

BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



Remarks of Dr. Carol R. Johnson
Superintendent, Boston Public Schools

“The Arts Advantage”

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The Boston Foundation

Good morning. I want to thank Paul Grogan and the Boston Foundation for hosting us today. I’m delighted to be here because I am deeply passionate about the arts and the potential for us to make a difference with our students through the arts. I would especially like to thank our funders, the Barr Foundation, the Linde Family Foundation, Hunt Alternatives Fund, EdVestors (Sandy & Phil Gordon), and none of this would have been possible without two individuals who have actually almost worked part-time or practically full time with me in the Boston Public Schools, Laura Perille and Klare Shaw. I do hope their “bosses” know how much I appreciate their efforts to pull this all together.

I would also like to acknowledge a true arts advocate and Headmaster, Linda Nathan, Boston Arts Academy; Greg Gazzola, Roland Hayes Music program; Nancy Zimbalist, Visual Arts Coordinator; and Cleopatra Knight, Interim Arts Coordinator, for their advocacy and leadership in this work. This report and forum today are an outgrowth of a vision that we have consistently believed in over the last year. Our students deserve a rigorous, well-rounded education, and the arts are and must be an integral part of that education. I have been pleased that so many of you across the city have responded so positively – our own arts teachers, funders, philanthropists, arts organizations, and non-profit partners. Your generous support is appreciated. Collaboration is the key, both to our planning efforts and the expansion work in our schools.

The arts are important regardless of whether they teach students to read. A growing body of research affirms the capacity of the arts to improve academic success, but I believe the arts are essential for a well-rounded education all on their own.

The arts have a particularly important role in affirming community – bringing people together and sharing the diversity and common elements across culture. One of the art leaders in Minnesota decided it this way, “The Arts

keep people from withdrawing into safe communities – the arts are not an isolated act – but a force of power to make connections and to bring together people with seemingly little in common and make them stronger through poetry, dance, theater, music and the visual arts.”

An evolving field of research does suggest that the arts, indeed, do have an academic advantage. A 2008 report by the Dana Consortium on Arts and Cognition, “Learning, Arts and the Brain” found that:

1. An interest in a performing art leads to a high state of motivation that produces the sustained attention necessary to improve performance and the training of attention that leads to improvement in other domains of cognition.
2. Specific links exist between high levels of music training and the ability to manipulate information in both working and long-term memory; these links extend beyond the domain of music training.
3. In children, there appear to be specific links between the practice of music and skills in geometrical representation, though not in other forms of numerical representation.
4. Correlations exist between music training and both reading acquisition and sequence learning.
5. Training in acting appears to lead to memory improvement through the learning of general skills for manipulating semantic information.
6. Learning to dance by effective observation is closely related to learning by physical practice, both in the level of achievement and also the neural substrates that support the organization of complex actions. Effective observational learning may transfer to other cognitive skills.

Professor Karen Seashore Louis, at the Center for Applied Research in Education and Improvement, University of Minnesota, concluded that:

1. Arts integration was related to improved student achievement in 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade reading and improved achievement in math at grade 3.
2. The more in-depth the arts – the more arts integration – the greater improvement in achievement.
3. In particular, arts integration appeared to be a significant factor for disadvantaged learners.

The benefit to students’ key and academic progress included:

- improved communication in groups
- emergence of unlikely student leaders
- inclusion of special needs children with their regular education peer group
- student teamwork to accomplish a goal

Most profound was the change in teacher practices:

- more child focused than adult focused
- teachers expand their tool kit of instructional strategies

- teachers changed their perceptions about individual student's capacity to learn

Dr. Seashore Louis stated, "Rarely, in our combined 30-plus years of evaluating school reform initiatives, have we studied an initiative that is associated with meaningful change in how teachers teach, change in how teachers perceive their students' capacities, and significant improvements in student learning."

We have learned that students do not learn just because you put an artist in the classroom – you must focus also on how teachers teach.

What we have learned over the last few decades is the importance of teaching students to think critically, to consider multiple answers to complex questions, to examine, to create anew; what we have today is compelling evidence that teachers can use the arts to help students reach performance standards and develop the kinds of critical thinking skills that are essential for learning in school and in life.

We have learned that for students to be engaged and to own their own learning, they must develop their own voice – An artist needs to develop a voice (Juanita Rodriguez, Theater Chair at Boston Arts Academy) to look at society and figure out where they fit, stand and can contribute. "Our students are challenged as playwrights and actors to explore the issues and to craft a sound artistic work that will take the audience on a learning journey. To do so as actors, they have to go inside of themselves to places that are usually kept in the dark and wrestle with demons to bring forth truth that will affect others."

In the old definition of the arts – we thought the arts, like college, were meant for the talented few. We said, "I can't hold a tune" – or "I can't draw a straight line" – or "I am not creative" or "I could never write a poem" or "I've got two left feet, I can't dance"... in the new order of learning, we must create new classrooms and new teaching techniques that bring the arts into the hearts, minds and skills of all of our children – All of our students need mechanisms to create, to learn, to self express.

A recent study of the highest scoring 14-year-old science students around the world found that the best came from Hungary, the Netherlands and Japan. What all three school systems had in common were arts-infused curricula.

Researchers in Pittsburgh suggest that, "It's no mere coincidence that the graph showing the decline in SAT scores over the past 30 years is a virtual duplicate of the graph showing the decline in the number of arts hours in schools. Conversely, it is clear: Increase the arts in schools and the reading, math and science scores will rise."

A 2007 Dana Foundation Report suggests that only about 12% of U.S. school systems can afford arts specialists on a substantial scale and achieve participation on an advanced level – so there's clearly lots more to do.

At a recent visit to the Harvard-Kent Elementary School in Charlestown, I saw the following poem about the power of arts in the classroom. I want to thank Principal Richard Martin for these powerful words...

Art is life. And like life, art is about what we see and feel; what we think about and reflect upon – how we respond to the world surrounding us, and the world inside of us. Art is our stance toward things – the record of our movement through dreams and difficulties, the highs and lows of daily life and our need to communicate with one another. Art communicates then. It talks to us and conveys a message or insight through a plethora of motifs and forms. Art is our history – the incredible story of people and artists through time.

Each day at the Harvard-Kent School, art springs to life under the gifted guidance of Mrs. Patricia Wilson for all students. From self-portrait to still life to representations of the great masters – yes, Monet, Picasso, and Van Gogh, as well as original flights of fancy under the dictates of form and color – art lives here in the minds, hearts, and paintbrushes of the students. Art is cool. Art is restorative. Art is soul. Art is on our walls, in our halls, and in our blood. It reminds us to observe the world, to participate in its beauty and drama. It compels us to pick up a brush, a crayon, or colored pencil and enter the arena of creativity.