afternoon ballet sessions and strings lessons from morning until afternoon. Visiting the classrooms, they could see stories being acted out as plays, students using musical notes to learn fractions, tunes to learn other academic skills, dances of cultures relating to a social studies lesson, and visual art related to the

Arts Integration in Action

Here are some of the countless ways that Casey Elementary incorporated the arts into its classrooms:

- Each morning, the day started with the introduction of the musical artist of the week, and one minute of his or her music was played over the intercom.
- A visiting artist presented drum lessons that incorporated counting, as well as a history component connecting the music to a particular culture and region.
- Students created quilts connected to the story of Harriet Tubman and the runaway slaves she sheltered.
- Students illustrated story sequences with paper cut-outs in the style of Henri Matisse.
- Students made tissue-paper gardens in the style of Claude Monet while studying plants.
- Students dressed as insects and sang songs about ladybugs, fireflies, and other insects for their parents.
- A local artist helped children create a piece of pottery from clay in demonstrating the power of water as part of a science component.
- Students made self-portraits in the style of Joan Miro to illustrate stories about themselves.
- During Artist Night, students based presentations on an extended project that included choosing, researching, and writing a paper on a Mississippi artist, memorizing facts about the artist, and dressing as the artist.
- Fifth-grade students wrote an original opera in language class, made costumes, and created the set and the lighting.
- Children learned about Indian culture through food tasting, dance presentations/lessons, and art exposure. The students then created a piece of art related to Indian culture.
- Students read Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" before watching a visiting theatrical group present a dramatic performance of the story.
- All children were involved in designing a poster, writing and delivering a speech, or delivering a dramatic performance of a poem they wrote about Martin Luther King Jr.
- Artists visited the school, brought storytelling to life, and excited the children about reading.
- Second-grade students and their teachers decorated ceilings, doors, and walls with visual art to illustrate what they had learned in social studies about rainforests.

reading for the week or demonstrating understanding of a science concept.

The Principal's Influence

Integrating the arts can be a wonderful addition to the traditional curricula, but all parties, especially the principal, need to understand each aspect of the commitment.

After serving five years as principal of Casey Elementary School, and reaching more goals than I had dreamed of, I decided it was time to dream somewhere else. Today, as principal of Pearl Lower Elementary School in Pearl, Mississippi, I encourage my staff to play

instrumental music in their classrooms and to activate the arts in their classes. In the hallways, visitors can see the visual arts being used to develop the vocabulary and writing skills of kindergarten and first-grade students. Plans for the year include a musical presentation featuring the works of famous jazz musicians.

The five years I spent at Casey Elementary impacted many lives, as well as my own, and for that I am grateful. But it also showed me that arts integration must be fully understood and seriously implemented before true success can be achieved, and no school can do that

without ample opportunities for professional development.

An arts-integrated school must be led by an administrator who serves as the instructional leader in helping teachers devise strategies to bring their lessons alive with art. Arts integration is not an easy process, and it does not happen overnight. Teachers may find themselves exhausted, but as the instructional leader you must always be waiting in the wings to pep them up or provide timeout.

Many people talk about arts integration, but not everyone can actually walk the talk. Believe me, as someone who has done it, it is a task that requires total focus, and an enormous amount of time, energy, patience, and perseverance. ■

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WEB RESOURCES

The Mississippi Alliance for Arts Education provides links to an extensive list of arts resources on its Web site. www.msartsalliance.com/resources/resources.htm

Produced by the Kennedy Center, ArtsEdge is an online tool for educators to bring the arts into the classroom. Find lesson plans, audio, and video files of performances and news related to art education on this site. www.artledge.kennedy-center.org

The National Arts Education Association offers curriculum and thematic lesson plans on its Web site, including activities, materials, themes, and artists. www.naea-reston.org/research_curriculum.htm

