

Arts in Education

Education Commission of the States • 700 Broadway, Suite 1200 • Denver, CO 80203-3460 • 303.299.3600 • Fax: 303.296.8332 • www.ecs.org

State Policymakers' Views on the Arts in Education

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As the 2004-06 chairman of the Education Commission of the States (ECS), Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee selected the arts in education as his ECS Chairman's Initiative. The focus of the initiative stems from more than an appreciation of "arts for arts' sake." While this value is of great importance, there also is compelling evidence that shows student involvement with the arts can make a significant difference in improving educational outcomes for *all* students – in terms of their academic achievement, their engagement in learning, and their social and civic development.

As part of the Chairman's Initiative, ECS sought to gain insight into the education priorities of state policymakers, and to determine what role the arts might play in supporting those priorities. One goal of the initiative is to provide information that could help inform policy options for state policymakers.

Toward that end, ECS conducted telephone interviews with 21 policymakers between November 21, 2005 and February 27, 2006. Six state senators, eight state representatives, one state board of education member, two deputy commissioners of education, three current state superintendents and one former state superintendent were interviewed. All of the legislators serve on their respective education committees, and most chair these committees. Political affiliation among these policymakers is approximately equal, with nine Republicans, 10 Democrats and two unidentified.

Curriculum Integration, Balance and the Basics

The policymakers – most of whom are ECS commissioners – were asked first to describe the most salient education issues in their states currently. Quite a few legislators mention issues that, advocates argue, the arts can help address – namely, dropout prevention and the achievement gap between poor, mostly minority students and more affluent, generally white students. Several bring up changing graduation requirements and school funding as key issues in their states. Legislators also mention the challenge of maintaining a balanced curriculum under the pressure of increased accountability in reading, mathematics and science.

Virtually all of the policymakers interviewed, regardless of political orientation, agree that arts can contribute to a quality education, and that students should have some exposure to the arts in school. Although each of the policymakers interviewed understands arts can serve as a vehicle for instruction in non-arts subject areas, with a few exceptions the conversations usually focused on arts as discrete subjects. Most seem to agree that increased accountability requirements and the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) have had some impact on the demand for and availability of the arts in education.

Minnesota Republican Representative Barbara Sykora, a former teacher, argues that if done properly, increased accountability for the basics does not have to limit opportunities in other areas, such as arts. Sykora chaired a committee that established requirements that districts offer and students study the arts at the primary and secondary levels. But according to Sykora, "At the lower grades, reading should be a priority. And if you do that right, then you should not have to cut anything out."

Republican Representative Dennis Baxley of Florida and Republican Senator Ron Raikes of Nebraska echo Sykora's sentiment. Raikes notes that the argument made for the core subjects is that they form the foundation for later learning, making it difficult to catch up if a student falls behind. However, according to Raikes, this same argument cannot be applied to the study of the arts, which can take place at any time.

In other words, the arts can be a valuable component of the curriculum, but schools should give first priority to ensuring students master the core subjects.

A number of policymakers appear to support a strategy of integrating arts throughout the curriculum – that is, using the arts as a vehicle for teaching history, reading, science, etc. Recognizing that teacher preparation is a critical element of arts integration, Democratic Representative Michael Merrifield of Colorado hopes to introduce legislation to establish a requirement that all teacher candidates receive some exposure to the arts, a strategy also supported by Democratic Representatives Linda Lopez of Arizona and Kathy Ashe of Georgia. Idaho’s Democratic state superintendent Marilyn Howard, and Florida’s Representative Baxley both expressed a desire to see their teacher education programs do a better job of preparing candidates to integrate arts into other subjects.

Idaho Superintendent Howard has encouraged schools of education in her state to do more cross-curricular training, such as promoting collaboration between music and algebra teachers. She has suggested that arts educators should be able to reinforce what students learn in the core courses. One example she mentions is woodworking and drawing teachers working together to help students understand when they are applying mathematical concepts in the course of developing their projects. These teachers should be able to explain the concepts in “math language” so that students are able to see the connections clearly.

Yet some policymakers believe voters in their states do not necessarily embrace the ideas of integration and balance. Republican Senator Ed Olson of South Dakota describes a belief among many in his rural state that schools have traditionally focused on “the three Rs” and should continue to do so – an attitude he characterizes as, “If it’s good enough for Grandpa, it’s good enough for me.” Representative RaeAnn Kelsch, Republican of North Dakota, describes a similar attitude in her state, especially among older voters and policymakers. The result, according to Kelsch, is when funding difficulties arise, the arts are easy to cut.

Mandates and Local Control

Policymakers on both sides of the aisle express their opposition to state mandates for curricular offerings, though several admit that differences in the size and wealth of school districts have led to new rules in their states. Representative Kelsch describes such requirements recently established by the North Dakota legislature, commenting, “We felt it was unfair that the size of the district determines [students’] access to these programs.” Delegate Adrienne Jones, Democrat of Maryland, acknowledges that legislation may ultimately be needed to ensure a balanced curriculum, but argues, “The first step is to talk to superintendents and school boards.” Kansas Deputy Commissioner of Education Alexa Posny expresses a belief that good teaching cannot be mandated, but describes recent changes in her state’s graduation requirements that include an additional credit in fine arts, along with increases in math and science requirements. According to Posny, “You probably have to start with a mandate,” but once the requirement is in place the focus should be on ensuring effective practice.

Colorado Representative Mike Merrifield, a Democrat and former music teacher, is an ardent supporter of the arts in education. But Merrifield faces “a quandary.” He believes instruction in the arts should be required; as an advocate of local control, however, he resents what he sees as an attempt by his state’s higher education commission to dictate K-12 curriculum by increasing core course requirements for admission to the state’s universities – a move that could affect students’ ability to enroll in arts courses.

On the other side of the aisle politically, Republican Senator Ron Raikes of Nebraska shares Merrifield’s disdain for the increased entrance requirements being instituted by institutions of higher education – including arts requirements – because such requirements can unduly burden small districts. On the other hand, while Raikes recognizes that some small, rural school districts cannot afford arts specialists, he argues that this is a result of inefficiencies in those districts or the presence of too few students to justify the expense. Raikes does not want higher education dictating the K-12 curriculum, and neither does he believe it is the role of the legislature to tell school districts how to allocate their resources.

Local control is one of the aims of the Reinventing Education Act for the Children of Hawaii (REACH) of 2004, as described by Representative Roy Takumi, Democrat of Hawaii. The state uses a student-weighted formula to determine school funding. Schools serving more challenging student populations receive extra dollars. Each school forms a school-community council and – aside from state and federal mandates in the areas of special education, sports, graduation and adequate yearly progress – these

councils determine how best to meet state standards and allocate state funds. According to Takumi, schools in Hawaii cannot ignore the arts, but they can emphasize or deemphasize them based on what they believe is best for their students, an approach he strongly supports.

Taking the concept of local control to the *most* local level – that of the individual – Republican Senator Luther Olsen of Wisconsin offers an argument for a consumer-driven approach. In Wisconsin, students can choose regular electives, including courses in the arts, or they can enroll in college courses paid for through the state's Youth Options program. Because so many students are participating in Youth Options, demand for electives, says Olsen, is decreasing. Olsen believes the arts should be available to students, but that the choice of courses should be left to students, even if this results in fewer students studying the arts.

Advice for Advocates

Most of the policymakers interviewed for this report could not identify by name any reliable authorities in the area of arts in education; most point to the state education agency's arts education consultant or the state arts council as sources of expertise. One commissioner states that she would be more likely to turn to ECS for unbiased information about the arts in education than to anyone in her own state.

When asked whom they would like to hear from about the value of the arts in education, most policymakers identify teachers and parents, and many emphasize the effectiveness of personal stories in helping legislators understand the issues. Many policymakers, of course, are also parents. Representative Kelsch (ND) mentions that her children's band teacher has been adamant that she ensures the legislature include music among the options districts and students can choose from to meet the state's new requirements. Cegavske is the mother of a child with learning disabilities and believes the arts can be an important means of helping such children learn and express themselves. Baxley, of Florida, explains that all of his children are musicians. A daughter, who has dyslexia, "lives for band class" because it provides her with an opportunity to be successful even though she struggles in other areas. A son, who is blind, plays the bass. And an older son "made it through med school by playing the piano."

When asked what kind of information would be most helpful in determining whether to make the arts a higher priority, the majority of policymakers mention research that links arts to academic achievement. A few mention additional information that could be helpful, such as Senator Olson (SD), who would like to know whether participation in arts can have a positive effect on students' mental health. Representative Lopez (AZ) expresses an interest in research showing the effects of the arts on dropout prevention. Delegate Jones (MD) indicates a need for model legislation from states with similar demographics to hers; and Deputy Commissioner Posny (KS) expresses an interest in understanding how arts can help students gain job-related skills and awareness of jobs in the arts that they may not otherwise know about.

As to the kind of information policymakers need in order to decide whether to support the arts, Senator Sykora (MN) indicates she would like to know whether there are enough qualified teachers in her state to effectively teach arts. Representative Merrifield (CO) expresses a need for data specific to his state because his colleagues in the legislature do not seem to accept research or data from other states. Specifically, Merrifield wants to know the number of arts teachers in Colorado schools and the ratio of students to art teachers, and whether these numbers have decreased in recent years as districts use any extra funds to hire teachers in areas covered by the state's standardized tests. Representative Ashe (GA) notes that she is unable to determine the extent to which the arts are offered in her state's schools, and is considering submitting a resolution requiring local school districts to provide this information to their own school boards and the legislature.

When asked for advice to arts education advocates, former South Carolina State Superintendent Barbara Nielsen and West Virginia Deputy Secretary of Education Jay Cole, a Democrat, mention the Partnership for 21st Century Skills. Both Nielsen and Cole suggest that arts advocates work to incorporate arts into the work of the Partnership because of its credibility with business leaders. Both argue that if the business sector demands well-rounded graduates, it will happen. But Nielsen also emphasizes that arts education advocates must play a part in creating that demand by helping business leaders understand how the arts contribute to the development of the kind of employees they want. The message, according to Nielsen, has to be that the arts are not just for elites. "It has to be in K-Mart language," so that people understand the benefits to all students.

Several ECS commissioners suggest that ECS could help support the arts in education most by emphasizing the idea that it is not a question of the arts or academic achievement in the core subjects, but that the arts can actually support student achievement and help keep students engaged in school. Delegate Jones (MD) argues that an investment in the arts could save money in the long run by keeping at-risk students from getting into trouble, a sentiment echoed by Representative Lopez (AZ), who observes, “Students’ involvement in the arts often helps them to be successful in the academic arena, and it’s often what keeps them in school.”

Of course, not all of the policymakers interviewed are interested in promoting arts in education. Although Senator Raikes (NE) believes the arts are important, he claims to be a “stick-in-the-mud” with respect to the basics, arguing that the top priority for schools has to be math, science and reading. And Senator Olsen (WI) asserts that his state is not going to cut funding for the arts in education, but they also are not going to mandate it.

Summary and Conclusions

Ultimately, the question for these policymakers is not *whether* the arts should be included in the K-12 curriculum, but to what extent. A few believe the arts belong in schools because of their inherent value, but these supporters acknowledge that the most effective argument with their colleagues is that the arts can be used to teach a variety of academic skills and concepts, and to keep at-risk students engaged in school. Others believe that the focus should be on “the basics,” although they are willing to listen to experts in their own states, parents and students. Most policymakers interviewed for this study express reluctance to get involved in decisions about curriculum. Those who support the use of the arts seem willing to consider policy options that do not include mandates for increased classroom time or graduation requirements, but are aimed instead at expanding districts’ capacity to use the arts as a strategy for increasing student engagement and boosting academic achievement.

Policymakers suggested several avenues for advocates of the arts in education. These include:

- Professional development designed to prepare teachers to integrate the arts across the curriculum
- Public education about the role of arts in keeping students engaged in school, and the links between the arts and achievement in math and reading and the development of well-rounded citizens
- Continued engagement of the public through student performances and displays of student work
- Collection of state-specific data on the availability of arts education to students; to include information such as student-teacher ratios, arts instructional time and the availability of highly qualified arts teachers.

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Representative **Dennis Baxley**, *Florida*
Representative **Kathy Ashe**, *Georgia*
Senator **Norman Sakamoto**, *Hawaii*
Representative **Roy Takumi**, *Hawaii*
State Superintendent **Marilyn Howard**, *Idaho*
Senator **Teresa Lubbers**, *Indiana*
State Superintendent **Suellen Reed**, *Indiana*
Deputy Commissioner of Education **Alexa Posny**, *Kansas*
State Board of Education Member **Bill Wagnon**, *Kansas*
Delegate **Adrienne Jones**, *Maryland*
Representative **Barbara Sykora**, *Minnesota*
Senator **Ron Raikes**, *Nebraska*

Senator **Barbara Cegavske**, *Nevada*
Representative **RaeAnn Kelsch**, *North Dakota*
Former State Superintendent **Barbara Nielsen**, *South Carolina*
Senator **Ed Olson**, *South Dakota*
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This paper was written by Jeffery J. Miller, a Denver-based consultant specializing in citizenship education, youth leadership and public policy. Additional assistance was provided by Douglas Gould and Company.

For more information on the ECS Arts in Education Chairman's Initiative, visit www.ecs.org/huckabee

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