

## ARTS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Positive signs of support for the arts in education are visible everywhere. Consider these recent developments:

- In the federal No Child Left Behind Act, also known as NCLB, the arts share equal billing with reading, math, science, and other disciplines as “core academic subjects,” which can contribute to improved student learning outcomes. (1)
- Forty-nine states have established content and/or performance standards that outline what students should know and be able to do in one or more art forms; states require schools or districts to provide arts instruction. (2)
- Schools integrating the arts into the curriculum as part of a comprehensive education reform strategy are documenting positive changes in the school environment and improved student performance. (3)
- The American public, by an overwhelming margin, believes the arts are vital to a well-rounded education; more than half rate the importance of arts education a “ten” on a scale of one to ten. (4)

As a nation, we are close to reaching a collective understanding that all students benefit from the opportunity to learn about and experience the arts. Study of the arts in its many forms—whether as a stand-alone subject or integrated into the school curriculum— is increasingly accepted as an essential part of achieving success in school, work and life.

Yet, at the same time we celebrate the arts for the value they add to learning and to life, study of the arts is quietly disappearing from our schools. In schools across the country, opportunities for students to participate in high-quality arts instruction and activities are diminishing, the result of shifting priorities and budget cuts. Poor, inner-city and rural schools bear a disproportionate share of the losses. Studies show children from low-income families are less likely to be consistently involved in arts activities or instruction than children from high-income families. (5)

Put simply, our rhetoric is out of sync with the reality. Why is it so important to keep the arts strong in our schools? How does study of the arts contribute to student achievement and success?

### CRITICAL EVIDENCE

Why is it so important to keep the arts strong in our schools?

How does study of the arts contribute to student achievement and success?

Critical Evidence: How the Arts Benefit Student Achievement is designed to answer these and other questions. It describes in nontechnical terms what the research says about how study of the arts contributes to academic achievement and student success. It offers impartial, to-the-point reporting of the multiple benefits associated with students’ learning experiences in the arts. In short, it “makes the case for the arts” based on sound educational research.

A primary source for most of the studies cited here is Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development. (6) The Arts Education Partnership (AEP), with financial support from the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Arts, commissioned and published Critical Links in 2002 to capture the best work being done at the time on the academic and social effects of arts learning experiences. The 62 peer-reviewed studies included in the compendium were identified as strong arts education research that would “make a contribution to the national debate” about effective strategies to improve student achievement and school environments.

The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) and the AEP commissioned Critical Evidence: How the Arts Benefit Student Achievement in response to the needs of arts professionals and nonprofessionals alike for accurate and concise information that reflects the current state of knowledge about arts learning and student achievement. This new publication serves as an update to Eloquent Evidence: Arts at the Core of Learning, which was published by NASAA, in collaboration with the AEP, the National Endowment for the Arts and the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities in October 1995. (7) Ten years after its release, the evidence is even more eloquent, and the need to demonstrate the link between the arts and student achievement has grown more critical.

## CRITICAL EVIDENCE

### ARTS EDUCATION in the BIG PICTURE

To a large extent, changes in the national education policy environment over the last decade have shaped the landscape for arts learning in the schools today. When Eloquent Evidence was published in 1995, Arts at the Core of Learning provided an exceptionally apt subtitle. A year earlier, Congress had enacted the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which identified the arts for the first time in federal policy as a part of the core curriculum. This public acknowledgement of the arts as “core” to education was a meaningful step. In one sense, it came to symbolize what Eloquent Evidence later described as “a growing consensus among policy makers and parents that the arts should be an integral part of education.”

The federal government through the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Arts has maintained a consistent connection with arts education in the public schools over the last 10 years. (8) This has occurred in part through targeted funding for programs—often involving partnerships between schools and community organizations; professional development for teachers and teaching artists; and research and evaluation. The two agencies have cooperated as well in the data collection efforts of the National Center for Education Statistics, which provide important insights into the status and condition of arts education in the country.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is arguably the most significant federal action to affect arts education, and education generally, in the last decade—if not the last 40 years. This legislation, as with the Goals 2000 law, is an update of the basic federal education law originally enacted in 1965. No Child Left Behind was signed into law in January 2002. It expanded the federal role in

education in order “to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers.” (9)

### CRITICAL EVIDENCE

To comply with the law, states have developed plans to increase student achievement and have set performance goals, which all students are expected to meet by 2013-14 in reading and mathematics. In almost every section of the law, NCLB stresses that decisions about the allocation of federal resources for education should be grounded in “scientifically-based research.” The intent, as interpreted by the Department of Education, is to “transform education into an evidence-based field.” (10)

What Does THE PUBLIC Think about Arts Education?

SOURCE: “New Harris Poll Reveals That 93% of Americans Believe That the Arts Are Vital to Providing a Well- Rounded Education,” [www.artsusa.org](http://www.artsusa.org).

### CRITICAL EVIDENCE

A May 2005 Harris Poll on the attitudes of Americans toward arts education, commissioned by Americans for the Arts, revealed strong public support. Among the findings:

93% agree the arts are vital to providing a well-rounded education for children, a 2% increase over 2001.

86% agree an arts education encourages and assists in the improvement of a child’s attitudes toward school.

83% believe that arts education helps teach children to communicate effectively with adults and peers.

79% agree incorporating the arts into education is the first step in adding back what’s missing in public education today.

54% rated the importance of arts education a “ten” on a scale of one to ten.

79% believe that it’s important enough for them to get personally involved in increasing the amount and quality of arts education.

### CRITICAL EVIDENCE NCLB and THE ARTS

No Child Left Behind reaffirms the arts as a “core academic subject” that all schools should teach. It puts the arts on equal footing with the other designated core subjects: English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, history and geography. And it paves the way for the arts to be recognized both as a serious subject in its own right and as a part of a proven strategy to improve student performance in the other core subjects.

With its many challenges and opportunities, NCLB dominates the state and local education landscape today. What the long-term effects of NCLB will be on funding and support for arts education in the schools remain unclear. So far, the results have been mixed. Schools in some states report the amount of

instructional time devoted to reading, writing, math and science has increased, while for the arts it has declined. (11) In other states, NCLB has served as a catalyst for strengthening efforts to raise student achievement and improve school environments through integration of the arts.

### CRITICAL EVIDENCE

#### What Is the NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT?

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, as described by the U.S. Department of Education, is "the most sweeping reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act since it was enacted in 1965." With strong bipartisan support from Congress, President George W. Bush signed NCLB into law on January 8, 2002. At over 1,000 pages of legislation, it is no surprise most Americans are still in the dark about the specifics of NCLB. In 2004, more than two years after it became law, two-thirds of Americans surveyed reported they knew "very little" or "nothing at all" about NCLB, according to a Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll. On average, parents of public school children were slightly better informed and, as a whole, had substantially increased their level of knowledge about the law from the previous year. In 2004, 62% of parents said they knew "very little" or "nothing at all" about NCLB, compared to 78% in 2003.

As outlined by the U.S. Department of Education, NCLB is based on four guiding principles or "pillars":

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Stronger Accountability for Results More Freedom for States and Communities  
Encouraging Proven Education Methods More Choices for Parents

A primary objective of NCLB is to close achievement gaps between students, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or income to the "proficient" level on state standardized tests by the 2013-14 school year.

SOURCES: [www.nochildleftbehind.gov](http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov); Rose, Lowell C. and Alec M. Gallup, The 36th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, 2004.

### CRITICAL EVIDENCE

#### How Study of THE ARTS Contributes to STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT & SUCCESS

A growing body of studies, including those in the research compendium Critical Links, presents compelling evidence connecting student learning in the arts to a wide spectrum of academic and social benefits. These studies document the habits of mind, social competencies and personal dispositions inherent to arts learning. Additionally, research has shown that what students learn in the arts may help them to master other subjects, such as reading, math or social studies.

Students who participate in arts learning experiences often improve their achievement in other realms of learning and life. In a well-documented national study using a federal database of over 25,000 middle and high school students, researchers from the University of California at Los Angeles 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 in school. (12)

The concept of transfer, in which "learning in one context assists learning in a different context," has intrigued cognitive scientists and education researchers for more than a century. (13) A commonly held view is that all learning experiences involve some degree of transfer both in life and learning outside the school as well as learning within the school. However, the nature and extent of these transfers remain a topic of great research interest. Recent studies suggest the effects of transfer may in fact accrue over time and reveal themselves in multiple ways.

Researchers continue to explore the complex processes involved in learning and the acquisition of knowledge and skills. One promising line of inquiry focuses on how to measure the full range of benefits associated with arts learning. These include efforts to develop a reliable means to assess some of the subtler effects of arts learning that standardized tests fail to capture, such as the motivation to achieve or the ability to think critically.

### CRITICAL EVIDENCE

Arts Course-taking Patterns and SAT Scores, 2005

4+ years arts 534 540

4 years

2 years

1/2 year or less

VERBAL MATH

543 541

508 517

485 502

3 years 514 516

1 year 501 515

Average for All SAT Test Takers 508 520

The SAT and Arts Learning

The relationship between arts learning and the SAT is of considerable interest to anyone concerned with college readiness and admissions issues. The SAT Reasoning Test (formerly known as the SAT I) is the most widely used test offered by the College Board as part of its SAT Program. It assesses students' verbal and math skills and knowledge and is described as a "standardized measure of college readiness."

Many public colleges and universities use SAT scores in admissions. Nearly half of the nation's three million high school graduates in 2005 took the SAT.

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.

Arts participation and SAT scores co-vary—that is, they tend to increase linearly: the more arts classes, the higher the scores. This relationship is illustrated in the 2005 results shown below. Notably, students who took four years of arts coursework outperformed their peers who had one half-year or less of arts coursework by 58 points on the verbal portion and 38 points on the math portion of the SAT.

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).

### CRITICAL EVIDENCE

#### The ABCs of ARTS LEARNING

The research compendium *Critical Links* contains a diverse collection of studies that examine how arts learning experiences affect the academic achievement and social development of children and youth. It includes summaries of studies conducted in five major art form areas: dance, drama, visual arts, music and multi-arts. As the title implies, the research provides critical evidence linking study of the arts with student achievement and success.

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.

Based on these findings, the compendium has identified six major types of benefits associated with study of the arts and student achievement: (14)

1. READING AND LANGUAGE SKILLS
2. MATHEMATICS SKILLS
3. THINKING SKILLS
4. SOCIAL SKILLS
5. MOTIVATION TO LEARN
6. POSITIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT