MISSISSIPPI ARTS COMMISSION

The Arts Are An "R" Too

Integrating the Arts and Improving Student Literacy (and More) in the Mississippi Arts Commission's Whole Schools Initiative

WHOLE SCHOOLS INITIATIVE

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Executive Summary

Historically there have been several arguments for the need to include the arts in public schools: enhance cultural awareness and appreciation, stimulate creativity, teach specific arts-related skills that translate directly into learning content-related skills, tap into students' multiple intelligences, reinforce content and skills taught in the "major" subjects, and promote artistic development - to name several. Participants in the Whole Schools Initiative report that they have seen their students realize a host of these benefits.

** The principal evaluators acknowledge the substantial help provided by two field researchers - Charlotte Tabereaux and Adrenne Dedeaux.*

Mississippi schools can help their students improve literacy skills in line with (or slightly better than) state expectations AND provide them with arts-infused activities that reinforce those skills. The current press for accountability in education need not cause schools to narrow their instructional programs to a single-minded, "no frills" focus on basic skills.

Instead Mississippi schools can celebrate the state's cultural richness, accommodate the diverse ways in which its students learn, and provide a quality education. Indeed, it is entirely possible that connecting cultural experiences to diverse instruction is a significantly viable means of improving the quality of education students receive. The following pages of this report share evidence that supports the conclusion that, when implemented seriously and systematically, arts infusion is an integral contributor to stimulating and enriching student learning. What this conclusion means for schools is that educators can view arts integration as an integral ally (perhaps even as a fourth "R") in improving student learning; what the conclusion means for the Whole Schools Initiative is that keen attention must be paid to supporting schools in ways that improve the likelihood that all participating sites will succeed in seriously and systematically infusing the arts into curriculum and instruction

The Mississippi Arts Commission (MAC) has funded schools since 1991 to embed the arts into regular classroom instruction. For the last five of these years, the effort became known as the Whole Schools Initiative (WSI), a label which underlined the intention that the arts would become more than a set of add-on activities. In fact, WSI had five ambitious goals: improving student achievement through infusion of the arts into the core curriculum, enriching students' lives by increasing their skills and knowledge in the arts disciplines, assisting the growth of educators through arts-based professional development, using the arts to increase parent and community involvement, and building a sustainable system for arts infusion. WSI, therefore, was a systemic approach that hoped to alter the organizational, cultural, instructional, and learning patterns in the participating schools.

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To track the progress of this reform, MAC contracted with an external, third-party evaluation team. Five researchers spent four years documenting progress in the schools, while collecting information from all the stakeholders: students, teachers, administrators, parents, artists, and community partners. The evaluation examined three intersecting themes: the need to identify the impacts on children, adults, and the participating schools; the importance of documenting the variety of paths that schools took in their change journeys; and, finally, the tracking of the infrastructure of support available to all the participants. Data pertinent to these themes came from (1) the evaluators' site visits to the schools to interview the various stakeholders and tour the schools and classrooms to see examples of instruction as well as student work; (2) surveys that were administered to students, teachers, and parents both early and late in the implementation process; (3) "change journey maps" that required that participants create, revisit, and reflect regularly about their progress; and (4) state-collected student performance data (the Mississippi Curriculum Test-MCT) that allowed comparisons among WSI sites, state averages, and a set of matched comparison schools.

When discussing the various effects of arts-infused curricula on students, staff, and schools, participating educators fervently argued that one common indicator - test scores - was woefully inadequate at capturing the full range of impacts they saw on students. But, with the advent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), Mississippi schools did not have the luxury of ignoring the state's expectations for growth in student proficiency across basic literacy and numeracy skills. Thus, the evaluation had to attend to such measures and chose to focus on literacy because learning to read was the foremost concern in all the participating schools. The analysis revealed that students in the participating WSI schools achieved proficiency in literacy as well as - if not slightly better than - both the state average for all Mississippi schools and a set of matched comparison schools. However, closer inspection showed that 75 percent of the higher implementation WSI schools (based on survey results triangulated with field visit data) met the state standard for growth in student literacy proficiency whereas less than half of the lower implementation WSI sites did so. The higher implementation sites also outperformed their matched comparison peers. This analysis suggested that enriching rather than narrowing the curriculum might be the wiser move in improving students' literacy.

In addition, participants - adults and children - identified a host of academic, social, and personal benefits other than test score improvement that students enjoyed as a consequence of arts integration. The arts, therefore, not only appeared to help schools meet formal accountability requirements but also added considerable value to students' education generally. Academically, educators argued that integrating the arts into math, language arts, science, and social studies heightened students' comprehension and retention of content and sharpened their ability to think critically and creatively about the material. Socially, the collaboration involved in arts activities gave students' increased opportunities to communicate with one another on school-related matters and, teachers said, paid off in the respect students began to afford one another. Personally, students became more confident in school because those that had heretofore been unsuccessful academically often found that they stood above their classmates in the arts. The association of the arts with academics enabled this confidence to transfer frequently to school work. Most importantly, adults and students reported increased enjoyment and motivation.

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Variation in implementation was characteristic of WSI (as well as all educational reforms). In fact, schools varied in seven important ways. First, the schools differed with respect to their endorsement of WSI. For some, the idea was sold to the entire faculty while others tried to win staff over one at a time. Second, WSI schools had differential success in making opportunities available for teachers to become skilled at infusing the arts. A range of strategies were used, including MAC-sponsored professional development, local school-based professional development, visitations among participating schools, and finding ways for teachers to reflect on and redesign their work. Third, schools took advantage of informal coaches to assist with arts-infused instruction in a variety of ways. The project directors in each school, as well as the MAC-assigned field advisors, varied in the degree to which they were able to help teachers. Fourth, schools were variously successful in maintaining a continuity of focus on arts integration in the intervals between formal WSI training events and in the face of external demands for change on other fronts (e.g., the NCLB legislation). Fifth, serious infusion of the arts into the main-stream of instruction across core subjects was a time-consuming and demanding task. Schools varied markedly in how well arts integration remained a priority in the resource allocation process. Sixth, arts-infused instruction took an abundance of support.

Support manifested itself in a variety of ways: time, materials, and human assistance being the three most prominent. The schools experienced widely varied levels of such support. Finally, the schools displayed a marked range of capacity to ensure the long-term sustainability of the organizational and instructional changes promoted by WSI involvement. The ability to maintain focus, keep staff motivated, find time for faculty to collaborate, and continue the refinement of curricula were all critical to sustainability. An analysis of survey results comparing the highest and lowest implementing schools confirmed these qualitative findings.

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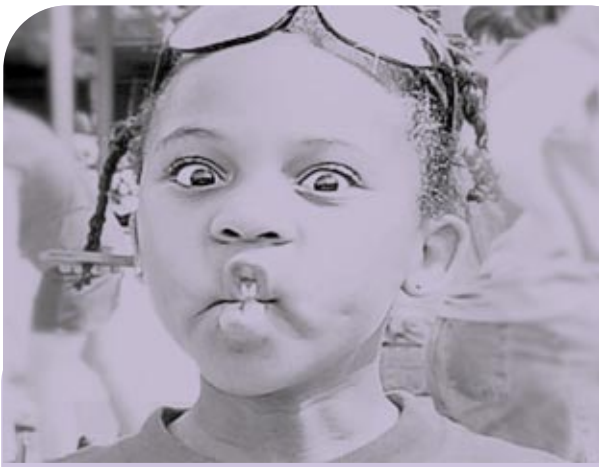
Three straightforward conclusions emanate from the four years of evaluation work. First, whether one looked at (a) test scores; (b) school progress on NCLB criteria; (c) the reactions of students, teachers, or parents; or (d) the school environment, students won when their schools implemented the WSI approach. Second, some strategies appeared to work better than others in embedding knowledge and skills with arts integration into the fabric of school life. Third, because of the unique characteristics of each school, no two were exactly alike in how the WSI model was implemented. However, geographic, economic, and local cultural differences were not found to be primary explanatory factors for differences in the degree and quality of WSI implementation. Rather, it was the choices made about putting arts integration into place that either boosted or diminished the possibility that a child would encounter the arts no matter what grade level or teacher the student had.

The unambiguous finding from this evaluation was that the accomplishments of the WSI schools differed in large part because of this variation in the degree and quality of implementation. While local circumstances will (and should) force schools to modify any educational reform, substantive choices during implementation mattered tremendously in WSI and students benefited the most in those schools that seriously and systematically integrated the arts into the core curriculum. The evaluation concluded that there were several steps MAC could take that would both honor local context and improve the quality of implementation across the participating sites. These included: insisting on informed consent to participate from all educators; taking seriously the existing level of staff expertise and predisposition to integrate the arts in judging grant applications; requiring that participating sites have a plan to develop, adapt, implement, and evaluate arts infusion

that fits with their districts' overall strategic plans; strengthening the schools' use of field advisors; promoting regular teacher collaboration; demonstrating concrete ways of adapting arts integration in the upper grades; creating an ongoing documentation process to track implementation progress annually; making implementation issues one of the training strands at the Whole Schools Summer Institute and retreats; rethinking the process for judging annual grant renewals; and revising the patterns of communication with the schools.

In this accountability-focused environment that American education finds itself in, educators and experts frequently bemoan the tendency for curricula to be narrowed, for time on a topic to be truncated in order to cover all that is on the test, and for teachers to have little room in the school day for "extras" - even if educators openly acknowledge that these extras are important in the education of the whole child. Nevertheless, the concern in some WSI sites that were experiencing intense pressure to improve test performance - as reflected throughout the country - was that they could not afford to take time from direct literacy instruction to do the arts. The findings from this evaluation strongly hint that perhaps such schools could not afford NOT to embrace the arts. When insinuated seriously and systematically into classroom lessons, the arts broadened a teacher's reach to include many children who had not thrived in school previously and engendered opportunities for those who traditionally did well in school to stretch themselves further. In such situations, the arts were most definitely not add-ons; they were an equal partner, a fourth R, in students' education. As stated clearly above, one mission of WSI is to now insure that students do not have to be lucky to be assigned to a teacher, grade, or school that is committed to serious arts integration by working with and for participating schools in such a way so as to enable all participating sites to effectively and thoroughly infuse the arts throughout their buildings.



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