

The Art of Education Success

By Nick Rabkin and Robin Redmond

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It is fall. Fourth-graders in a Chicago school in a low-income neighborhood are focused and coiled with excitement. They are drawing portraits of each other in a lesson that is part of a unit on descriptive writing. They are deeply engaged, and the rich writing and art on the walls are evidence of real learning and accomplishment. Most other classrooms in the building also integrate the arts with other subjects and buzz with the intensity of discovery.

The same day, in another low-income Chicago school, fourth-graders slump in their chairs, waiting to read a bit of advice to their classmates. They mumble, "Don't hit your sister," and "Do your homework." There is no children's work on the walls, no evidence of learning. Instead, posters remind students of rules they must follow. One asks, "What is freedom?" The answers suggest freedom is a reward for self-control.

The new economy may require higher-order skills such as creativity, adaptability and teamwork, but most schools in low-income areas focus narrowly on "basic" academic skills, testing and discipline. The student boredom and academic failure that follow prompt calls for yet more testing and discipline.

The first school and others like it are proving that integrating the arts into the core of the academic program is a far more productive strategy. Recently the principal of Edgebrook, Chicago's highest-scoring non-selective elementary school, attributed her school's success to its embrace of the arts. "We were concerned we might see a negative impact on test scores," Diane Maciejewski said. "But actually, just the opposite happened."

A growing body of research is yielding data that support her claim. A study of 23 arts-integrated schools in Chicago showed test scores rising up to two times faster there than in demographically comparable schools. A study of a Minneapolis program showed that arts integration has substantial effects for all students, but appears to have its greatest impact on disadvantaged learners. Gains go well beyond the basics and test scores. Students become better thinkers, develop higher-order skills, and deepen their inclination to learn.

The studies also show that arts integration energizes and challenges teachers. Karen Seashore, a distinguished sociologist who studies urban schools, called the Minneapolis program "one of the most powerful professional development experiences we have seen for large numbers of teachers."

When the arts are an interdisciplinary partner with other subjects, they generate conditions that cognitive scientists say are ideal for learning. The curriculum becomes more hands-on and project-based, offering what University of Chicago researchers have called authentic and challenging intellectual work. Learning in all subjects becomes visible through the arts. Teachers' opinions of their students rise.

Students invest emotionally in arts-integrated classrooms, where the curriculum often connects lessons to their own experience, and where they often work in groups and turn classrooms into learning communities.

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These classroom changes lead to a cascade of broader school changes. Schedules change to accommodate sustained attention to meaningful questions. Parents become more involved in schools. Teachers collaborate and take on new leadership roles.

These successes make clear that the arts are not just affective and expressive. They are also deeply cognitive. They develop the tools of thinking itself: careful observation of the world, mental representation of what is observed or imagined, abstraction from complexity, pattern recognition and development, symbolic and metaphoric representation, and qualitative judgment. We use these same thinking tools in science, philosophy, math and history. The advantage of the arts is that they link cognitive growth to social and emotional development. Students care more deeply about what they study, they see the links between subjects and their lives, their thinking capacities grow, they work more diligently, and they learn from each other.

Students will not be prepared for work in an economy that demands higher-order skills if their schools focus exclusively on the basics. Students will not learn to think for themselves if their schools expect them just to stay in line and keep quiet. Successful programs in Chicago, Minneapolis and elsewhere have proven that arts integration is within the reach of most schools and districts. Now research is showing that connecting the arts to learning across the curriculum is a strategy that helps close the achievement gap and make schools happier places by moving beyond a crippling focus on basics and discipline. It is time for more districts and schools to make use of this strategy.

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