

Success Story: Expanding Literacy Through Art

2020 Action Agenda for Advancing the Arts in Education – Priority Area 1: Raise Student Achievement and Success

"Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art® is an innovative, evidence-based approach to teaching writing that uses simple art processes and the study of quality picture books to teach the art of writing. Picturing Writing has been proven effective for a wide range of learners, including Title I students, special education students, English learners and boys (who are outperformed by girls in writing across the nation)."
– Beth Olshansky, Director,
Center for the Advancement
of Art-Based Literacy



Photo courtesy of Beth Olshansky.

Arts Education Partnership partner organizations work to promote opportunities for high-quality, arts learning opportunities for all students in every classroom. [Inclusion of the arts in state plans](#) under the Every Student Succeeds Act elevates the critical role that arts teachers play in a well-rounded education for students. When students engage in visual arts education, they can experience achievement in other facets of their education that they may not have otherwise experienced. [Research indicates](#) that visual arts education can enhance writing quality and early reading skills.

Developed in 1995, [Picturing Writing](#) was first piloted in two first-grade classrooms in a local New Hampshire school district. Facilitated using an Artists/Writers Workshop model, Picturing Writing treats words and pictures as complementary, parallel and equal languages for learning. Unlike traditional approaches to teaching writing, students draft their ideas in pictures first using quality art materials. This allows students to more fully develop and record their ideas prior to setting pencil to paper. Through a formalized process of reading their pictures, students gain access to rich descriptive language. Through the power of transmediation (recasting meaning from pictures to words), students draft sentences that make their pictures come alive. The program, and a sister model — [Image-Making Within The Writing Process®](#) — now serve K-12 students across the U.S. and Canada. Onsite workshops are available upon request.

This multimodal, art-and-literature-based approach to literacy learning is aligned with Art and English Language Arts Standards. It can be used to teach a variety of genres including descriptive writing, poetry, narrative writing, research-based poetry, research-based narrative, historical fiction and informational text. Picturing Writing can be easily integrated across science and social studies curricula.

Picturing Writing and Image-Making [qualify as Tier II Evidence-Based Literacy Models](#). Three independent, quasi-experimental research studies document statistically significant gains in writing and visual literacy. Standardized test scores also improved. For example, following two years of school-wide adoption of at the Main Street School in Exeter, N.H., standardized test scores revealed notable gains in reading and writing skills, particularly among Title I and Special Education students.

Current Locations: Across the United States

Populations Served: Elementary School,
In-Service Educators

Conditions for Success:

Throughout its 29 years of operation, the Center for Advancement of Art-Based Literacy has received federal, state and regional grants. Following initial promising results, a series of small grants funded program development, the creation of teacher resources and an independent research study. These grants helped the program grow to the current model where the majority of funding received comes through teacher workshops. Because the model is evidenced-based, schools are able to apply Title I, Title II, Title III and Title IV-A professional development funds toward teacher-training and the purchase of art materials. Graduate credit options are available to teachers participating in training, opening up yet another funding source in many districts. Administrative support at the district and building level is essential to long term sustainability. The model has been adopted school-wide in several schools across the country.

As a recipient of U.S. Department of Education National Dissemination Network funding, the importance of replicability was an early focus. It is critical that the evidence-based model is disseminated by highly-qualified Certified Trainers who provide uniform, quality, hands-on teacher-training. To that end, the Center maintains a cohort of highly-qualified Certified Trainers. Every teacher who attends an experiential workshop receives a teacher's manual detailing daily lessons for that particular unit of study. A variety of other teacher resources are available, including mentor texts that are designed to help teach each unit, classroom posters and [instructional videos](#).

Questions to Consider:

- Are there ways to build a financially self-sustaining model into program design?
- How can community arts organizations partner with schools and districts to strengthen their professional development models for arts education?
- How will you build evaluation and research into program design?
- Are there creative funding streams, such as federal professional development grants, that schools and districts can use to support this work?
- How does the professional development and experience that invested teachers receive transfer to their classroom pedagogy?

Learn More:

[Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art.](#)

[AEP 2020 Action Agenda for Advancing the Arts in Education.](#)

[Visual Arts Matter.](#)

[Preparing Educators and School Leaders for Effective Arts Integration.](#)

[ArtsEdSearch studies on teacher professional development and student success.](#)

About AEP Success Stories

The Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States is guided by [The Arts Leading the Way to Student Success: A 2020 Action Agenda for Advancing the Arts in Education](#). To achieve its goal to expand access to high-quality arts learning opportunities for all students, AEP gathers detailed information on Success Stories with the potential to be replicated in communities across the country.
Updated: June 25, 2019.