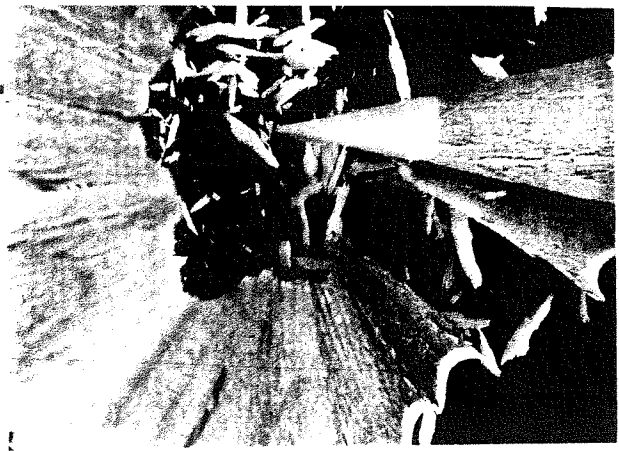




What One Dedicated Teacher Can Do



The Promise of Arts Education

Far from being a 'frill,' arts education provides opportunities for renewal and reform

SARAH TAMBUCCI

Roslyn Stulga was doing just as she was asked. All the teachers at Park Elementary School in Munhall, Pa., were instructed to complete a weekly report on how they were helping students prepare for the state assessment tests. But imagine her surprise when she handed in her report and was told that, as the elementary art teacher, she wasn't expected to do the assignment. Practicing her leadership skills, Stulga said that since she had already done the task, perhaps the principal would like to read her report.

Later that week, the principal complimented Stulga for a comprehensive analysis that focused on how she was reinforcing students' literacy skills. The principal also asked if her report could be used as a model for the whole school.

But this was only the beginning. Positive reinforcement from her principal on a job well done spurred this elementary school art teacher to investigate the connection between literacy and math skills and the visual arts. She set out to conduct a needs assessment regarding the skills in which her students were weak and what she could do to help them strengthen those skills. With the

support of her principal, Stulga was on her way to doing the kind of research that only a knowledgeable classroom practitioner could do.

ART TEACHERS AS CHANGE AGENTS

Stulga's story is not atypical. More frequently than most of us can imagine, arts educators are functioning as change agents in the school improvement process. But for that to happen takes vision, creativity, and administrative support. Stulga used her creativity to develop a bigger vision, but what if the principal had not read her report and seen the opportunity it presented? Both Stulga and her principal had a shared vision and knew

their roles as educational leaders.

The No Child Left Behind Act identifies the arts as core academic content. But we know the core is shrinking down to those content areas that are tested. We find that study in the arts and other core subjects has become a victim of our political environment. The intent of NCLB was not to rip the arts out of our schools, but in many places, that is just what is happening.

Why? Responsible leaders at the local level cannot lay all the blame on NCLB. The problem is a lack of shared vision.

We know that bored students are a fact of American schools. We know that the achievement gap between white students and minority students is a reality. We also know that the arts make classroom learning relevant, engage active learning, and provide a way for students to discover and learn to embrace the value and duties of citizenship.

Volumes of documentation regarding the value of the arts line the shelves of our professional libraries. Support for the arts as part of a comprehensive education is the

subject of articles, speeches, and symposia. Still, when push comes to shove—when resources are precious and test results get published in newspapers—it is the arts that are the first to go.

The chasm between what we know about education's problems and what we know about the value of the arts in helping solve these problems is a leadership issue.

Educational leaders and decision makers at the local level have the ethical, moral, and professional responsibility to provide substantive support for arts education that can make a difference in children's lives. Top down and bottom up, our understanding of the value of the arts must be translated into the policy decisions and allocation of resources that will help all students achieve at high levels. It is a matter of educational leadership.

SUCCESS IS CONTAGIOUS

Loretta Smith, an art teacher in Moon Township, Pa., had been a hardworking, dedicated professional for more than 25 years. But something was missing. She knew her students at Moon Area Middle School could easily lose interest in learning if she didn't work to keep her instruction fresh and relevant. She began to experiment with technology in her art program and soon had colleagues interested in the learning that was evident in the students' work.

Smith heard about an opportunity for a technology grant and, with the support of her principal and central office administrators, submitted a proposal and was awarded the grant. Students now use such software applications as Art Dabbler, CorelDraw, and Flash along with more traditional art materials in their drawing and graphic design courses.

On her way to becoming an educational leader in her school, Smith embraced Pennsylvania's new state standards and incorporated even higher expectations for her

students in the areas of listening, speaking, and writing. Students responded, and Smith found that her satisfaction with her work as a teacher increased in direct proportion to her students' achievement.

Success is contagious, and soon, working with colleagues, the entire middle school art program became a model for other departments. Smith was providing daily evidence that her students were demonstrating the crucial 21st-century skills of creativity, problem solving, self-direction, flexibility, and the ability to work collaboratively.

A shared vision of the value of the arts emerged at the school. The music teacher volunteered to work on a regional team to help shape a framework for music education, and a physical education teacher participated in a dance residency to incorporate dance education into the physical education program.

LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORT

These teachers had a vision of how arts education could support and enrich the entire curriculum. They took the initiative—but not without leadership and support from their principals and from the Moon Area School District central office.

Assistant Superintendent Bille Rondinelli provided increased opportunities for arts educators to participate in professional development designed to meet their specific needs. She encouraged faculty members to garner community support by writing about their students' accomplishments for the district newsletter. The community responded enthusiastically to a school calendar highlighting arts programs and student learning in the arts. The school board granted permission for teachers to attend professional conferences, provided resources for arts education programming, and ensured sufficient staffing. The board's decisions reflected leadership at the policy-making level that supports high-quality pro-

grams in the arts.

The district now had a shared vision of arts education for all students—not just the talented ones—and was developing a leadership team in the arts as a model for the entire region.

These examples of leadership at the classroom, school, and district levels reflect what it takes to support student achievement and school improvement. Roslyn Stulga, Loretta Smith, and Bille Rondinelli were exhibiting the very skills that the arts teach—among them intuition, diligence, and risk taking. The arts are a part of, not apart from, what happens in American schools.

ACTION TO SUPPORT THE ARTS

What can each of us do to support arts education as part of a high-quality education for all students? Consider an action plan that includes:

- Teachers as change agents in identifying learning opportunities that include the arts;
- Principals as gatekeepers to ensure that the arts are acknowledged with the same respect as all content areas;
- Central office administrators as educational leaders who view NCLB as an opportunity to enhance learning with the arts as a core component; and
- School board members as informed policymakers who value arts education for all students.

Arts education is not a panacea for everything that is wrong in our schools, but it offers opportunities that we consistently overlook. Let us provide the leadership at every decision-making level that gives students opportunities to learn in ways we can only imagine.

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