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# Issue Brief

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## At a Glance

Integrating arts across the curriculum and providing access to arts education benefits literacy skills.

Teachers reported that the DC Collaborative Arts Education Initiative (AEI) program supported student learning in academic subjects such as reading. Teachers reported that 80% of students learned reading and writing skills because of the DC Collaborative's AEI program.

## Key Issue:

Learning in and through the arts provides an important but often neglected means by which schools can close achievement gaps and advance student academic outcomes such as higher levels of literacy.

## Primary Findings

Learning in the performing and visual arts, as well as arts integration across the curriculum, significantly improves student reading and writing skills, motivation, and self-confidence, laying a foundation for future academic achievement.

## Arts Integration Advances Literacy

Research has shown that integrating arts across the curriculum and providing opportunities for arts learning can help advance student literacy.

The National Literacy Act of 1999 defines literacy as "an individual's ability to read, write and speak English and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary: to function on the job and in society, achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential." As the breadth of this definition suggests, literacy represents more than the ability to decode words on a page; it is the skill-set undergirding student academic achievement, as well as a key indicator for success in adult life. Contrary to the perception that all activities not included within the covers of the standard basal readers will take away valuable time needed for literacy, the arts can complement and actually strengthen traditional curricula, motivating students through engaged learning and stimulating higher-order and creative thinking.

## The Challenge

It is generally acknowledged that the ability to read grounds learning in a wide variety of disciplines. In the U.S., where only one out of every three 4th and 8th graders can read, students' overall academic proficiency remains a critical challenge (NAEP, 2009). Many experts accept that "students who are not proficient readers by the end of second grade face continuing difficulties throughout their education" (Moses 1999). For youngsters "who do not make good progress in these early grades, learning to read is difficult and is associated with both present and future failure. Children who do not learn to read well in the first and second grades are likely to struggle with reading throughout their lives" (Moses, 1999). A double burden falls upon our school system: educators must help our youngest students master the basic literacy skills they will need along the continuum of their school careers, while also finding ways to bring under-performing, disconnected students still struggling with reading up to grade-level.

## TAKE-AWAYS FOR: School Administrators and Teachers

The DC Collaborative's approach to building capacity for integrating arts across the curriculum leads to more interactive instruction associated with advancing literacy skills among students.

The AEI program assists teachers and principals in defining and refining instructional programs to increase effectiveness.

Project-based learning opportunities, arts integrated curricula and rich opportunities for in-school and out-of-school arts experiences allow AEI schools to develop a more engaging curriculum and instructional approach for students at all levels on the spectrum of academic performance.

## TAKE-AWAYS FOR: Policy makers

An emerging body of research, including applied research, shows that integrating arts across the curriculum — as well as an increased access to arts learning and arts experiences — helps support and advance reading and writing skills among students. Therefore policy makers should support arts integration initiatives in schools as well as research initiatives designed to provide more information on the most efficacious approaches to scaling up arts integration so that the preponderance of best practice knowledge does not exist at the case by case basis.

## Findings

The relationship between the arts and the development of literacy skills has been well documented. One striking example comes from a six-year study of the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE), an arts education initiative bringing local artists and art agencies into collaboration with the public school system at all grade levels. The study found that CAPE school students in the sixth grade outperformed students from non arts-integrated programs on reading standardized tests in all 52 comparisons conducted (Catterall 1999). The following findings illustrate how arts learning activities and arts integration strategies, joining instruction in an art form with specific instructional goals in reading, can excite student engagement with learning and make a measureable difference in improving such curricular goals as story understanding, reading comprehension, and topical writing skills.

## The Performing Arts: Setting the Stage for Literacy through Drama, Dance, and Music:

### Theater

- Although “story time” has long been a standard method of teaching children to read, a recent study found that allowing Pre-K students to act out their favorite stories promoted the development of the children's literacy skills. Dramatic play helped motivate them to learn (Goodman 2002). Engaging in a dramatic enactment of a story further improved students' overall understanding of the story, most markedly in first graders who were reading below grade level (Page 2002).
- Drama has also been shown to improve the quality of children's narrative writing. Second and third graders using poetry, games, movement, and improvisation to act out their story ideas demonstrated enhanced performance in writing (Moore and Caldwell 2002).
- The ArtsConnection Project worked with over 120 NYC public schools over seven years to help integrate theater, dance, music, and visual arts into the classroom. Researchers identified significant parallel competencies between the dramatic arts and English language skills (ELA), especially verbal expression and listening skills. Children participating in drama/ storytelling residencies learned to interpret texts and understand narrative, dramatic sequence and character development (Hefferen, 2005).

### Dance

- Another branch of research suggests a link between movement and early literacy development (Corso, 1997). Movement and sensory integration have been demonstrated to positively impact focus and motivation as related to reading ability in second graders (Anderson, 1999).

- Within dance residencies provided through the ArtsConnection project, students used movement and gesture to represent ideas and emotion. Quantitative and qualitative data indicated that the experience with the arts enhanced such cognitive skills as creativity, elaboration, originality, and the ability to conceive of multiple ways of representing a problem. (Horowitz, 2002).

## **Music**

- Several studies have pointed to the value of “music lessons,” primarily piano or other instrumental lessons, for improving reading achievement scores and academic abilities in children aged 3-7 (Lang, 1999; Weinberger, 1998). According to 2009 results published in the journal *Psychology of Music*, the general vocabulary and verbal sequencing skills of young children in New York public schools who received structured training in music were significantly higher than those of their peers, even though all participants took part in comprehensive literary training in which lengthy periods of their school day were dedicated to reading and writing (Piro and Ortiz, 2009).
- A 2009 cross-over study conducted by the Joyful Note Music Education Foundation demonstrated that a twice-weekly intervention, consisting of non-instrumental music, movement, and play, had a positive, quantifiable, and statistically significant effect on the reading scores of second graders receiving the intervention as compared to a control group that received instead additional classroom instruction in either reading or math. (Zell and Zell, 2004).

## Theater and Language Skills in Secondary School: Reading More Deeply

- According to data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS:88), a panel study following more than 25,000 students in American secondary schools for 10 years, low socio-economic status (SES) students who were highly involved in theater between the eighth and twelfth grades outscored non-involved students in reading proficiency. The difference favoring students engaged in the language-rich environment of theater steadily increased over the course of the students’ high school careers; while 9% more drama-involved students were reading at high proficiency in the eighth grade, the advantage rose to nearly 20% among twelfth graders. (Catterall, 1999).
- In a multi-year study of Creating Original Opera (COO), a program in which elementary students form a company to write and produce an original opera, researchers found that children as young as third grade,

when asked to write reviews of the comic opera “Gianni Schicchi” as part of their exit interviews, “spontaneously interpreted the many messages that a performance can convey.” Having completed their own creative opera work, students showed signs of applying more nuanced, non-literal reading and writing skills to their appraisal of the work of others (Wolf, 1999).

## Visual Arts: Reading Paintings

- The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum’s “Learning through Art” initiative dispatches artists to spend one day a week at schools over a 10- or 20-week period helping students and teachers learn about and make art. Groups of students are also taken to the Guggenheim to see exhibitions. According to a 2006 study, students participating in the museum’s arts education program performed better in six categories of literacy and critical thinking skills—including thorough description, hypothesizing and reasoning—than did students who were not in the program. Says researcher Johanna Jones, “the use of both talking about art and using inquiry to help students tease apart the meaning of paintings helps them learn how to tease apart the meanings of texts, too. They apply those skills to reading.” (Jones, 2006)
- A study investigating the effect of visual response on literacy encouraged learning-disabled boys to convey their understanding of reading assignments using visual forms of expression. After a nine-week course of “visualization training,” these students took a more active role in reading: they began to interpret text rather than passively reading it (Wilhelm 2002).

## Arts Involvement and Perceptions of Self as Learner

- Engagement with the arts also provides students with the self-confidence so crucial to success in school. In the study, “Learning In and Through the Arts,” the Center for Arts Education Research at Teachers College Columbia University discovered not only that pupils receiving more in-school arts instruction outscored their low-arts counterparts in creative thinking ability and general competency of expression, but also that these high-arts students were much more likely to think of themselves as competent in school in general, particularly in language and mathematics. Fourth, fifth, seventh, and eighth-grade youngsters in the “high-arts group” (the upper quartile of children based on the level of in-school arts instruction) revealed a reading self-concept that was twice as high as that of children in the “low-arts group” (Burton, Horowitz, Abeles, 1999)

## Spotlight on the DC Collaborative's Arts Education Initiative (AEI) Schools:

Many of the findings reflected in the research synthesis above were mirrored in the work of the DC Collaborative Arts Education Initiative schools.

For example, teachers reported that the DC Collaborative Arts Education Initiative program supported student learning in academic subjects such as reading. Teachers reported that 80% of students learned reading and writing skills because of the DC Collaborative's AEI program.

Many of these arts integration opportunities have been specifically geared towards exposing students to literature in an interactive setting.

"[Arts integration] allows ones who are not always at the top of the class to sometimes [be] the ones that get to shine. It was more apparent with the ones who are struggling readers because everything was not focused on reading from a book."

Activities such as dramatizing the narrative helped to build confidence and motivation among students honing their reading skills.

"[One student] was very shy and reticent. When she got up there in drama she could pretend, and in the pretending she could let go a little bit. She could be the character and enjoy herself and take the risk. That is true for a lot of the kids. They could take a risk," reported another AEI teacher. In many of the arts integration activities students were encouraged to link the dramatization to an understanding of corresponding text.

Another teacher participating in AEI pointed out that the spoken storytelling and dramatization "made it more important for [students] to learn the letters and sounds."

The result was that students became . . . "more independent in their writing. I think they are more focused on achievement."

These are powerful observations and take-aways that point toward a new direction for accelerating literacy in schools wherein arts integration is a key strategy.

## Key Policies

Under the federal education law, No Child Left Behind, schools have been led to increase class time spent on math and reading, often at the expense of subjects such as art. And yet siphoning time and funding away from learning in the arts may actually work against these efforts to raise student performance. Moreover, access to the arts in our society remains inequitably distributed, with students from poor and less educated families much more likely to record low levels of participation in the arts during the middle and high school years (Catterall, 1999). Providing equal access to arts education opportunities for all students in the DC metro area, then, represents a path for schools to bring students in the public and charter school system up to national standards. For struggling or at-risk students in particular, arts experiences help level the educational playing field by appealing to alternative learning styles, providing a gateway to achievement in other areas of learning, such as reading.

## Existing Barriers

Though arts in education represents an untapped resource for the development of literacy, too many schools face the following barriers:

- Lack of funds to integrate arts, including student-centered artist residencies; in and out of school arts experiences; and staff professional development.
- Lack of understanding about the creative process and corresponding positive impact on children's academic performance and personal development.
- An increasing demand for access to cultural institutions and arts-related organizations in the DC Metropolitan area and a need for increased funding for programs designed to meet the demand.

## The Bottom Line

Mounting evidence suggests that the arts, particularly integrating arts across the curriculum, positively impacts students' general academic success, fueling specific achievement in such subject areas as reading and writing. If schools include arts instruction across the disciplines and pursue arts-integrated learning programs, many students will realize significant benefits in the development of literacy skills, which are fundamental to student success both in school and beyond.



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