# Issue Brief

SEPTEMBER 2011

## At a Glance
Integrating arts across the curriculum contributes to creating positive school climate and other conditions for learning.

## Key Issue
As schools work to close achievement gaps and advance student academic outcomes, an important first step in that work is to create the positive school climates characterized by evidence of students' voice and participation and supportive student/teacher relationships.

## Primary Findings
Integration of arts across the curriculum at DC Collaborative's Arts Education Initiative (AEI) schools leads to greater evidence of the student voice, resulting in an environment where students feel they belong and are valued and can establish strong connections to caring adults they can trust.

# Arts Integration Creates Positive School Climates

A positive school climate is essential for students and their families to feel welcomed, encouraged and valued. There are a number of definitions used to describe school climate, but for the purposes of this issue brief, positive school climate is characterized by an environment that makes students feel accepted, recognized and valued.

## The Challenge

Student academic proficiency remains a critical challenge in the U.S. where only one out of every three 4th and 8th graders can read proficiently and only 34% of 8th graders are proficient in math (NAEP, 2009). Yet students in schools reporting an above-average climate had higher mean National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) mathematics scale scores than students in schools reporting average or below-average school climate on the same measure (Greenberg, Skidmore, Rhodes, & Nesbitt, 2001). There is a great deal of research still needed regarding the best ways to establish and sustain positive school climates, but current findings are clear that positive school climate holds real potential for supporting student learning. In the DC Collaborative's work with 10 schools in Washington, DC, we found that integrating art across a school's curriculum goes a long way in establishing the characteristics that make a positive learning environment. The following are some examples of what these schools participating in the Arts in Education Initiative (AEI) were able to achieve regarding creating a welcoming environment where students were recognized and valued with opportunities to identify their voice and express their ideas.

- Approaches to teaching that help students feel valued, heard, connected and supported

- The establishment of strong student/teacher relationships

- Increased manifestation of student work and voice

## Take-Aways for:

### School Administrators

• Establish clear goals for your arts integration program and the ways in which you will plan for it to contribute to improving school climate.

• Conduct school climate surveys before implementing an arts integration program at your school. Be sure to include student responses to survey questions.

• Periodically conduct school climate surveys to benchmark progress and identify opportunities to refine your plans to create a positive school climate.

• Ensure that teachers have appropriate high-quality professional development opportunities regarding arts integration and have time for collaborative planning.

The various activities involved in integrating arts across the curriculum help develop strong positive connections between teachers and students. Research indicates that students are more likely to perform well on tests when they believe that their teachers know and care about them (Muller, 2001; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Feeling secure and engaged with teachers leads to being more engaged with the learning process and has been linked to positive coping skills wherein students more often turn to teachers to address school problems (Newman, 1992.; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). Positive school climates characterized by the personalization that comes with strong teacher/student relationships have been shown to result in higher scores, on average, on the California Standards Test English language arts exam; higher weighted grade point averages; and an increased probability that students are "on-track" relative to requirements for high school completion (Jones, Yonezawa, Mehan, & McClure, 2008; Yonezawa, Jones, Mehan, & McClure, 2008). Researchers have found that students reported greater expectations of their own abilities and an increased sense of personal accountability among teachers and students when measures of personalization increased (Wallach, Ramsey, Copland, and Lowry, 2006).

## Snapshots from AEI schools

Arts Integrated units developed by participating AEI teachers provide strong evidence of a positive student climate, especially with respect to demonstrating student opportunities to *communicate and demonstrate learning in their own unique voice.*

### Arts & Technology Academy Public Charter School
The 2nd grade team developed an arts integrated unit combining language arts and drama, during which students wrote their own endings to the popular story "101 Dalmatians." As a class, the students then drafted a script based on a compilation of individual student work, and performed the final production for the school. Through this unit, students not only learned elements of writing and performing drama, but also had the opportunity to put their individual interpretation of the story and characters into words.

### At the Peabody Early Childhood Center
Students explored the work of abstract painter Georgia O'Keefe, through a partnership with the Phillips Collection. Classroom teachers connected studio painting projects to age-level learning in core competency areas from literacy to life science, with activities that included reading about the artist's life, making careful observations of leaves and flowers from the school's garden, and then writing about their artwork in student journals.

The impact of arts integration on school climate is also highlighted *through positive student engagement.*

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## Take-Aways for:

### Teachers

- Use arts integration to engage students in learning, expression and in contributing positively to the school community.

- Use arts integration to recognize and reward positive student participation.

- Use arts integration to help teach to individual student learning styles.

### District Administrators

- Articulate standards regarding positive school climate and share benchmarks for establishing such a climate, including through integrating the arts across the curriculum.

- Feature school climate data, including examples of successful arts integration, in district-wide reports and school accountability systems.

- Use school climate data to focus district-wide activities.

- Provide ongoing support to districts and schools regarding data-driven school climate improvement systems and support for related professional development, particularly with a focus on arts integration as a lever for more positive school climates.

### Stuart Hobson Middle School

An AEI teacher noticed that a student awaiting an IEP who was typically a disengaged student was fully engaged during a unit that integrated math and square dancing. For all future units, the teacher made a point to integrate kinetic activities through the arts as much as possible. According to the teacher, "…he was able to show me class work. He was able to show me some progress on his test."

Finally, the impact of arts integration on creating a positive school climate is highlighted through examples of students who otherwise might be alienated or have difficulty connecting to classroom activities demonstrating positive learning experiences.

According to survey response from a participating teacher who developed a unit integrating language arts and poetry, "One of my students has a quirky sense of humor. He loves to shock, and [is] very disorganized…But he came up with really fun poems that allow him to use that quirky sense of humor. It allows him to use his edginess. "

Evidence of a positive school climate can also be demonstrated through the physical environment in the school. In hallways and classrooms in Arts Education Initiative schools, student artwork and corresponding displays listing both content and arts learning standards related to the artwork are frequently visible.

## Key Practices

The following practices were identified as key to supporting learning in the AEI classrooms:

### Student Voice and Engagement

- Opportunities for students to informally share work were created. The goal of these opportunities included an emphasis on process, not just product.

- Whenever possible, opportunities for students to create in the art form were explored. Opportunities and appropriate time to create and construct new paintings, sculpture, lyrics and drama provided more authentic and meaningful learning for students, and thereby demonstrated to them that their voices and ideas were valued by the community.

### Student/Teacher Relationships

- As teachers listened and observed individual student expression, they built up a rapport and sense of understanding and appreciating unique qualities of their students.

- Students at AEI schools often sought teacher input and feedback on their artwork and other academic activities, manifesting a sense of trust.

### Physical space

- School administrators and staff made space for student artwork to be displayed. Fire codes and safety regulations were reviewed to ensure that student artwork could be presented in public school spaces, and did not prevent or prohibit such displays.

- School administrators set the expectation that student work should be displayed as a demonstration of student learning for parents and community stakeholders.

- School administrators created the expectation that space can become messy in the process of creation. School staff were willing and able to work with students to clean up space after arts lessons, and did not let neatness issues prevent creative exploration.

- School administrators created the expectation that student artwork on display should be respected by the school body.

### Existing Barriers

Though arts in education has so much potential to create the kind of school climate where students thrive and learn, 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 social, emotional, and cognitive development.

- Lack of adequate physical space to learn and create.

- The notion that arts integration somehow dilutes arts learning and fine arts mastery. These are not mutually exclusive.

## The Bottom Line

Arts integration as well as learning in the arts has a positive impact on school climate, in terms of creating a more engaging and authentic learning experience for students, in developing more positive adult relationships with teachers and staff, and in establishing a more vibrant physical space in which to learn. Arts integration provides students the opportunity to consider and to understand their own voice, and to learn how to effectively and creatively communicate with the outside world.

## Caveats

There are convincing data to suggest that addressing school climate as part of an overall school improvement plan holds significant promise for helping to create better schools and it has been our observation that both integrating arts across the curriculum and advancing learning in the arts contributes to establishing positive school climate. Because of a lack of time and resources in schools, there has been relatively little documentation regarding school and district efforts to improve school climate through the arts. Yet it is this very data and additional rigorous research that will shed light on the most effective approaches to improving school climates, and thereby improving schools moving forward.

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### About the DC Collaborative

The DC Collaborative believes that the arts—inclusive of music, visual arts, theater, dance, and literary arts—are central to the education of every student. A community-based partnership organization, now 60 members strong, the DC Collaborative works to promote quality arts and humanities education for all DC public and chartered public schools for the growth of the whole child. Working with our partners, the DC Collaborative produces such exemplary programs as Arts for Every Student, Professional Development, and the recently launched Arts Education Initiative. The DC Collaborative's Arts Education Initiative (AEI) was made possible by generous support from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities and the Ford Foundation.