While the arts in the United States are themselves often controversial, arts in public schools rarely are. That is to say that teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members tend to agree that the opportunity to participate in the arts is beneficial to students and to the wider society. Whether discipline-based arts education (DBAE or “art for art’s sake”), integrated arts (art that promotes core content knowledge—literacy, numeracy, critical thinking—alongside self-expression), or somewhere in between, the desire to have art (including music and theater) in public schools is well-known. Also well-known, however, are the local and national pressures and mandates that place arts at the bottom of the list of school priorities and possibilities.

In their thoughtful articles about the centrality of arts in education (included in this volume), Gulla, Milman, and Norman raise a series of interrelated issues amidst snapshots of best practices. School funding, the pressures of standardized testing, and the lack of opportunities for engagement in the classroom all present a reminder that it is particularly because of these realities that schools, teachers, students, and communities need arts in the classroom. The authors also remind us, through evocative description of best-practice programs, that arts participation enables students to engage deeply with subject matter and school itself, countering grim notions that the most vulnerable students in the most vulnerable schools are necessarily the least engaged. Arts involvement for academic achievers and others is correlated with higher rates of school completion, lower rates of delinquency, higher levels of self-esteem and efficacy, and a host of other “magic wand” type effects.

And yet the same cries echo in the corridors of schools in Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York: there’s just no money for arts. There’s just no time. There are no personnel—and besides, aren’t “arts and culture” a luxury?

As poet Gwendolyn Books neatly illustrated in her 1967 poem “The Chicago Picasso,” this tension over experiencing art as essential on the one hand and elitist or alienating on the other hand is not a new one. She asks, “Does man love Art?” Answering her question, she reminds us that Man visits Art, but squirms.

Art hurts. Art urges voyages—and it is easier to stay at home
Art is not necessarily easy. Arts provide a place to question the heretofore unquestionable, to imagine a different world. While critical for imagining new possibilities, this realm of the imagination can be frightening. Teachers who lack deep experience with art, in the sense of art as experience promoted by John Dewey (1932/2005), may be afraid—or at least likely to squirm in its presence. Students may lack exposure to museums, public sculptures, and works of art across the spectrum even in some of culturally richest cities in the United States. Proximity to museums, theaters, and other formal venues does not necessarily guarantee access.

But beyond art in its cages, in its “official” homes in cities around the world, there is the reality that art is a part of everyday life. In that, no teacher, no student, no community is a stranger to art. As Stern and Siefert (1998) remind us, the most underresourced and historically excluded sections of Philadelphia and Camden are full of people who are artists, who boast high levels of arts participation, who integrate arts into their daily lives. From gardening to cooking at home decorating, to singing and listening to music on the radio, to attending performances at religious institutions and schools, art is alive and well—well, everywhere.

Yet this notion that art is somehow foreign to students, particularly low income students of color attending schools in highly concentrated areas of poverty, persists. Brooks illustrates and mocks this point of view, writing, “We must cook ourselves and style ourselves for Art, who is a requiring courtesan. We squirm.”

We do not hug the Mona Lisa. And yet children above all know that art can be anything, that everyone is an artist, that art is all around us. And adults know this too, even if they rarely articulate it. The reality of art—of cultural expression, of the joy and pain of being alive in this world right now—is too often seen as separate from the world of Art that Brooks pil-lories. Even dedicated arts activists and educators too often labor under the belief that art lives in museums, that art is a language too tricky for most of our tongues, and, most of all, that art is an experience that trained professionals need to bring to students.

These three articles provide hopeful visions of what can happen when arts are included in the classroom, even amidst the funding crises, the standardized testing schedules, and the challenge of administering any innovative program in overburdened and under-resourced public schools. But these articles raise important questions as well, some of which go unanswered. While arguing for multcultural art experiences, there remains the whisper that real art is Western European, that real art is for wealthy people, that you have to dress up and speak English to visit real art in its faraway home. Is the hopeful vision of arts in education one that encourages all people to participate in certain kinds of art, or perhaps...
suggesting that certain demographic
groups should participate in certain
kinds of art (either demographically
similar, or a more traditional notion of
“high art,” or the art of the powerful)?

If everything is art, then there may
be no need to “include” it in school; it
is already there. That is one danger of
taking a position that says art is ev-
erywhere, all people have art, we are
all artists. But that is an extreme and
almost deliberate misinterpretation.
If everything is art, then we can pro-
vide spaces in which to look and listen
more closely to the art all around us,
including young people’s practices of
visual art, poetry, and dance too often
deemed anti-social by well-intentioned
school administrators and other au-
thorities. Rap, graffiti, dancing, cell-
phone photos and movies—these are
often seen as orthogonal to “real”
learning, the learning that is tested
and almost always found lacking. But
too, to include youth culture in our
 canon of art is not necessarily to say
that is the only art young people un-