



**A**ccess to art connects to essential qualities that society wants for children and demands from schools: academic achievement, social and emotional development, civic engagement, and equal opportunity.

Experiences in the arts are associated with gains in math, reading, cognitive ability, critical thinking, and verbal skills. Additionally, participation in the arts improves motivation, concentration, confidence, and teamwork.

## BUILDING DISTRICT-LEVEL *Support for the Arts*

District leaders align on strategies and priorities



This compelling evidence advises district leaders to envision, prioritize, and champion arts opportunities throughout the curriculum and beyond school.

Interviews with three inspiring district leaders provide guidance to principals on how to build and sustain support for art at the school board, superintendent, and district office. Roberta Marcus is a Pennsylvania School Board Association consultant in residence and former school board president of Parkland School District, Allentown, Pennsylvania. Dr. Fred Primm is a former superintendent of Bessemer City Schools in Birmingham, Alabama. Finally, Brad Foust is the fine arts supervisor of Bartlett City School District in Memphis, Tennessee.

**What can you tell principals about how school districts can champion the arts as a districtwide priority?**

*Marcus:* It starts with philosophy. Our Parkland School Board changed the language around everything we do to focus on the whole child and a cross-curricular approach to instruction. Parkland makes the arts part of every discipline offered. Every environment in the district, including administrative offices, is covered with student art to showcase the value of this work. We have a specific office of Visual and Performing Arts, with a director who manages the curriculum planning, relationship building, and community programming.

**As the school board president, how have you engaged community stakeholders?**

*Marcus:* Community partnerships are key. Every year we host a Senior Arts Dinner to showcase student artwork and thank the community for their support. This approach shows the community and its tax base how their contributions impact students.

The Spring Arts Festival for the community is another program that engages community stakeholders and fosters partnership. This display of student and local art helps to build

outside support for the arts. I talk about the benefits of art at board meetings and make sure all board members are aware of the compelling evidence and why this is essential for a well-rounded education.

### **How has your district maintained funding and ensured that arts education is always a strongly supported budget line?**

**Marcus:** Parents can be the most powerful advocates for why school boards need to support art experiences for their children. We are purposeful and consistent in sharing the compelling evidence with parents. We talk about the value of art “out loud” to highlight the importance of students spending time and the district spending funds on art and the impact on student achievement. We also encourage exposing young children to the arts as early as possible. Children who have early access to the arts become adults who value creative thinking and support cultural experiences as lifelong learners.

## **Spark interest, set a vision that stakeholders are passionate about, implement a strategic plan specific to the arts, and savor the results.**

Beyond our school board’s allocation of funds, we work with our state legislature and set district policies that support art. At Parkland, art learning is a graduation requirement. We consistently have teams meet with policy makers to share the results and evidence so that funding is maintained and policy is in place to provide guidance. We have a strong commitment to the arts. By allocating resources, providing ongoing professional development opportunities for staff, and aligning art to the district culture and vision, our faculty and district continue to grow in their support and commitment.

### **What suggestions do you have for school leaders looking**

### **to use art to transform the learning environment?**

**Marcus:** The elementary principal role is pivotal in the trajectory of how students and parents see the arts. We need to capture families early so the value is not diminished along the way due to competing priorities. In short: Spark interest, set goals, carry out strategic plans specific to the arts, and have a vision that all stakeholders can be passionate about.

### **How can district leaders re-imagine the role of art as a systemwide strategy?**

**Primm:** Three things immediately come to mind:

- 1. Have an open growth mindset.** We tend to focus on testing and results, but we cannot forget the importance of art and its effect on the whole child.
- 2. Be empowering.** Allow teachers and students to accomplish their vision and goals. Practice distributed

leadership. Clarify and allocate resources used to promote the arts. Emphasize the importance of creative thinking to prepare students for the future. Provide leadership and development opportunities for staff and students.

- 3. Be a champion.** Take charge, show your passion, and stakeholders will be inspired to follow. Be connected to the work. Make it a part of the district culture.

### **What do you recommend to leaders looking to build districtwide capacity for incorporating art?**

**Foust:** I would recommend starting with five essentials:

- 1. Start small.** Implementing the arts-integration approach to teaching happens over time, much in the same way that learning to play an instrument or becoming a skilled visual artist happens over time. Moving forward at small increments is perfectly acceptable.
- 2. Form a leadership team.** This team of classroom teachers, arts teachers, and administrators will guide the work as the school transitions to art-integrated teaching and learning.
- 3. Attend professional development sessions.** Sessions are offered by arts organizations and at conferences and workshops. Online learning resources also are available. When principals attend the sessions, this shows a commitment to learning about art and convinces others that this has value.
- 4. Read and research.** Several books are available that directly address arts-integration teaching and learning, as well as strategies for building schoolwide creative capacity. Dozens of peer-reviewed journals in the arts and education fields contain articles on arts-integrated teaching and learning.
- 5. Share your knowledge.** Volunteer to present your knowledge and experiences in your district or at local- or state-level conferences and workshops. Help other district leaders and principals understand how this approach impacts learning and school culture.

Art is a catalyst to prepare students for a successful future. When schools provide students with art-rich experiences and robust access to the arts, the benefits are evident. Principals can help district leaders realize this vision and build support at the school board and district levels when they champion the successful results of their schools’ art-integration programs.

*As told to Dominique Young, the Crayola professional development leader.*