

Published: January 26, 2005

COMMENTARY

## Putting Arts Education Front and Center

By Rod Paige & Mike Huckabee

Since the time when humans drew figures on the walls of the caves of Lascaux, the arts have been our means of recording human experience and making meaning in the world. They are a sign of a thoughtful, inventive, and creative citizenry. As the global economy becomes faster and more competitive, these qualities are increasingly important. As such, the arts are an integral part of a complete, successful, and high-quality education.

**As a nation, we must develop children who are productive, happy, well-adjusted citizens, rather than kids who can just pass a test and get through school.**

Study of the arts enhances young people's intellectual, personal, and social development. The arts provide a rich and engaging curriculum that develops students' abilities to think, reason, and understand the world and its cultures. A comprehensive arts education encompasses such areas as the history of the arts, the honing of critical-analysis skills, the re-creation of classic as well as contemporary works of art, and the expression of students' ideas and feelings through the creation of their own works. In other words, students should have opportunities to respond, perform, and create in the arts.

Research has shown that those who study the arts improve their achievement in other subjects, including mathematics, reading, and writing. In math, for example, studies point to a direct connection between music and spatial reasoning and spatial temporal skills, which are important to understanding and using mathematical concepts. For high school students, coursetaking data collected by the College Board indicate that students of the arts annually outperform their nonarts peers on the SAT. In 2004, for example, students who studied music scored 40 points higher on the math portion of the test than students reporting no arts coursework. Similarly, students who studied acting and play production outscored their nonarts peers on the verbal portion of the SAT by an average of 66 points.

The effect of arts study on reading is similar. Because reading is the educational skill upon which all others in our lives are based, the No Child Left Behind Act focuses on literacy and sets the goal that all students read by the 3rd grade. We know from research that the arts can help achieve this goal, and that certain forms of arts instruction enhance and complement reading instruction. Studies have shown, for example, that when creative dramatics are a component of reading with preschool-age children, skills in comprehension and vocabulary increase.

The academic benefits of arts education also go beyond math and reading. An analysis of U.S. Department of Education data on 25,000 middle and high school students found that students who were highly involved in the arts performed better on a variety of academic measures than other students. They earned better grades, did better on exams, performed more community service, and watched fewer hours of television. And a growing amount of evidence shows that the arts can be particularly beneficial to students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and can even keep some potential dropouts in school.

Most Americans recognize the importance of this early engagement in the arts. A recent Harris Poll found that 90 percent of respondents considered the arts vital to a well-rounded education for all students. The same poll also revealed that nine in 10 parents of school-age children oppose subjecting arts programs to budget cutbacks.

To put it simply, we need to keep the arts in education because they instill in students the habits of mind

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that last a lifetime: critical analysis skills, the ability to deal with ambiguity and to solve problems, perseverance and a drive for excellence. Moreover, the creative skills children develop through the arts carry them toward new ideas, new experiences, and new challenges, not to mention personal satisfaction. This is the intrinsic value of the arts, and it cannot be overestimated.

President Bush and both Democrats and Republicans in Congress recognized that the arts have this intrinsic value, are a necessary component of preparation for life in our democracy, and have a positive impact on student achievement and motivation. They understood that dance, drama, music, and the visual arts provide important skills and are educationally powerful tools for reaching all learners—that the arts can engage a child in ways that defy imagination. That’s why the arts are considered a core academic subject under the No Child Left Behind law: They can and should play a central role in fulfilling the law’s goal of improved student achievement, as well as similar goals of states, districts, schools, and parents. And that’s why the Department of Education included the arts, in addition to math, science, and reading, in its Research-to-Practice summit, a component of its Teacher-to-Teacher Initiative, this past summer.

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The state of the arts varies from state to state and district to district, but we are beginning to see recognition of their importance in education across the country. Using the state of Arkansas as an example, we can see this in more than a dozen school, community, and governmental efforts to bring the arts to students.

- Every public school elementary student in the state now receives instruction in music or the visual arts.
- The Future Art and Music Teachers pilot program gives 11th and 12th grade students in at least six schools the opportunity to offer music and visual-arts instruction to K-6 students.
- The Arkansas School for Mathematics and Sciences has been expanded to include the arts, making the state one of only a handful offering a year-round, rigorous program for students gifted in the arts.
- The A+ Schools Program, begun in North Carolina and operating in Arkansas and Oklahoma as well, incorporates the arts into every subject in the curriculum of a number of schools.

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**FOR MORE INFO**

Get more information on arts-in-education initiatives of the **U.S. Department of Education** and the **Education Commission of the States**.

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Other states are at work in this area as well. In Arizona, state Superintendent Tom Horne’s “content-rich curriculum” initiative is investing \$4 million in comprehensive-school-reform funds under the No Child Left Behind Act to support arts education improvement efforts at 43 schools throughout the state. The initiative is based on the success of Tucson’s Opening Minds Through the Arts program, which received federal support from the Department of Education’s Arts in Education Model Development and Dissemination program. Again this year, the department’s office of innovation and improvement will solicit applications for both the models program and professional-development projects for K-12 arts educators.

The Education Commission of the States is undertaking a two-year focus on ensuring access to high-quality arts education in our schools. The goal of the ECS initiative—The Arts: A Lifetime of Learning—is to put the arts front and center on the education agenda. Its work plan is centered on four interrelated areas—awareness, research, tools, and state leadership—that, together, form the word “arts” and provide a set of objectives vital to increasing the arts’ stature in education:

- Raise levels of public *awareness* and deepen understanding among state policymakers about the educational, social, and civic benefits of student involvement in the arts.
- Call for and contribute to the development of better state-level *research* and data on which to base policy decisions.
- Equip state policymakers with the *tools* to analyze and interpret state-level information related to the status and condition of arts education and instruction in schools.
- Support *state leadership* in efforts to develop policies and practices designed to improve educational outcomes for *all* students through school-based integration of the arts.

As a nation, we must develop children who are productive, happy, well-adjusted citizens, rather than kids who can just pass a test and get through school. We must ensure that our children can compete in the 21st-century economy by preparing a workforce and a citizenry that can think creatively, skillfully, and “outside the box.” The arts are a vital part of doing this—and of ensuring that every student can achieve his or her potential and contribute fully to our society.

We know our nation is up to the challenge, but we must mobilize, inform, educate, and inspire education and policy leaders to recognize the vast potential returns that can be realized by investing now in arts education. Because of their primary responsibility in setting policy and in determining funding levels for public education, these leaders play a critical role in helping to make and keep the arts strong in schools.

By working together to bring the arts to every child in America, not only will we change attitudes about the curriculum, but we also will change the future of our country.

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Vol. 24, Issue 20, Pages 40,52

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