

Letters

In Praise of Discipline-Based Approach to Arts Education

I wish to compliment you and your staff members for the content of the December/January issue of *Educational Leadership* (A New Design for Education in the Arts). Nebraska has received a planning grant from the Getty Foundation and has developed an application for some "real" money for arts education. The State Department and several schools are the applicants. People from this district are very active in this effort. If I had not retired, I would have been also.

We began using a discipline-based approach to the visual arts program in our elementary schools about five years ago through the SWRL program marketed by Phi Delta Kappa, developed by the Southwestern Regional Lab and written by Dwaine Greer. We piloted in the primary grades for a year and then expanded in the total system a grade at a time until we reached grade 6 this year.

After watching what students can do in production as a result of a strong directed program on basic techniques for teaching the elements of art and the principles of design, I have some observations to share.

1. Students' perception improved beyond anything I have experienced.
2. Students had sufficient command of basic techniques to do "something" with a brush and paint.
3. The horizon level was appropriate.
4. Trees were accurately portrayed as having a trunk and branches—not as a circle and a stick.
5. Human proportions were incredibly accurate. These primary students would blow the top off a "Draw a Man Test," which is used as a measure of mental development.
6. Students in summer school at the Stuhr Museum who had SWRL did

incredible line drawings and water-color pictures of the beautiful Victorian houses there.

For full fruition of the program, one needs art specialists to teach the criticism, aesthetics, and history. However, there is no doubt in my mind that the approach makes a powerful contribution to the cognitive growth of students. We saw an autistic child reflect basic shape instruction in free drawing that was remarkable. I think the discipline-based approach to visual arts has great potential.

Please continue your contributions to education through your work with ASCD publications. I am impressed with the continued involvement of the organization and its publications.

GERALD BRYANT
*Assistant Superintendent
School District of Grand Island
Grand Island, Nebraska*

Junior Kindergarten, Successful First Step

I wrote an article on junior kindergarten for the November 1986 issue of *Educational Leadership* and also made a presentation on that program at the ASCD conference in New Orleans last year. Hardly a day goes by that I don't receive a letter from someone outside Virginia requesting more information about the program. I would like to share additional information gathered from our longitudinal study.

1. We have developed local norms for our screening program and have refined them through a regression study. In the 1987-88 school year, we were able to place 96 percent of the 4,000 children correctly from the results of the spring screening prior to school entrance.

2. The combined kindergarten and 1st grade retention rate in the 13 schools that piloted the program

dropped from 20 percent to 11 percent.

3. The countywide kindergarten retention rate was reduced from 8 percent to 2 percent.

4. On surveys conducted for the last two years, 99 percent of junior kindergarten parents reported that their children were happy in the program. Even with the school administrators and teachers making the final placement decision, 86 percent of the parents felt it was the most appropriate placement for their children. The surveys were based on a 56 percent return.

In Virginia, 20 percent of the children fail one of the first two grades. We feel the most beneficial thing we can do to improve the success rate is to make sure children are ready to begin their school experience. We monitor our kindergarten program by using computer programs. We know our kindergarten program objectives are mastered by a very large percentage of our children. For children who are not ready for kindergarten, junior kindergarten allows a successful first step.

We will be following the progress of our junior kindergarten children throughout the primary grades. Currently, they arrive at the kindergarten door with a sense of confidence and a "can-do" attitude. We think that is a step in the right direction. ♦

JAN GEORGE
*Instructional Specialist
Early Childhood Education
Chesterfield County Public Schools
Chesterfield, Virginia*

We welcome your letters. Please send comments to: Letters, ASCD, 125 N. West St., Alexandria, VA 22314-2798. Letters selected for publication may be edited for brevity and clarity.

Copyright © 1988 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.