

### Why the Arts Belong in School

Money is tight. So how do you convince the public and the school board that the arts are necessary in the K-12 instructional program?

As I point out in the accompanying article, when taught well, the arts develop cognitive competencies that benefit learners in every aspect of their education and prepare them for the complex demands of the 21st century. Here are some other ways the arts affect student learning and behavior:



Photo by Karen Heid/  
University of  
South Carolina

- **College admissions test scores.**

More than 10 million American high school students responded to a questionnaire indicating the number of years of arts classes they took. The results were amazingly consistent. Students who took arts classes had higher mathematics, verbal and composite SAT scores than students who did not take arts classes.

Furthermore, the SAT scores increased linearly with the addition of more years of arts classes, that is the more years of arts classes, the higher the SAT scores. All classifications of arts classes were found to have significant relationships with both verbal and math SAT scores. Of course, this positive correlation between arts courses and higher SAT verbal and mathematics scores does not prove that one *caused the other*. Other variables may be involved, but it is difficult to challenge the strength of this relationship, given the magnitude of the study.

- **Disaffected students.**

The arts reach students who are not otherwise being reached. Arts sometimes provide the only reason certain students stay in touch with school. Without the arts, these young people would be left with no

access to a community of learners.

A 10-year ongoing study in the Chicago public schools shows test scores rising faster on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills reading section than a matched population of 6th graders in the regular schools. A 2004 study of the Minneapolis schools showed that arts integration had positive effects on all students, but much more so with disadvantaged students. In Florida, 41 percent of potential dropout students said something about the arts kept them in school and they were more engaged in their art classes than in academic classes.

- **Different learning styles.**

Because students learn in many different ways, some students become behavior problems if

conventional classroom practices are not engaging them. Success in the arts is often a bridge to successful learning in other areas, thereby raising a student's self-concept. Studies show students involved in the arts have a significantly higher self-concept than a standard student population. The students in this sample noted how the arts allowed them to express pent-up feelings and to gain some distance from problems at home by talking about them, thinking and listening.

- *Personal and interpersonal connections.*

The arts connect students to themselves and each other. Creating art is a personal experience, as students draw upon their own resources to produce the result. This is a much deeper involvement than just reading text to get an answer.

Studies indicate that the attitudes of young people toward one another improve through their arts learning experiences. In 2000, more than 2,400 elementary and middle school students from 18 public schools participated in a study that showed students in arts-rich schools scoring higher in creativity and several measures of academic self-concept than students in schools without that level of arts instruction.

- *School and classroom climate.*

Schools become places of discovery when the arts transform the focus of the learning environment. Arts change the school culture, break down barriers between curriculum areas and improve the school's physical appearance.

Because administrators and teachers determine a school's climate, a study of 29 arts-rich New York City schools compared some indicators of school climate to the remaining non-arts schools. In the arts-rich schools, administrators encouraged teachers to take risks, broaden the curriculum and learn new skills. The teachers had a significantly higher degree of innovation in their instruction, were more supportive of students and had greater interest in their own professional development.

Once again, the arts-rich program had a much greater impact on these results than did the students' socioeconomic status.

- *Gifted and talented students.*

The arts provide new challenges for students already considered successful. Students who outgrow their learning environment usually get bored and complacent. The arts offer a chance for unlimited challenge. For instance, older students may teach and mentor younger ones who are learning to play musical instruments, and some advanced students may work with professional artists in the community.

- *The world of work.*

The arts connect learning experiences to the world of everyday work. The adult workplace has changed, and the capacity to use imagination to visualize and generate ideas, to bring ideas to life and to communicate them to others are essentials today.

As students create works of art, they see how parts relate to each other and interact, how small changes in color or language can have large effects in art work and writing, and how to recognize and pursue goals that were not thought of at the beginning. Whether in a classroom or in a studio as an artist, the student is learning and practicing future workplace behaviors.

— **David Sousa**