

Executive Summary

Integrating the Arts: Report of Focus Groups Among Parents, Teachers and School Administrators in Baltimore, Northern California, Dallas and Washington, DC

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II. Executive Summary

The focus groups in Baltimore, Northern California, Dallas and Washington, DC reveal several key points as we look ahead to the next step in our project: the national survey.

Key points:

Arts education is viewed as very important but neglected in schools:

Throughout the groups, participants see arts education as an essential component of K-12 education, but they believe it is not given the priority it deserves, and that works to the detriment of students.

Group participants voice numerous advantages for students exposed to arts education, including views that it increases students' knowledge, creativity, problem-solving abilities and their ability to discover new talents and connect with their personal feelings.

Take a broad view of arts education: According to the participants, arts education encompasses a range of disciplines, including: painting, drawing, music, band, drama, photography, dance, graphic design, choir, art history and speech. Some group members include foreign language, martial arts, writing, auto mechanics, home economics and industrial arts in arts education.

Arts integration will create well-rounded, analytical thinkers who are better able to succeed: Parents, teachers and administrators believe integrating the arts into other subjects as a teaching tool will have a number of benefits for students, including: providing students with a well-rounded education; giving more students a chance to succeed; and helping students think, analyze and exercise different parts of their brains. More often than not, participants agree that students exposed to an integrated arts curriculum will be better prepared for college and the job market.

Challenges of arts integration - teacher training and time: Most participants believe the biggest challenge to implementing a curriculum with arts embedded in the teaching is the need for additional teacher

training. Some, particularly the teachers and administrators, also express concern about having the funding and the time to integrate the arts, considering the current priority is to prepare students for standardized tests.

Other benefits include making school more enjoyable and thereby increasing attendance; generally improving learning; strengthening social skills; and giving students experience working as a team.

Educating the whole child - within limits: Parents, teachers and school officials are supportive of the reasoning behind arts integration: the idea that incorporating the arts throughout curricula will “educate the whole child.” This endorsement of the “whole child” concept stops, however at the “m” word: “moral.” Use of the term “moral education” is problematic because it leads participants to wonder whose morals will be taught in schools.

Another red flag appears when participants read a statement asserting that teachers are responsible for bringing out individuality in each student. Many focus group participants take this to mean teachers bear this responsibility totally, and they say this is unrealistic and inappropriate.

Parents: The parents in our groups are most likely to say integration will be an aid for teachers during instruction. These participants are quick to assert that arts integration was prevalent when they were in school and make the connection between the rise of standardized testing and the reduction of arts programs in schools.

Teachers: The elementary, middle and high school teachers in our groups generally support the proposal to integrate the arts, but they express concern about the additional training needed for teachers. Many question whether arts integration is realistic given the current testing structure and budget concerns. The teachers cast a wary view on new programs and ideas, wondering if arts integration may be a proposal disguised as a helpful addition, but when put into practice, will reduce arts instruction overall.

Principals and superintendents: To these administrators, arts integration is a worthy goal, but budget concerns and student achievement on standardized tests are at the front of their minds. The participants reveal that integrating the arts is a risky endeavor if scores on standardized tests determine pay and job security for teachers and principals.

The superintendents voice their concern that the entire educational system and curriculum would have to be overhauled in order to institute this type of change. They say they are not opposed to this adjustment.