The Arts Are the Basics

For the first time in this writer’s memory, there is a growing consensus among educators and artists about establishing the arts as basic subject areas in school curricula throughout the country. Recent reports and policy statements from many diverse organizations—the College Board, the American Council for the Arts, the Getty Center for Education in the Arts, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and the National School Boards Association, for example—have focused on the need to treat the arts in school as disciplines, with the same expectations and requirements as other more established academic areas of study.

Several fundamental ideas underlying the buzzwords discipline-based arts education and cultural literacy are gaining wide acceptance among arts educators and other professionals in the field:

- The arts should be taught sequentially, both as creative processes and as products of civilization.
- Students should be expected to acquire specific skills in the arts and knowledge of them.
- Students should be tested regularly to determine the level of their knowledge and proficiency in the arts.
- All teachers should receive training in the arts, with additional training for those who have primary responsibility for teaching the arts.
- Artists and arts organizations have an important role to play in establishing the arts as an essential part of education, both as advocates and as resources in schools.
- Local and state education agencies should work cooperatively to establish standards and procedures for evaluating the comparative quality of arts programs among individual schools, school districts, and school systems.

The document likely to exert the most influence in the arts education arena is a report recently released by the National Endowment for the Arts, Toward Civilization. Among its findings, the report states:

We have found a gap between commitment and resources for arts education and the actual practice of arts education in classrooms. Resources are being provided, but they are not being used to give opportunities for all, or even most, students to become culturally literate. The arts in general are not being taught sequentially. Students of the arts are not being evaluated. Many arts teachers are not prepared to teach history and critical analysis of the arts (Foreword, p. i).

Several recent efforts designed to help close this gap between aspirations and current practice have been initiated at the local, state, and national levels. For instance, the Kansas City Trusts and Foundations has underwritten a program called Arts Partners. Through this innovative project, prominent Kansas City arts institutions and four local school systems have joined forces with an arts-in-education service organization to design and coordinate sequential arts activities for grades K-12. In New Jersey, the state education department has commissioned a task force led by Ernest L. Bower, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and former Commissioner of Education, to design model arts curricula K-12.

At the national level, the National Endowment for the Arts has instituted a series of planning grants designed to encourage state arts councils and education departments to work together. In the private sector, the National Coalition for Education in the Arts, comprising leading national arts and education service organizations and associations, is working to encourage more comprehensive and lasting collaboration among the diverse constituencies that make up the arts education field.

How rigorously this aspect of educational reform is pursued over the next several years depends largely on the degree of public support it receives. Recent advances in establishing the arts as basic subjects suggest that school systems are beginning to define for themselves what it means for their students to be culturally literate in the arts. As a result, demonstrating the value of this outcome to the American public appears more feasible than ever before.

Reference


Recommended Readings


Richard Bell is National Program Director, Young Audiences, Inc., 115 E. 92nd St., New York, NY 10128.