

# Advocating for the Visual Arts in the Era of No Child Left Behind

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## **Abstract**

*Research has shown that a solid visual arts program provided to students throughout the K-12 years increases academic achievement, increases self-confidence and self-concept and provides opportunities for students to tap all their intelligences. However, recent budget cuts and the high stake testing on Mathematics and English Language arts at all grade levels demanded by the No Child left Behind Act has led to elimination of art programs across the country leading to less student involvement in the visual arts. It is clear that the public, administrators, parents, teachers and the larger community have little or no knowledge regarding the potential benefits of an art program to the student well rounded education. My research which relied on content analysis of archival data investigates strategies through which teachers and other stakeholders can advocate for the visual arts to ensure they are accorded the same respect other core subjects enjoy!*

## **Introduction**

As children we find comfort and peace in picking up crayons and markers to draw a picture that serves as a natural act for our personal expression. This act is natural and comfortable to us at the most youngest of age. As adults, a shift occurs, and unless we are in the profession, we will never further fulfill the desire to pick up another crayon to draw a picture or express our thoughts and/or feelings visually. Why does this shift occur? What happens from the tender years of adolescence to adulthood that influences our need to create, to express ourselves? I believe a big part to this answer lies amongst the decision school districts make to cut art programs, which in return leads to our students' lack of a well balanced education. A wealth of research clearly shows the direct correlations to academic achievement in math and English language arts that are credited to providing students with a consistent art

education program (Eisner, 2002, p. 75). I believe that this information is not easily accessible for public consumption and this lack of knowledge the public does not carry, greatly contributes to students less involvement in the arts. The public- parents, educators, administrators, community- have a right to fully understand the gains a visual art program provides for students. The purpose of this study was to enhance our understanding of the benefits an art education has on students and how that contributes to academic success in other subject areas. The study also shows how the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has negatively affected the arts program all across the country and how that is leading to less and less time in art class. In addition, the study provides information of how teachers and parents can passionately advocate the arts in an effort to keep art programs as part of a well respected, needed part of our students' well-rounded education.

According to New Horizons for Learning, Art Education is expressed as:

Always among the highest expression of every culture, the arts teach us much about every historical period through its literature, visual arts, music, dance, and drama. Today it is recognized that to be truly well educated one must not only learn to appreciate the arts, but must have rich opportunities to actively participate in creative work. The arts are languages that most people speak, cutting through individual differences in culture, educational background, and ability. They can bring every subject to life and turn abstractions into concrete reality. Learning through the arts often results in greater academic achievement and higher test scores. (2006, para. 1)

As stated above, a consistent art education program directly correlates to student achievement in core subject areas like math and English language arts. In 2002, the Arts Education Partnership (AEP) released a report based on an analysis of previous studies of various categories of art by different researchers. It was the first study to combine all of the arts and make comparisons with academic achievement, performance on standardized tests, and improvements in social skills and student motivation. The AEP report concluded that schoolchildren who are exposed to dance, music, theater, and the visual arts appear to better master reading, writing, and math than those who simply focus on the basic curriculum. In addition, Art education allows us to learn about other people living in different parts of the world at different times than us, and allows us to celebrate multiple perspectives. The arts teach that there are many ways to see and interpret the world.

Even with all this information visual arts programs across the country remains top of the list for removal whenever there is an economic crunch. Budget cuts are a real factor that all districts have to face at one point or another. The question then lies, what areas are worthy of keeping and what areas in our students' education can a district reduce funding or students time in? In most instances, the arts are reduced in scheduling and funding. In a survey conducted in 347 school districts nationwide, the study revealed that since the enactment of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), about 62% of these districts increased instruction time for English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics in both elementary and middle schools. The increase of time allowed in these subject areas followed a decrease in time for the arts:

Five Hundred sixty-eight minutes (almost ten hours) per week were devoted to ELA. And only 97 minutes for art and music. In addition, school curricula have become increasingly tailored to include only the content and skill sets evaluated on local, state, and federal assessments. (Choi & Piro, 2009, p. 28)

Such studies reinforce what administrators and community deem as valuable subjects. Choi and Piro also found that “Curriculum narrowing continues to occur, and a content area like the arts face significant time cuts in classrooms across the United States.” (2009, p. 28)

I strongly believe that these cuts can be reduced if the public was better educated on the benefits of a consistent art program. Our number one goal as parents, teachers, and administrators is to provide our children with an education that will allow each individual to reach for the stars. In order to facilitate this success, art education must be included as part of a well rounded education. The public seems to be unaware of these staggering facts and it is our job as art educators to spread the word effectively.

### **Literature Review**

In reviewing literature of this study, a number of themes emerged: a) *Correlations to academic success*, b) *Effects on self, whole body character building*, c) *Multiple intelligences*

#### *Correlations to academic success*

LaFee argues that there are certain areas in which the arts “pay off”:

First, in basic reading skills, language development and writing skills increases in general academic skills also show up and would appear to reinforce these specific literacy

related developments. Here we refer to focus and concentration, skills in expression, persistence, imagination, creativity, and inclinations to tackle problems with zeal. These are the sorts of skills and behaviors that promote positive social behavior, social compliance, and collaboration with others, ability to express emotions, courtesy, tolerance, conflict resolution skills and attention to moral development. (LaFee, 2008, p. 44)

The relationship between arts learning and the SAT is quite significant. The SAT exam is the most widely used exam for college admission all across the country. It is a standardized exam that assesses students' verbal and math skills and knowledge. Ruppert states:

Multiple independent studies have shown increased years of enrollment in arts courses are positively correlated with higher SAT verbal and math scores. High school students who take arts classes have higher math and verbal SAT scores than students who take no arts classes. (2006, p. 9)

The following chart clearly shows the correlation between the numbers of years a student takes art classes and its effect on the SAT achievement scores:

#### **Arts Course-taking Patterns and SAT Scores, 2005**

	<b>VERBAL</b>	<b>MATH</b>
4+ years arts	534	540
4 years	543	541

3 years	514	516
2 years	508	517
1 year	501	515
1/2 year or less	485	502
Average for All SAT Test Takers	508	520

Source: 2005 College-Bound Seniors: Total Group Profile Report, The College Board, 2005, Table 3-3; SAT Scores of Students Who Study the Arts: What We Can and Cannot Conclude about the Association, Kathryn Vaughn and Ellen Winner (Fall 2000).

In a national study using a federal database of over 25,000 middle and high school students, Rupper found:

Students with high arts involvement performed better on standardized achievement tests than students with low arts involvement. Moreover, the high arts-involved students also watched fewer hours of TV, participated in more community service and reported less boredom at school. (2006, p. 8)

There is a wealth of data that links academic achievement to student academic success.

Ruppert also explains:

More than 65 distinct relationships between the arts and academic and social outcomes are documented. They include such associations as: visual arts instruction and reading

readiness; dramatic enactment and conflict resolution skills; traditional dance and nonverbal reasoning; and learning piano and mathematics proficiency. (2006, p.10)

The amount of research available that links academic success due to a consistent art program is immense. The evidence is clear that with a consistent art program children are more apt to succeed in other academic areas, in addition to developing needed social skills. It is imperative that we keep strong arts programming in our schools.

### *Effects on self, whole body character building*

Parks (2006) found that

Art has been an integral activity in every known society, past and present. What we know about society's beliefs, values, and quality of life are based on artifacts they produced. Because art objects are cultural artifacts, such products *always* reveal the health and vitality, or sickness and deprivation of the society that produced them.

(2006, p. 1)

In our fast-paced, rapidly-growing visual culture of our world today, it is imperative that children grow into adults that are able to understand, interpret, and decipher between true and false, positive and negative messages received through Television advertisements, video games, commercials, toys and so forth. Parks also states:

Not only were visual images probably the first form of written symbol-making, we are today, more than ever, living in a visually-oriented society. If individuals are to function



intelligently in such an environment, they will need the skills, awareness, and insight to respond to the visual bombardment in reflective, critical ways. (2006, p. 1)

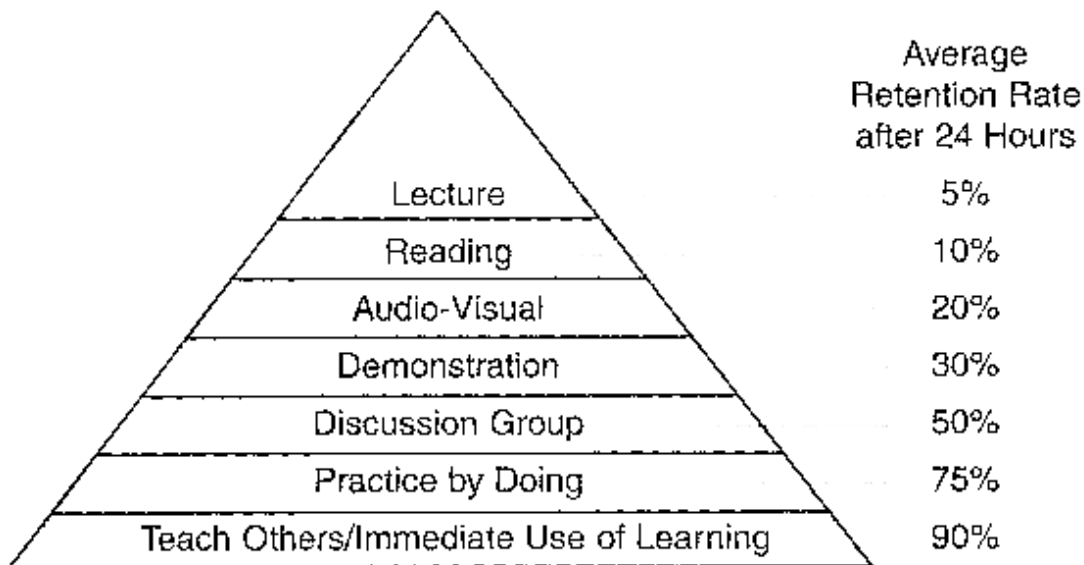
### *Multiple intelligences*

The theory of multiple intelligences was developed in 1983 by Howard Gardner. The theory explains that every individual has strengths and weaknesses in absorbing information, and that teachers can use these different “intelligences” as a method for reaching learners. Gardner informs there are eight intelligences: Linguistic, Logical-Math, Spatial, Bodily-Kinesthetic, musical, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal and Natural intelligence. As educators, being aware of our students’ intelligence will allow greater access to learners. Gardner says,

Our schools and culture focus most of their attention on linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence. We esteem the highly articulate or logical people of our culture. However, we should also place equal attention on individuals who show gifts in the other intelligences: the artists, architects, musicians, naturalists, designers, dancers, therapists, entrepreneurs, and others who enrich the world in which we live. (2000, para 1)

A learning pyramid that shows the average retention rate of students conducted by the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine shows, the following:

Figure 1



This triangle clearly illustrates that most students learn by hands on experience. A solid art education program incorporates all of these categories into each lesson with most of the time being spent on “Practice by Doing” which reaches 70% of learners.

### **Methodology**

My research method relied on content analysis of archival data. I selected articles that were written in the past ten years and pertained directly to my themes. Utilizing archival data allowed me to understand the true impact the NCLB act has had on art education by credible sources who have done extensive research in the field. In addition, my research included vast evidence on the benefits of art education on the student as an individual and learner. Finally, my content analysis allowed me to research methods of advocacy that have been successful in

an effort to provide more educators, parents and community with the tools and knowledge needed to fight for the arts and keep them in our schools as part of our students well rounded education.

## **Findings**

### *No Child Left behind Act and It's Impact on Art Education*

Great change in education has taken place in the last ten years, beginning with the 2002 enactment of the NCLB act by the George W. Bush Administration (Grey, 2010, p.1). This Education Reform at the time was an effort to lessen the gap between low and high achieving students. The intentions of these reforms were positive because there was an effort to help failing students achieve academically by closing the achievement gap. But as research has shown, the consequence of this Act has lead to greater emphasis on standardized testing in reading and math that includes curriculum narrowing focusing on expanding English and math emphasis in order for students to achieve passing test scores. This narrowing of the curriculum that so strongly tailors to English and math means students are lacking a well rounded education that includes the arts. The NCLB act was signed into law on January 8, 2002 and is an updated version of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act which expired in September of 2007 (Grey, 2010, p. 10). There is no doubt that this law has had a major impact on the world of education, and even more specifically, the world of art education.

Chapman (2005) provides a brief timeline which shows the drastic change in test taking for students before and after the NCLB act:

**1994.** Under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Act, schools were required to give statewide tests in mathematics and reading three times during a K-12 span. Compliance was uneven, but these scores count as a baseline for requirements under *NCLB*.

**2001-2002.** *NCLB* is passed. Prior scores in reading and mathematics are used to identify schools as "in need of Improvement" or "corrective action." States begin to determine their targets for AYP.

**2002-2003.** Statewide plans and targets for AYP in reading and mathematics are filed. Targets are calculated backward from 2014 according to various formulas. States also set targets for ensuring that "highly qualified teachers" are in every classroom within the next 3 years.

**2005-2006.** States must have standards for science. Students are tested in reading and mathematics annually in grades 3-8, and once more in grades 10-12. Middle and high school teachers must have a degree in the discipline that corresponds to the subject they are assigned to teach.

**2007-2014.** Annual statewide science tests are required in at least one of three grade spans (3-5, 6-9, 10-12) in addition to annual tests in reading and mathematics in grades 3 through 8. Some students also take reading and mathematics tests in grades 4 and 8. In 2014, 95% to 100% of students will score "proficient or above" in reading, mathematics, and science. (2005, p.7)

This timeline clearly shows the change schools have had to undergo to comply with NCLB act. From 1994 to 2005 standardized test taking jumped from three times in a students' Kindergarten to twelve grade time span to each child being tested annually. In addition to this drastic increase in test taking, in 2003 plans for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) reports were implemented nationwide.

AYP benchmarks are intended to show that students who were previously not doing well are receiving adequate instruction. Beveridge (2010) explains:

When a school fails to meet benchmarks in any number of subcategories, the school is first assigned a probationary status and then has another chance to achieve the new goals before losing funding. In that probationary time, the school, the district, or both are required to formulate strategies, using their own funds, to bring failing students up to the benchmark level (p.1).

NCLB is funded through meeting these benchmarks. In other words, if schools do not meet these annual benchmarks, they lose funding.

The goal of meeting these benchmarks in order to receive annual funding affects art programs in many ways. First, curriculum narrowing occurs where student schedules are tailored to spend more time learning English Language Arts and math and less time in art class. A survey administered by The Council for Basic Education in 2004 of elementary school principals found that "since the passage of NCLB, instructional time for tested subjects in 75 percent of those schools had increased and instructional time for the arts had decreased" (as cited in Beveridge, 2010, p. 5). The survey included schools from all fifty states. A survey

conducted of 347 schools found that “Five Hundred sixty-eight minutes (almost ten hours) per week were devoted to ELA. And only 97 minutes for art and music” (Choi & Piro, 2009, p. 28). A 2008 Center on Education Policy study indicates:

A 35% decline in the time devoted to art and music instruction in a significant number of public schools since 2002 due to the NCLB-driven focus on standardized-test scores.

There are also indications that 41 districts or about 12% of all districts in the nation fail to offer arts instruction at all. (p. 2)

Also, when a student does not meet minimal test score requirements, they are taken out of their elective classes, which may include visual arts, and placed in remedial courses. They are told that when they do better on the test they may return to their art class (elective). This change of schedule holds an underlying message that art is just a “fun” class that is not important and missing an art class has no academic consequences. Not to mention the message it sends about art teachers. Beveridge states, “treating art classes as merely fun undermines the professionalism and knowledge of any art educator, casting them as peripheral, rather than essential, players in a students’ education” (2010, p. 5). Eisner also states: “The arts position in the school curriculum symbolizes to the young what adults believe is important” (2002, p.70). When time for the arts is only allotted on average fifty minutes, once a week, then how does that translate to students and faculty the importance of an art education program? It’s more important than ever to maintain learning in and through the arts to develop the “whole child” and foster the creativity and imagination so crucial in problem solving, innovation, and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills development. In addition, pulling students out of a visual arts class might be

taking away their means of expression and artistic freedom. Pulling a student out of a music ensemble, where each student relies on one another, might jeopardize the performance of the whole team.

Although evidence shows the negative effects NCLB has had on art education programs all across the country, there is a positive perspective we can assess. "NCLB is credited as the first national legislation to designate the arts as one of the five core learning areas" (Grey, 2010 p. 10). The NCLB Act, esteems the arts as a "core academic subject," putting them on a par with math or language; but the act doesn't actually require states or districts to evaluate their students' artistic abilities. The increase focus of this policy affecting art education is an opportunity to designate the arts as a respected core subject. Grey, states:

Every nook and cranny of arts education is being probed, analyzed, and codified in truly ambitious plans for the future. As a result of the arts' classification as a core subject, a plethora of information and an increased focus on arts education exists, and every arts organization has become anxious to jump on the bandwagon in an effort to rescue the students from an ever diminishing arts education curriculum. (2010, p.10)

The NCLB Act values an art education program and carries it to a high esteem as math and Language, but yet it is not carried through to administrators and schools to build their art programs because that is not what is being tested and funded. Often policymakers fail to offer the funding and follow through required to make learning in and through the arts a reality. What message does this give to teachers and students about the relevance of a solid art program as opposed to math and English?

### *Additional Benefits to Individual*

Art education can teach the child how to express ones thoughts and feelings; how to develop an outlet for emotions and words that are difficult to express with words (Eisner, 2002, p. 75). In other words, the arts help children learn to say what cannot be said. When children are invited to disclose what a work of art helps them feel, they must reach into their poetic capacities to find what words will do the job. Through this we are enabled to have experience that we cannot have from any other source and through such experience to discover the range and variety of what we are capable of feeling (Eisner, 2002, p. 76).

The creative process allows us to “see” in new and innovative ways that potentially teach us how to have greater patience, practice positive problem solving, and develop greater self confidence and self concept. This teaches children that problems can have more than one solution and questions can have more than one answer. Creating artwork allows one to separate oneself from others and stand as an individual ready and able to express/think “through” and “within” materials. All art forms employ some means through which images become real (Eisner, 2002, p.70).

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the reality of art education in our schools today. Over the past decade, art education has steadily decreased from the school curriculum in all grade levels from kindergarten through twelfth grades. Much of this change in curriculum has been contributed to by the 2001 NCLB Act, where greater emphasis has been placed on



standardized testing which focuses solely on the core subjects of English and mathematics (Grey, 2010, p. 2). High stakes testing has increased annually for every student with greater implications on the students learning and achievement. This new emphasis has taken away from the time students spend learning and reinforcing information in art class and are placed in remedial classes with the effort to increase test scores. As the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) benchmarks explain, when a district fails to meet specific test scores, funding is reduced (Grey, 2010, p. 2). School district funding is awarded based on passing test scores on standardized testing which only tests English and Math skills. Funding is not awarded through achievement in art and therefore administrators feel that the arts are not an important subject of study. This new outlook encourages district professionals to reduce the time students spend in art class and/or cut the subject all together. My research shows that art education has significant gains to student achievement and directly links academic success with other core subject areas like English and math. In addition, art education has significant gains to an individual's self-confidence and provides an outlet for self expression. Decreasing the arts program from the overall school curriculum sabotages each student's chance of a well rounded education.

### **Limitations**

I used archival data to explore multiple research papers and articles written by teachers and scholars in the field of art education. I found two limitations of utilizing this research method. First, I worked alone and did not have any human subjects. Second, I did not have outside opinions or advice. The second limitation is the result of the first limitation. Even though a content analysis of archival data is a reliable and legitimate means of research, I

believe having outside opinions, advice and guidance can be imperative in bringing new insight into your research.

### **Interpretation**

Throughout my research I have learned that art education is a valuable asset to a child's growth and learning. Research shows the diverse ways a consistent art program can contribute to academic achievement, self confidence and self expression. Research also shows that one of the main reasons a consistent art program is not offered for students as part of a well rounded education is because of budget cuts and pressure from Annual Yearly Testing's (AYP) brought on by the NCLB Act.

It is time to take action against deteriorating art programs and value art education as a core subject area. Advocating for art is a necessary step in order to educate the public and administrators what the value of an art program truly means for children. According to Keep Arts In School, a dedicated website for keeping the arts alive all across the nation, there are five steps art educators can take right away in order to educate the public of the importance of well rounded education that includes the arts: "1. Make arts a strategic solution, 2. Involve the board in arts activities, 3. Get on the agenda, 4. Insert the arts into other activities, 5. If you can't beat them, join them" (2010, para. 1). These integral steps address the importance of including the arts in high profile activities such as sports games, debate, marching band, and so forth. "It is essential to reach out to these groups and to help them connect the dots between arts learning and their activity"(2010, para. 1). Making the arts part of the schools "strategic" plan by illustrating how the arts directly impact learning in other core subject areas. Clearly

addressing learning goals and how the arts contribute in reaching those goals/milestones. Also, utilizing the district website is an effective method for displaying student artwork, illustrating art learning goals, and how each lesson meets cross curricular goals simultaneously.

Furthermore, getting the school board involved or a part of arts activities is just as important. An opportunity to see firsthand the benefits of arts learning can turn a “decision maker” into a believer and advocate the arts themselves. Volunteer to speak at board and Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings and invite the press, encouraging them to quote board members and teachers speaking passionately about arts learning. Finally, being proactive and never stop fighting/advocating. The following saying applies, “If you can’t beat them, join them.” In other words, if your school does not promote art learning and activities, do it yourself by involving the arts in every possible way.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

I believe in order for arts education to increase in our schools today and grow into a well respected/valued area of study, greater research must be conducted focusing specifically on how to better equip art educators with the tools/education needed to attain funding for the enhancement of their art programs. Sufficient funding has been a consistent issue with the deterioration of art programs. If art teachers were more knowledgeable of how to attain grants from multiple recourses then that will provide greater stability for art teachers to continue their program running strong. Also, greater attention should be given on how to better incorporate art making in other classrooms. Art making can be adapted into the curriculum to reach all learners/intelligences and simultaneously advocating the importance of the visual arts. More

educators can witness firsthand the relevance of art education. Lastly, greater research must be conducted on how to more effectively advocate the arts on a national scale so that art programs do not decrease but increase and become equal with respect to funding and appreciation.

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