

# The Case For The Arts

**By cutting back on arts to strengthen their basic core curricula,  
schools may be taking a giant leap backward**

**By Eric Oddleifson**

**Source: <http://www.context.org/iclib/ic27/oddlfson/>**

One of the articles in **The Learning Revolution (IC#27)**

Originally published in **Winter 1991** on page 46

Copyright (c)1991, 1996 by Context Institute

*If by now you haven't concluded that the arts are a crucial part of any effort to reinvigorate learning, Eric Oddleifson will convince you. Eric is President of The Center for Arts in the Basic Curriculum, an association whose agenda is clear. Not only do they believe art education will enhance the traditional curriculum; they believe "the arts should be the basis of education" because "the deepest and most lasting learning is participatory and whole-brained. This is precisely what the arts offer." Their publications offer some impressive data to back up their case. Contact the center at 58 Fearing Road, Hingham, MA 02043 for more information on their publications and services.*

In their efforts to improve the schooling of American children, educators and the communities they serve are striving to develop schools that will teach our youngsters to be more productive and competitive workers in business and industry. From their understanding of the test scores of American children, the reformers infer that our schools must teach more mathematics, more science, more language skills. Prescribed remedies for the problems range from "back to basics," to a more rigorous curriculum, to alternative private school systems, to parental "choice" of schools. In almost every case, budgetary constraints become the "enemy"

as greater demands are placed on the schools and they appear to be, like Alice, "running faster just to stay in the same place."

To make time for expanded math, science and language studies, the reformers reduce or eliminate time for the arts – music, visual arts, theater, dance, and creative writing.

But the research of cognitive psychologists – and the experience of schools that teach the arts as a part of the basic curriculum – strongly suggest that this prescription will not produce the results the reformers seek. In fact, research into the records of students in several schools indicates that *a curriculum that devotes 25% or more of the school day to the arts produces youngsters with academically superior abilities*. There is compelling evidence to suggest that schools should *increase* the time devoted to teaching the arts. The supposedly "nonessential" subjects of music, theater, dance, and art promote the kinds of thinking, enthusiasm, self-esteem and discipline that are necessary requisites for learning.

Many people do not associate the arts with "thinking." We are aware of the art "product"- the song, the picture, the play – but we are less aware of the *process* which creates that product. Yet the arts are not so much a result of inspiration and innate talent as they are a person's capacities for creative thinking and imagining, problem- solving, critical judgment, and a host of other mental processes. The arts represent forms of cognition every bit as potent as the verbal and logical/mathematical forms of cognition that have been the traditional focus of public education.

Still, some educators and educational psychologists remain skeptical about the practical benefits of arts study. They see no relationship between learning in the arts and learning in other subjects. The argument runs this way: "If you want to improve science education, improve science, not the visual arts. Math is improved through math education and not through music." Because interplay between the arts and the rest of the curriculum is not

obvious, the arts are often confined to the periphery of the school day. When budgets are tight, the arts tend to be the first subjects curtailed – though this attitude may be changing.

## **VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL**

There are very good reasons to teach the arts both vertically *and* horizontally within the traditional core curriculum [see sidebar]. An examination of what the study of an art form requires when taught *vertically* – that is, as a stand-alone subject – points to very practical benefits that may accrue. The arts:

- activate mental energy by awakening and educating the imagination, the seat of our thought processes themselves;
- are a model of "learning by doing" and engaging students with the real world (the apprenticeship model of learning, with teacher as coach);
- develop aspiration to achieve, to get better, to excel;
- require hard work to perfect the techniques demanded by the specific art form;
- require discipline, and the continuing need to practice to hone technique;
- require long-term commitment; and
- require cooperation and collective accountability in a group performance – music, theater, and dance.

Others have observed that the arts develop higher order (critical and creative) thinking skills, including (1) the ability to *deal with complexity and ambiguity*; (2) the capacity for *sound judgment*; (3) attention to *purpose* (exploring alternative goals) as much as results; and (4) the ability to *consider differing viewpoints and defer judgment*.

Interestingly enough, these are precisely the skills the business community now so avidly seeks in its new employees. Not finding them, it is calling for a radical restructuring of the American educational system.

When the arts also taught *horizontally* – that is, used together with traditional academic approaches to articulate and understand a particular subject or theme – learning becomes

more integrated. Students employ the style of learning that suits them best, and the arts become a support to the curriculum. Such "integrative learning" changes the *way* the classroom runs, as well as the content. It uses a problem-based structure, and is similar to a "studio" in this respect. Outstanding artistic work can occur, giving an important aesthetic content to the broad themes being studied. Teachers become excited about their new roles as facilitators, and a culture of high standards and high academic achievement within a school is the result. School becomes an exciting place to be.

In fact, the most important benefit of the arts may be *the education of the imagination*. Imagination is a powerful tool indeed; if we can imagine something, we can make it happen. Imagination is an invaluable resource for seeking – and finding – solutions to problems, as well as in defining and acting on opportunities.

The arts represent immediately available, well-known and low-cost ways to quickly achieve the educational goals now sought by business leaders and educators alike. We at The Center for Arts in the Basic Curriculum call for a restructuring of American education through the arts, and our purpose is to assist in bringing this about. We subscribe to the words of Graham Downe:

*Arts educators should become aggressive on a whole new school agenda. They should join forces with the current reform impulse that aspires to transform the whole structure of learning, the whole climate of learning, the whole relationship between the teacher and the student. They should promote the arts as the vanguard to meaningful restructuring of the schools.*

The compelling message the arts bring to education is a difficult one to articulate, and school change may be difficult to achieve. But the business and professional people involved with The

Center for Arts in the Basic Curriculum stand ready to offer assistance to arts educators – in bringing the arts to the forefront of educational change.

---

## Supporting Evidence

*The schools listed here are not selective, and their students are considered "average." But they differ from other schools in having included the arts in their basic curricula.*

**Elm Elementary, Milwaukee, WI** \* In the bottom 10% in academic performance in 1979, Elm has been #1 out of 103 schools in its district for eight of the last ten years since introducing arts education.

**Ashley River (K-6), Charleston, NC** \* Started in 1984, Ashley River is now ranked #2 in the county (second only to a high school for the academically gifted), and it has a waiting list of 1200 students.

**St. Augustine (K-8), Bronx, NY** \* This 99% minority school was about to fail in 1984, but since introducing arts to the curriculum, 98% of the students have had reading and math scores at grade level (only three public schools in metropolitan New York can claim this).

**Davidson (5-12), Augusta, GA** \* Fully integrated (50% white, 50% black) and ranked #1 in the county, Davidson has a waiting list of many hundreds.

**FACE (K-11), Montreal, Canada** \* FACE students achieve higher scores in most academic subjects than five other local high schools combined. Test scores run an average of 20% higher than the scores of other Canadian students, even though the school is not selective.

**Eliot Elementary, Needham, MA** \* Since integrating art into curriculum in 1983, the test scores for "average" 3rd-grade students in this racially mixed school have risen to the 97th to 99th percentile.

**ANZA, Los Angeles, CA** \* Reading scores doubled one year after the introduction of a visual arts program.