



The Arts Education Effect

Why Schools With Arts Programs Do Better At Narrowing Achievement Gaps

By Sandra S. Ruppert

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Most Americans agree with President Barack Obama's assessment that a "complete and competitive education for the 21st century" means all students will need some form of education or training beyond high school. That's why college and career readiness for all by 2020 is his administration's top education goal.

Yet while we recognize that higher levels of educational attainment will open doors to a better life for students, we haven't been able to keep an estimated 7,000 of them each day from heading quietly for the exits before they've had even a chance to earn a high school diploma.

Fewer than seven in 10 students in this country graduate from high school on time, according to the latest data available from the U.S. Department of Education. For students of color and those living in poverty or residing in large urban areas, the odds of on-time graduation are even slimmer. Barely half (51 percent) of African-American students successfully complete high school, while only 55 percent of Hispanics do.

For many of the 1.3 million young people who leave high school each year without a diploma, the path that eventually leads to this educational dead end begins in middle school. The National Assessment of Educational Progress—often referred to as "the nation's report card"—provides a snapshot of student achievement in various subject areas at crucial transition points, including 8th grade. In June 2009, the results of the 2008 NAEP arts assessment in music and visual arts were released; it was the first NAEP arts assessment conducted since 1997.

Those 2008 results tell a disappointing, but incomplete, story of 8th grade student achievement in the arts. In music, for example, 8th graders had just a 50-50 chance on average of being able to identify the correct response on any of the multiple-choice questions. In visual arts, 8th graders on average were able to identify the correct answer only 42 percent of the time. As troubling as the overall lackluster performance were the significant disparities in achievement based on socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, gender, and type and location of schools.

Does it really matter if the performance of 8th grade students on the NAEP arts assessments is mediocre at best, or that significant achievement gaps based on socioeconomics and other characteristics continue to persist? It matters only if we as a nation are truly serious about reaching the president's goal of preparing all K-12 students by 2020 to succeed in school, work, and life.

Arts learning experiences play a vital role in developing students' capacities for critical thinking, creativity, imagination, and innovation. These capacities are increasingly recognized as core skills and competencies all students need as part of a high-quality and complete 21st-century education. And, as a matter of social justice, we must be concerned when students are denied access to a high-quality education—one that includes learning in and through the arts—simply because of where they live or go to school.

Eighth grade is a crucial turning point for students as they prepare to make the transition from middle school to high school. By 9th grade, researchers can predict with a high degree of accuracy which students are most at risk of dropping out of school, based on three factors: absenteeism, behavioral problems, and course failure.

We know the arts can make a difference in the academic lives of 8th graders. A decade ago, the [Arts Education Partnership](#) published [groundbreaking research](#) that compared 8th graders who were highly involved in the arts with those who had little or no involvement, and found consistently better outcomes for the highly involved students: better grades, less likelihood of dropping out by grade 10, and more positive attitudes about school. The study also showed that the benefits of high levels of arts participation can make more of a difference for economically disadvantaged students.

Here are five strategies, drawn from the NAEP results, that can help arts education leaders, policymakers, and educators improve performance in the arts and narrow achievement gaps.

Ensure equal access to arts education. Not surprisingly, 8th graders who attend schools where visual arts instruction is offered at least once a week perform better than 8th graders who attend schools where the visual arts are not taught. The same is true for music education. Yet based on projections contained in the NAEP results, more than half a million 8th graders attend the 14 percent of schools where no visual arts classes are offered. More than 300,000 8th grade students attend the 8 percent of schools where no music classes are offered.

Raise levels of participation in arts coursetaking. Even in schools where the arts are offered, actual rates of student participation can be low. For example, one-third of schools estimate that no more than 20 percent of their students received any music instruction in 2008. Fewer than half of 8th graders reported taking a visual arts course in 2008.

Build interest in and demand for the arts in the early grades. Multiple factors can account for mediocre performance and low levels of participation in the arts, but one plausible explanation is that we are seeing the effects of the reduction or elimination of elementary school arts programs, which help build interest in and demand for arts courses in middle school. It may also be a contributing factor in 8th graders' low self-assessments of their skills: Only 24 percent think they have a talent for visual arts, while just 36 percent think they do for music.

Focus on what works in improving student achievement in the arts. Based on the NAEP results, 8th graders perform at consistently higher levels when they attend schools where any of these conditions exist: (1) a state or district curriculum is in place; (2) classes are taught by a full-time or part-time arts specialist; and (3) classes are located in a designated and adequately equipped space.

Level the playing field to help close the arts education achievement gap. Minority students and those from low-income households have less access to instruction and are less likely to attend schools that have a state or district curriculum. They are less likely to receive instruction from a full-time or part-time arts specialist, or to take field trips or have visiting artists in their schools. Put simply, we provide students who are likely to benefit from arts instruction most with the least of everything.

NAEP's next arts assessment is scheduled for 2016. The 8th graders who participate in it will be part of the high school graduating class of 2020—the first class in which we can measure whether we have met the ambitious goal of ensuring that all K-12 students are prepared to succeed in college and the workforce.

If we are to meet such a goal, we must take seriously our commitment to close achievement gaps and keep all students on the path to high school graduation and beyond. Arts learning opportunities—both as stand-alone classes and integrated with other subjects—must play an integral role in providing them with the complete education they need to succeed. Let's hope we see the results of our efforts in 2016.

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