

NAEA Advisory

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"WE GOT TROUBLE ... RIGHT HERE IN ..." UNLESS ...

by

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"We got trouble right here in River City..." This phrase from *The Music Man* (Willson, 1958) aptly describes a rapidly evolving dilemma facing arts educators, as well as their colleagues in other areas of the curriculum in public education. The external forces which are placing unprecedented demands on educators have left no arena untouched, and have had a dramatic impact on many areas of the public school program.

Societal forces are impacting schools in new and previously unanticipated ways. In the September, 1991, issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, noted demographer Dr. Harold Hodgkinson cited the following:

- Almost one-fourth (23%) of all preschool children live in poverty.
- Annually 350,000 children are born to women who were addicted to cocaine during pregnancy (costing over \$40,000 per child to educate). The first of these children are now in the kindergarten and first grade classes of our public schools.
- Over 15 million children are being reared by single mothers.
- 20% of America's preschool children have not been vaccinated for polio.
- One-fourth of pregnant mothers receive no physical care in the first trimester of pregnancy; (interestingly, 20% of handicapped children would not be impaired had their mothers had physical exams during pregnancy).
- Child protection agencies reported a tripling of child abuse cases in the last ten years; on any given night between 50,000 - 200,000 children have no home—40% of shelter users last year were families.
- In 1988, 4.3 million children were living with a mother who had never been married (up 678% since 1970) (Hodgkinson, 1991).

These external forces are having a particular impact on what children are taught, how they are taught, and when they are taught. Further complicating the issue are financial burdens placed on school systems as a result of these trends. A significant result has been the erosion of financial support for some traditional arts education programs.

Public Policy and Funding

Indicators of public policy changes which do not bode well for arts educators at the high school level include state accreditation standards, algebra and computer proficiency requirements, the expansion of Tech Prep, and new integrated testing programs. The old saying that states *that which gets tested gets taught* is true, but it also gets public attention and resources.

This is particularly obvious when funding decisions must be made. Both at the state and local level shrinking resources are causing school boards to focus on what is of *greatest priority*. It is logical to assume that the greatest priority would be that for which boards are held accountable—which is the *academic performance of students*, and this is where the arts are important. The arts add to and increase the academic performance of students. National research is proving that in school systems which include the arts, especially those who use the arts as a core curriculum, are experiencing high student performance and increases in test scores, in academic subject areas. Two schools, Ashley River School in Charleston, SC and the South Bronx's St. Augustine School of the Arts, were featured in the March 1992 issue of *U.S. News and World Report*. Both schools are located in poor neighborhoods and had low test scores until they implemented arts programs which turned them into high achieving schools.

In Sampson County, the largest rural county in North Carolina, standardized test scores improved dramatically when the arts (music, dance, drama, and visual arts) were introduced into the school system. In comparison, similar rural North Carolina school systems, which have not implemented arts education programs, have not shown the rapid increases in pupil achievement which were exhibited in Sampson County. Cognizant of the importance of the arts in enhancing test scores, another rural county has added a high school graduation requirement in the arts for all students.

In the April, 1992 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, Judith Lynn Hanna cited another indicator of the positive impact of arts education from the National Center for Education Statistics. "The grade-point average of secondary students

who concentrate in the arts (defined as earning more than three credits in any combination of courses in dance, dramatic arts, design, graphic and commercial arts, crafts, fine arts, music or creative writing) are generally higher than those of the student body as a whole" (p. 603). She also states that profiles of high school students compiled by the college Board (1987-89) reveal that students who take arts courses tend to have higher scores on the SAT than high school students who do not take the arts, and that the more arts courses a student takes, the higher his or her SAT score increases.

Arts educators and school administrators have a responsibility to make this currently published research information known and heard by people who make decisions about funding and school programs. These groups include local school board members, parents, P.T.A. groups, students, community members and state and local politicians and members of State Boards of Education.

Most arts educators feel that policy makers will not reduce funding for the arts because of its visibility, its broad appeal to the public, and its value in enhancing the self-image of students. They may or may not be correct. However, arts education must take the initiative to ensure leaders, as well as average citizens in local communities, are truly knowledgeable about the arts and are informed of the latest national research that relates the arts to creativity, higher order thinking skills and an increase in test scores by those students who are exposed to the arts.

An Agenda for the Arts

What, then, should arts educators do? First, *acknowledge* and *accept* that a paradigm shift in education is occurring, both short term and long term, which will impact arts educators and other curriculum areas. Secondly, begin immediately by taking measures at the school level to ensure that arts educator's points of view can be both respected and assimilated into decision making. Next, develop new creative and innovative models for delivering instructional services to boys and girls and work with administrators to pilot them. Look at the models already developed (i.e., Ashley River, Project Zero, St. Augustine, etc.) and use these as examples of successful programs that work! Develop innovative alternative models (i.e., redesign and focus your arts program on creative thinking and higher order thinking skills for all students, integrate the arts into all other curriculum areas, etc.). A comprehensive approach such as this should allow for subject matter to be integrated into a rich, full, colorful life learning experience for students.

Picture high school students, for example, projecting and sharing their computer images in an art lab, students creating videos and projecting the images on one large screen that can be seen and printed at several sites simultaneously, or picture music/dance students sharing sound and movement with fellow students throughout the state and in other countries, creating both dance and songs via video networking...the ideas and possibilities are there just waiting to be created.

Keep up with all new aspects of modern technology so that arts educators will be in the forefront as leaders of the creative arts education movement of the 21st century. Arts educators have been focusing on Outcome Based Education for the past twenty years. While it has never been called by that name, arts educators have (historically) been teaching for specific outcomes.

Fourthly, become a teacher of teachers. This will insure the development of a cadre of professional support within each school by demonstrating an interest in the subject matter of others for the benefit of the whole child.

Finally, be aware that curriculum integration infused with higher order thinking skills will receive full focus, nationally, in the next five years. To prepare for that inevitability, collaborate with classroom teachers to develop units which are exemplary models of integrating the arts into every curriculum area.

In addition, it is important that we all be aware of what business and industry is demanding from its future employees, i.e., that our students be able to: a) think creatively, b) apply information, and c) be able to communicate with groups of people. Through the arts, students are able to accomplish these skills.

In summary, take the initiative, as delineated in each of the strategies cited above to focus efforts on becoming a valued colleague and team player at the school level. Through these approaches, which represent only a few selected ideas, we can develop strong local support for the expansion of valuable arts education programs that enhance public schools and give our students those survival skills which will be required for the 21st Century.

References

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