

# Educational Leadership

February 2007 | Volume 64 | Number 5

**Improving Instruction for Students with Learning Needs** Pages 80-81

## Leading to Change / Academics and the Arts

*Douglas Reeves*

Leaders set priorities. With multiple demands on limited school resources and classroom time, an essential job of every school leader is allocating resources to produce the greatest student success. In some schools—often those serving large proportions of poor and minority students—the imperative to raise test scores in literacy and math has led administrators to sacrifice seemingly nonrelated subjects, such as music and art.

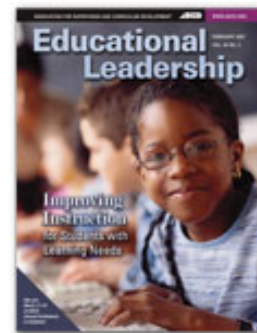
The debate about this trade-off is often contentious. Proponents view putting core academics first as a matter of social justice: If economically disadvantaged students lack essential literacy and math skills, then no amount of music or art will give them economic opportunity and self-sufficiency. Proponents of the arts claim with equal vigor that by exposing students in some schools to a rich, varied curriculum and consigning students in other schools to endless reading and math drills, we are only exacerbating opportunity gaps based on race and economics.

Both sides make a compelling case. But the evidence suggests that the stark choice between academics and the arts is a false dichotomy. In fact, recent research suggests a direct and systematic link between art experiences and literacy skills. For example, Kennedy (2006) described a study of a Guggenheim Museum art project:

The museum dispatches artists who 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. . . . Students in the 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. (p. 1)

Literacy is essential, and schools must provide interventions to enable disadvantaged students to catch up with their more advantaged peers. But the literature contains many examples of schools serving substantial portions of economically disadvantaged students and ethnic minorities that have raised student achievement in reading and math while delivering a well-rounded curriculum that includes the arts (Petersen, 2007).

One of the most remarkable examples of effective integration of the arts into an academic curriculum comes from 24-year veteran Maureen Copeland, who teaches Advanced Placement



February 2007

European History at Fort Myers High School in Lee County, Florida. Copeland's students are ethnically and economically diverse and are predominantly sophomores, rather than the seniors who traditionally take AP classes. When students enroll in the class, many of them need basic work in reading, writing, document analysis, and academic focus. Yet 80 percent of them routinely pass the AP test, more than 30 percent with the maximum score of 5. I asked Copeland about the secret of her success. She explained,

Art is a hook. I'll use Goya and David to show two perspectives on war, and 18th-century Dutch paintings that reflect the relationship between colonialism and global trade. The kids love it.

The AP European History curriculum is notoriously dense and covers far more than is reasonable for a single-period, one-year class. How does Copeland find the time to cover such an intense curriculum and also nurture a love of art among her students? "If it's important, you make the time," she told me. Her experience suggests that art is not an extra that can be indulged in when time permits, but rather an essential ingredient of superior academic instruction.

In the current education climate, standardized test scores in literacy and math are important to both schools and individual students. The challenge for school leaders is to offer every student a rich experience with the arts without sacrificing the academic opportunities students need. Here are three guidelines to consider.

*First, call a truce.* Establish a norm that there is no such thing as a "nonacademic" class in school and that every subject, including the arts, is worthy of the thought and discipline that we associate with academic study. Just as we expect all teachers, including those focused on the arts, to teach honesty, self-discipline, and organization, we can also reasonably expect all teachers to regard literacy not as a diversion from their primary subjects, but as a useful way of helping students think about their subjects. We write in music and art class because those subjects are worth writing about.

*Second, make it a two-way street.* Although it is increasingly common to expect music and art teachers to integrate literacy into their lessons, we also need to encourage content-area teachers to integrate the arts into their classes. Wise teachers of history, English, science, and math know that music, art, and dance can form powerful visual, auditory, and kinesthetic associations that help students learn essential content and concepts.

*Third, refuse to settle for a limited curriculum for any student.* If you were the headmaster of an elite private school and some students were behind in reading and math, parents would expect you to provide necessary academic interventions and also deliver a rich and engaging arts curriculum. Perhaps you would provide extra literacy instruction for all students, from those who are struggling to those who are advanced. You certainly would ensure that every student received opportunities to excel not only academically, but also in the arts, technology, and athletics. As you reflect on the challenge of allocating limited resources and time, ask yourself, Does any public school student deserve less?

## References

Kennedy, R. (2006, July 27). The arts may aid literacy, study says. *The New York Times*. p. E1.

Petersen, J. L. (2007, Winter). Learning facts: The brave new world of data-informed instruction. *Education Next*, 7(1), 36–42.

---

**Douglas Reeves** is Founder of the Center for Performance Assessment, 800-844-6599, ext. 512;  
[DReeves@LeadAndLearn.com](mailto:DReeves@LeadAndLearn.com)

Copyright © 2007 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

---

### **Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)**

1703 N. Beauregard Street, Alexandria, VA 22311 USA • 1-800-933-2723 • 1-703-578-9600

[Copyright © ASCD, All Rights Reserved](#) • [Privacy Statement](#)