



Arts Integration & the Mississippi Arts Commission's Whole Schools Initiative

A Stennis Institute Study for Decision-Makers

Executive Summary for Educators & School Administrators

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The Mission Statement of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government

Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi. Created as a service and research arm of Mississippi State University, the John C. Stennis Institute of Government was established on February 9, 1976. Announcing its formation during a two-day Forum on Politics honoring U.S. Senators John Stennis and Margaret Chase Smith, MSU President William L. Giles outlined the Institute's mission and goals. According to Giles, the Institute would seek to integrate research, service, and teaching activities to improve government in the state, as well as promote the training of students who seek careers in public service.

Thirty-seven years later, the Stennis Institute of Government has remained true to that initial charge. By providing meaningful, applied research to both local and state units of Mississippi government, the Institute brings a wealth of experience and knowledge to bear on real-world issues. Through its executive development programs, training opportunities, and technical assistance programs, the Institute provides support for today's policy-makers from the courthouse to the classroom. And, by playing an active role in the development of tomorrow's leaders, the Institute is working to ensure that Mississippi's future remains strong.

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Executive Summary

The Whole Schools Initiative (WSI) is an arts integrated conceptual approach to education reform that redesigns the school learning environment to promote enhanced learning using the arts as the vehicle to support high quality education and instruction for all students. The Whole Schools Initiative is housed at the Mississippi Arts Commission (MAC) and is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, the state of Mississippi, and with private funds. Since 1991, the Mississippi Arts Commission has provided support to Mississippi schools seeking to adopt the WSI arts integration model. Over 70 Mississippi schools are current or past participants in the Whole Schools Initiative.

The Stennis Institute study of the Whole Schools Initiative examined the impact that arts integration has on the academic performance of 4,275 students enrolled in Mississippi public elementary schools and 1,172 students enrolled in Catholic elementary schools that are currently participating in the Mississippi Arts Commission's Whole Schools Initiative. The study explored factors that contribute to the effective implementation of arts integration across the curriculum in Mississippi schools. To analyze the performance of Mississippi public schools participating in the Whole Schools Initiative, the study used databases from the Mississippi Department of Education for student performance on standardized Mississippi Curriculum Tests, Grade 4 Mississippi Writing Assessment Tests, and the 5th Grade Mississippi Science Test. The performance of Catholic schools participating in the Whole Schools Initiative used data from the Stanford Achievement Test. In addition to the analysis of student performance on standardized tests, surveys of school administrators, principals, arts specialists, classroom teachers and students at participating WSI schools were used to evaluate the Mississippi Arts Commission's Whole Schools Initiative.

The study found the percentage of students scoring "*Proficient or Above*" on standardized Language Arts and Mathematics Mississippi Curriculum Tests, Grade 4 Mississippi Writing Assessment Tests, and 5th Grade Mississippi Science Tests was significantly higher at schools participating in the Whole Schools Initiative that had effectively implemented the WSI arts

integration model when compared to student performance statewide and when compared to district level student performance for the school district within which the WSI school was located. WSI schools that effectively implement arts integration were found to have reduced or actually eliminated the academic achievement gap for *economically disadvantaged* students. In WSI schools that effectively implement arts integration, a higher percentage of *economically disadvantaged* students score “*Proficient or Above*” when compared to all students (not just *economically disadvantaged* students) at the district and state level, across multiple grade levels, and across multiple subject areas on standardized tests.

Extensive research has found a consistent and robust link between arts integration and a range of positive student outcomes to include increased academic achievement, improved critical thinking skills, enhanced creative thinking, augmented school engagement, and the reduction of the achievement gap for *economically disadvantaged* students. More recent developments in neuroscience provide additional support for the role of the arts in brain development and learning. The findings of the Stennis Institute’s study of the Whole Schools Initiative provide additional evidence that arts integration can make a significant contribution to improved educational outcomes for Mississippi students.

Engagement in high quality professional development experiences was found to be a key requirement for the *effective implementation* of arts integration. Professional development provides classroom teachers with the requisite proficiency to integrate the skills and content of the arts across the curriculum; it enhances their capacity to use multiple arts disciplines as learning tools, and enables them to identify the natural connections between the arts and other subject areas. Participation in professional development activities was found to increase teachers’ feeling of competency using arts integration, which in turn increased the frequency with which teachers practice arts integration in the classroom.

Participation in the WSI Summer Institute and WSI Fall or Spring Retreats sponsored by the Mississippi Arts Commission and working with teaching artists was found to be positively associated with teachers’ feeling of competency and their increased practice of arts integration across the curriculum. The study found that survey respondents who reported a high level of

participation in the WSI Summer Institute and WSI Fall or Spring Retreats sponsored by the Mississippi Arts Commission were more likely to indicate that their students' academic performance *"improved significantly."*

Historically, Mississippi has fallen short of meeting the educational needs of students. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics reported that in 2011, 78 percent of 4th grade students in Mississippi public schools scored below a *"proficient"* level on reading tests. These percentage rates have not changed significantly since 2007. If children cannot read proficiently by the end of the 3rd grade their future educational achievement is in jeopardy — they are highly likely to continue to be poor readers and struggle with mastering subject content throughout their remaining years in school, they are more likely to drop out of high school, and they are more likely to become the state's least skilled and lowest income citizens.

The Mississippi Department of Education has adopted the Common Core State Standards. The purpose of adopting the Common Core Standards is to create a world-class education system in the state of Mississippi that provides students with the skills and knowledge that is required for them to be successful in college and in the 21st century workforce. A focus of the Common Core State Standards is that students need to be able to solve problems, to work in teams, to analyze and conceptualize, to communicate, and to create, innovate, and critique in order to succeed in 21st century colleges and careers. To successfully implement the Common Core State Standards, teachers will be required to: know how to plan for rigorous and deep learning experiences; ensure that students retain and have the ability to apply learning; and create a learning environment that fosters deep thinking, student engagement, integration across subject areas, and problem-based learning experiences.

The Common Core State Standards are clearly aligned with the visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic elements of arts integration learning models and the Whole Schools Initiative model. Examples include:

- The Common Core standard of *Phonological and Phonemic Awareness*, found to be the best predictor of reading success. Phonological and phonemic awareness includes the

ability to hear rhymes and alliteration, the ability to orally blend words and syllables, and the ability to do phonemic manipulation tasks. Instruction in phonological awareness can be taught through the use of rhymes, songs, chants, alliteration, and clapping syllables in words; all of these teaching methods are aligned with and will required arts integration.

- The Common Core Standard of *Comprehension: Students Understand, Interpret, and Analyze Narrative and Informational Grade Level Text*. This standard involves exposing students to a variety of writing genres (depending upon grade level, this includes fairy tales, poems, myths, legends, plays, historical or science fiction); art integration learning models that include elements of theater, drama, visualization, and the interpretation of art forms can assist schools to effectively implement Common Core State Standards.
- The Common Core Standard of *Writing: the process of selecting, organizing, and developing ideas, arranging ideas in a logical sequence, and expressing ideas in effective language*. Common Core Standards in writing require frequent writing practice and require that students acquire the skill to write in different modes and form, for a variety of audiences, and for a range of purposes. To acquire competency in writing, students will be required to generate ideas for writing by reading and discussion; identify the audience, purpose, and form of writing to be used; use strong verbs, precision, and vivid language to convey meaning; produce traditional and imaginative stories, narrative, and formula poetry (e.g., ballad, cinquain, haiku, lyric, quatrain); produce writing to persuade (e.g., editorials, speeches, scripts); incorporate relevant illustrations, photos, diagrams, and visual elements into their writing; and produce and/or publish group or individual projects. Arts integration will enhance the development of writing skills and augment the level of writing competency acquired by students. For example, the use of visual arts to teach concepts of symmetrical, asymmetrical, and radial balance; the use of a specific media to express mood, themes, or ideas; or using visual arts to communicate the concepts of observation, perspective, harmony, balance, or contrast.

Arts integration fosters the student engagement and “deeper learning” that is at the heart of the Common Core and arts integration promotes the interdisciplinary learning that is a vital aspect of the Common Core. The Common Core State Standards are precise in conveying a detailed description of “*what*” level of performance is to be expected of students for every standard across grade levels; but are not prescriptive in terms of “*how*” teachers will achieve these levels of performance. Implementation of Common Core State Standards in the State of Mississippi will require a significant investment of time and resources by school districts, school administrators, and classroom teachers as they move up the learning curve regarding “*what*” the Common Core State Standards require. Arts integration has the demonstrated potential to successfully answer the question of “*how*” to achieve the deeper learning of content, creative problem solving, and mastery of advanced higher order thinking skills to be achieved by the adoption of the Common Core State Standards.

Extensive research has found a consistent and robust link between arts integration and a range of positive outcomes to include increased academic achievement, critical thinking skills, creative thinking, school engagement, and the reduction of the achievement gap for *economically disadvantaged* students. More recent developments in neuroscience provide additional support for the role of the arts in brain development and learning. The Stennis Institute’s research on the Mississippi Arts Commission’s Whole Schools Initiative found a consistently higher percentage of *all* students scoring “*Proficient or Above*” on Language Arts MCTs, Mathematics MCTs, and 5th Grade Science Tests, and found the achievement gap for *economically disadvantaged* students attending WSI schools had been substantially reduced or eliminated. These findings converge with Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences, advances in brain research, and the consistent findings in prior research of the positive link between arts integration and improved academic outcomes to support the conclusion that a focused effort to expand arts integration in Mississippi schools will enhance educational outcomes and more fully realize the transformational potential of arts integration.

The arts integration model of the Whole Schools Initiative can significantly contribute to improving educational achievement in schools throughout the state and can play an important

role to assist the state of Mississippi to achieve the goals and meet the objectives of the Common Core State Standards. To achieve these goals and objectives, the Stennis Institute recommends consideration of the following policies:

- **Provide school administrators and teachers with resources, professional development, and information on specific practices to address the new Common Core State Standards through arts integration**

The Mississippi Arts Commission should play a significant role as a partner to the Mississippi Department of Education in the design of a framework that elevates the importance of arts integration during the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. This recommendation reflects two goals of Blueprint Mississippi 2011: to increase collaboration between two state agencies (the Mississippi Department of Education and the Mississippi Arts Commission) and to increase educational achievement. The adoption of the Common Core State Standards, alone, will not lead to improved student achievement unless teachers are provided with the teaching tools, guidance, and professional development that will enable students to meet the *standards*. It is clear that arts integration has improved the academic achievement of Mississippi students enrolled in WSI schools. It is also clear that the use and application of multiple art disciplines are interwoven throughout the design of the Common Core State Standards and will be vital to developing the essential skills and knowledge that students will need to master grade specific *standards*. The successful implementation of the Common Core State Standards across schools in the state of Mississippi will require a significant investment of time and resources; teachers, principals, and superintendents will require high-quality professional development to meet Common Core expectations. A focus on arts integration using the Mississippi Arts Commission's Whole Schools Initiative as a model will significantly augment the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and increase the possibilities for Mississippi students to meet the expectations of the *standards*.

- **Increase the number of elementary schools participating in the Whole Schools Initiative and expand the adoption of arts integrated learning by early childhood education programs**

Scientific developments in cognitive neuroscience, brain development, and neuroplasticity indicate that exposure to an art integrated curriculum may provide the greatest benefits during the early years of child development, particularly before the age of ten. The positive effect of the Whole Schools Initiative arts integration model on the educational achievement of *economically disadvantaged* students indicates that students in Mississippi elementary schools with a high percentage of children living in poverty would experience optimal benefits from adopting the WSI arts integration model. Research evidence for the role of the arts in the development of brain function indicates the importance of the arts during early childhood development and the need to adopt arts integrated learning in early childhood education programs. The widespread adoption of arts integrated learning experiences in pre-kindergarten programs and in early childcare programs is equally as important as the adoption of arts integration in the K – 12 school system.

Expanding the number of schools that can be assisted by the Mississippi Arts Commission to adopt the Whole Schools Initiative will require an increase in the financial resources available to support this expansion and to provide the quality of professional development that is required to achieve the effective implementation of arts integration. Opportunities may exist to create incentives to encourage individuals and businesses in the state of Mississippi to provide resources and financial support for the expansion of arts integration in schools and in early childhood learning programs; options for these policies need to be explored.

- **Expand teaching artists programs, increase access to teaching artists, and use teaching artists to augment the implementation of the Common Core State Standards**

Teaching artists are an essential component to effective arts integration education models. They play an important role engaging students in arts based learning experiences, assisting

teachers and schools to link arts integrated teaching practices with state curriculum standards, and can supplement uneven arts offerings at resource constrained schools. Teaching artists can bridge the gap in specific art disciplines, such as dance or theater, to assure that all students have access to truly effective arts integration that provides a high frequency of classroom experiences across the curriculum using the full range of arts disciplines. Teaching artists can teach arts integration skills and assist classroom teachers with arts integration projects to facilitate the effective implementation of the Common Core State Standards, particularly in schools that are located in high poverty school districts.

Expansion of the teaching artists program would enable teaching artists to provide more assistance to underserved schools, enable teaching artists to partner with teachers to develop arts integrated curriculum, build long term relationships with other community partners, engage students in extended arts integrated learning experiences, and provide high quality arts experiences. Existing models, such as Teach for America, Music National Service, and AmeriCorps programs could be adopted in Mississippi and leveraged with philanthropic funding to provide resources to support the expansion of training for teaching artists and increase public schools' access to teaching artists.

The use and application of multiple arts disciplines is an integral prerequisite to acquiring the knowledge and skills described within the Common Core State Standards. Not only will students be expected to acquire and exhibit these skills, but teachers will be required to be able to use a range of arts disciplines as teaching tools in order to achieve the goals of *the standards*. Teaching artists are well-prepared to make a significant contribution to schools across the state of Mississippi during the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. They can assist teachers to link arts integrated teaching tools to *the standards*, engage students in arts-based learning experiences aligned with *the standards*, and assist with the development of subject specific lessons plans that meet *the standards*. Teaching artists can be a valuable asset for the shared delivery of professional development and as resources in the classroom as schools struggle to move up the Common Core learning curve,

and they can facilitate and accelerate the implementation of the Common Core State Standards.

- **Prioritize Whole Schools Initiative resources to maximize the benefits of arts integrated learning for children during early childhood and elementary school**

Arts integration can make a contribution to students learning at any age; it can help students to think in new and creative ways, and because each arts discipline appeals to different senses and is expressed through different media the arts can help more students, with a range of learning styles, of all ages to learn. To withhold access to the arts and to arts integrated learning experiences is, for many students, the same as withholding the opportunity for educational achievement. Mississippi faces a crisis in educational achievement that requires difficult choices; particularly within an environment of constrained human and financial resources.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 45 percent of 4th grade students in Mississippi public schools scored “*below basic*” on reading and 33 percent scored “*basic*” on reading; only 22 percent of Mississippi students scored “*proficient or above*” on reading in the 4th grade. Students *learn to read* up until 3rd grade, after that they *read to learn* and gain skills in other subjects. If children cannot read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade their future educational achievement is in jeopardy. Mississippi must break the cycle of low educational attainment, high student drop-out rates, and high poverty.

Understanding how the brain develops and learns provides input into the decision-making process to support the recommendation that providing arts integrated learning experiences for children ages ten years and under should be given the highest priority. The brain adds comparatively few cells after birth. Instead, the existing neurons grow larger and more powerful, sprouting axons and dendrites and connecting with neighbors to create the neural network. Synaptic connections enhance the brain’s computing power — its ability to accept sensory input from the outside world and make sense of it. Activation of the neural network is critical to its growth. The neural networks that are used grow stronger; those

that are not, wither away. This process is known as pruning. The death and removal of excess brain cells and the connections that are made by synaptic activity across the neural network sculpts the brain. Although growth and pruning of the neural network takes place throughout our lives, it occurs at a different rate based upon age and dependent upon stimuli. Until age three, growth of the neural network outpaces pruning. From age three to ten, the formation of new connections is balanced by the elimination of unused connections. When a child reaches puberty, the rate of growth shifts and the formation of new connections is outpaced by the pruning of connections.

Science indicates that prime opportunities for brain development and learning occur prior the age of ten. Learning advances sequentially, from listening – to speaking – to reading. A baby learns to speak by learning to listen; babies learn to distinguish various sounds as parts of a word and words that become sentences. Sound is a stimulus that transmits signals to the brain, developing the associated neural network required to recognize words and to begin to speak. During the process of listening and eventually speaking, multiple areas of the brain are being activated in rapid succession and synaptic connections are increasing and growing stronger. Reading is a more advanced language skill requiring a more complex neural network. Words on a page are associated with sounds that are heard when words are spoken. Sensory inputs that include sights, sounds, and touch stimulate the growth and strength of synaptic connections that build the foundation for brain development and the creation of neural networks that are fundamental to children’s ability to move to the next level of cognitive development and learning — from listening — to speaking — to reading.

Arts integration provides the enriched, stimulating learning environment conducive to the use of all five senses that stimulate the growth and synaptic connections that are fundamental to children’s cognitive development. The visual arts introduce elements of line, shape, color, and space; music introduces tempo, rhythm, pitch, harmony and timbre; dance introduces movement and the principals of repetition, pattern, creative expression, balance; and theater introduces storytelling, pantomime, scripted role play, puppets, and the emotional content of comedy, fantasy, and tragedy. Each art discipline plays a unique

role in stimulating the senses and makes a unique contribution to an enriched learning environment that contributes to increased synaptic activity that activates the neural network and increases the potential for enhanced learning outcomes.

Prior to the age of ten, children have the greatest opportunity to achieve the maximum benefits from arts integrated learning. Arts integration offers opportunities for enhanced brain development and related improvements in learning and educational achievement. If children are not prepared to learn at an early age, they will face difficulties throughout their academic future. Science and brain research, combined with research on arts integrated learning leads to the conclusion that the earlier we can expose children to arts enriched learning environments, the greater the possibilities for enhanced learning outcomes. Although students at upper grade levels undoubtedly benefit from arts integrated learning experiences, within a constrained resource environment and given the crisis faced in educational achievement, optimal outcomes associated with the investment of resources for arts integrated learning will be achieved by maximizing the opportunities for participation in arts integrated learning experiences during early childhood and elementary school.

- **Leverage the existing resource of K – 12 arts specialists**

Arts specialists are education professionals with a teaching certificate in a specific arts discipline — visual art, music, dance, or theater. Arts specialists are teachers hired by an individual school or the school district to teach a specific arts discipline and, normally, teach the discipline full-time.

Arts specialists receive training in arts education at colleges and universities, their course of study combines the study of an arts discipline with general education courses in child development, educational philosophy, curriculum and assessment. Arts specialists understand age appropriate arts content and have the ability to design lesson plans and curricula. The college education of arts specialists includes a liberal arts education in history, math, science, and language. This provides them with the expertise to integrate

their arts discipline with other subject areas. Arts specialists are a prerequisite to assuring that all students in public schools have access to high-quality, standards-based arts instruction. Because the arts are defined as a core academic subject in the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind), arts specialists are necessary to meet the requirement that highly-qualified educators teach any subject that is defined as a core content area.

In WSI schools, arts specialists play an expanded role as a partner in the shared delivery of arts integration learning experiences. There are 43 arts specialists at WSI schools across the state; 20 percent of all Dance Arts Specialists in the state of Mississippi are employed by WSI schools. At WSI schools arts specialists frequently serve on the WSI school advisory board. Arts specialists become resource experts and frequently act as facilitators to assist classroom teachers to develop lesson plans that integrate the arts into other subject content, they may assist with arts integrated curriculum design and development, and they may serve as mentors or assist in providing arts integration professional development to classroom teachers within the WSI school. Using a shared delivery model of arts learning experiences for students, *effectively implementing* WSI schools create a community of learning involving relationships between classroom teachers, arts specialists, teaching artists and community arts organizations, with all partners sharing in the delivery of arts learning experiences to students.

There are approximately 1,886 Mississippi licensed classroom teachers that have certification in a specific arts discipline (arts specialists). The full report contains maps in Appendix A of licensed classroom teachers with certification in a specific arts discipline, these maps demonstrate that there is significant geographic variance in the distribution of the number of arts specialists; school districts with a higher percentage of students living in poverty generally have fewer arts specialists. In many school districts throughout the state there are no Theater Arts Specialists, Dance Arts Specialists, or Visual Arts Specialists. Statewide there are 164 Theater Arts Specialists, this equates to one Theater Arts Specialist for every 2,991 students enrolled in Mississippi's K – 12 public school system. There are 21

Dance Arts Specialists statewide, this equates to one Dance Arts Specialist for every 23,358 students enrolled in Mississippi's K – 12 public school system.

The existing infrastructure of certified arts specialists is insufficient to assure that students in Mississippi public schools have access to a quality arts education regardless of geographic location or socio-economic status. At minimum, policies need to be developed that will provide additional resources to support the shared delivery of arts learning experiences to all students enrolled in Mississippi public schools throughout the state and to more effectively use the existing resource base of arts specialists in the state.

- **Develop state policies that reinforce the adoption and expansion of arts integration education models**

The positive outcomes associated with arts integrated learning demonstrate significant potential to overcome the educational challenges faced in Mississippi schools. Decision-makers, educators, school boards, and superintendents need to be made more fully aware of the potential that arts integration offers for increasing student achievement and reducing the achievement gap that exists for *economically disadvantaged* students throughout the state of Mississippi.

The universities and colleges in the state of Mississippi have an important role to play in preparing the teachers of the future and providing them with the tools to effectively practice arts integration in the classroom. The Mississippi Arts Commission and the institutions of higher learning in the state of Mississippi should explore opportunities for increasing arts integrated learning experiences and courses related to arts integration teaching methods. Arts integration teaching methods should be an essential component of the curriculum for all students at colleges and universities in Mississippi who aspire to be educators in Mississippi schools.

- **Increase arts integration professional development opportunities**

To achieve the positive education outcomes associated with arts integration will require effective arts integration across the curriculum, using the full array of arts disciplines.

Participation in professional development enhances the arts integration competency of teachers and increases the frequency with which teachers use the arts as a learning tool in the classroom. The complex interface between specific arts disciplines (music, dance or movement, art, theater or drama) and individual student learning styles (kinesthetic, tactile, aural, or auditory) indicates a need to expand teachers' repertoire of arts integration skills across the arts disciplines and across subject areas. The demands of standardized testing, constrained budgets, and burden of competing priorities on teachers and school administrators create obstacles to their participation in professional development, thereby creating obstacles to the adoption and effective implementation of arts integrated learning in the classroom. In many cases, schools may be unable to provide the resources to support teachers' participation in professional development experiences; the time and cost of travel to participate in professional development activities may also act as a barrier to participation. These barriers to the effective implementation of arts integration need to be overcome and policies to achieve this objective are required.

The rich traditions of literature, music, performing and visual arts, history, architecture, and the culinary arts are the fabric of Mississippi's creative heritage. Mississippi's creative heritage is woven throughout the state. The threads of arts, culture, and heritage intertwine throughout every community creating the backdrop for civic engagement, setting the stage for lifelong learning, and enhancing the lives of our citizens. In many ways, Mississippi's creative heritage is one of its greatest assets and strengths. The arts not only improve Mississippians' quality of life, they make a significant contribution to the state's economy through their impact on tourism and job creation.

The Stennis Institute study of the Whole Schools Initiative found that the arts also make a significant contribution to the educational outcomes of Mississippi's school children. Students enrolled in Mississippi schools that have adopted the arts integration education reform model of the Mississippi Arts Commission's Whole Schools Initiative generally outperformed their peers within the school district and statewide on standardized tests administered to students enrolled in the 3rd through 5th grades. In WSI schools that had

effectively implemented arts integration across the curriculum, students' academic performance improved significantly, and a higher percentage of these students scored *"Proficient or Above"* on standardized tests. Importantly, WSI schools that *effectively implement* arts integration have significantly reduced or completely eliminated the educational achievement gap for *economically disadvantaged* students.

The state of Mississippi has a long history of struggle with systemic obstacles to educational achievement. Low educational attainment and high drop-out rates among students in Mississippi's public school system are among the state's greatest challenges. The result of low educational achievement and high drop-out rates is an unskilled workforce, high unemployment, and high poverty levels; these are the state's greatest economic weakness. Historically, decision-makers have urgently sought to identify solutions that will improve student learning, increase educational attainment, and reduce drop-out rates. Frequently, the effort to find solutions to the challenges faced within Mississippi Schools has involved adopting the most recent educational nostrum, borrowing policies or programs from other states, and following recommendations by consultants and experts from outside of the state. There is little evidence that these efforts have been successful.

With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, the state of Mississippi is now beginning another experiment that hopes to solve the systemic educational challenges faced in schools throughout the state. This effort will require a significant investment of resources and the outcomes are as yet unknown.

It is known, and the evidence supports the statement, that the arts integration model of the Whole Schools Initiative does improve students' academic achievement *and* that the effective implementation of arts integration can reduce or eliminate the educational achievement gap for *economically disadvantaged* students. The Whole Schools Initiative is a Mississippi model of arts integration education reform proven to work in Mississippi schools.

As Mississippi moves forward with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, decision-makers should consider developing an augmented strategy that uses one of Mississippi's greatest strengths to address its' greatest weakness. The use of arts integration

builds upon one of Mississippi's greatest strengths – its creative heritage. The preliminary infrastructure and resources for widespread adoption of arts integration already exist within the state of Mississippi and creative traditions exist within every community in the state. A cohesive strategy, designed to support the widespread adoption of arts integration and to assure that all students receive the benefits of arts integrated learning experiences, has the potential to inspire a vibrant new approach to transformative education by unleashing the strength of Mississippi's creative spirit.

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