

A Public School of Choice: The Los Angeles County High School for the Arts

Students at Arts High enthusiastically endorse its combination of artistic endeavors and academics.

The Los Angeles County High School for the Arts embodies the excitement as well as the demands of schools of choice. Arts High, as it is called, brings together a dynamic mixture of individuals who share lifelong interests in the arts. The school has the strong sense of community so vital to school and student success. Through the cooperative efforts of parents, students, faculty, and administration, the school is able to meet its challenges and provide space and funding for its programs. This study of Arts High will outline the school's achievements as well as some problems it has encountered.

A Shared Vision

At Arts High, all members of the school community agree that knowledge of and participation in the arts is essential to education and self-fulfillment. All have a strong commitment to the school's mission to offer a high quality arts-focused curriculum in the context of comprehensive college preparatory public education. Unlike arts high schools where academics are deemphasized, Arts High academics are on an equal footing with the arts to better prepare students for advanced study in the arts specialties.

Arts High is truly "public." There is no tuition, and admission is open to any student of high school age in Los Angeles County. The result is an integrated student body with students from all socioeconomic levels. Students are admitted according to differing criteria ranging from the signif-

Photographs courtesy of Los Angeles County High School for the Arts



Drawn from all socioeconomic levels, the culturally and ethnically diverse student body shares common interests and purposes; more than 80 percent attend college or art institutes after graduation



Every afternoon, students participate in their arts specialties during a three-hour period reserved for that purpose. The traditional academic courses are taught in the first five periods of each day.

ificance of their achievements in a particular arts area to the "fire in their eyes" when they discuss their dreams and goals. Sometimes students are admitted without prior formal training in their arts area. Thus, Arts High is far from an elitist school for wealthy students who have had expensive private training.

The school offers a neutral territory where students from various ethnic and racial groups share common interests and purpose. We take pride in the cultural and ethnic diversity of our 421 students: 22 percent Hispanic, 12 percent Asian, 13 percent black, 4 percent Filipino and Pacific Islanders, 1 percent Native American, and 48 percent white. Racial and ethnic tensions are insignificant, and the intermingling of students in hallways and class-

rooms is commonplace. Teachers and administrators describe this as the "best possible" student body.

Living Up to the Vision

Arts High practices site-based decision making. Administrators, faculty, and students are allowed and encouraged to exercise their creative discretion in structuring their own programs and in selecting how they will meet objectives. There is no single best way to do things—that's a very important lesson we learned from our study of Arts High.

Administrators at Arts High also participate actively in arts advocacy groups that attempt to influence legislation at both state and federal levels. Members of the arts faculty, 64 of

them, are professionals who also work outside the school in their specialized fields. They are employed by the school as independent contractors. This is such a new arrangement that the county had to develop a new job classification so that these professionals could be hired as county employees of the school.

Whereas most school principals are presented a budget to manage, the Arts High principal has the unique role of generating revenue, which includes grant writing and other fundraising activities, in addition to managing the funds from the county. Traditional academic and student services programs at Arts High are supported through per-student allocations, but the arts curriculum is rich, varied, and expensive, and the total school operating budget runs about twice the revenue generated through state and district sources. Thus, the school depends on a nonprofit foundation to raise funds. The Foundation of the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts relies on contributions from public and private sources, gala fund-raisers, and gifts from artists and the arts community. The foundation functions as a separate entity from the school and is managed by an independent board of directors.

The original plans for Arts High called for it to have its own independent site, but no appropriate facilities could be located. So, California State University, Los Angeles, a long-time supporter of the arts (also the West Coast home of the Joffrey Ballet), offered to provide space on its campus. This cooperative arrangement has greatly benefited the high school. High school students now have access to university arts classrooms, dance and arts studios, music rehearsal rooms, the university library and student union, and film-making facilities.

California State-L.A. also offers the students a way to earn college credit. Taught by Arts High and California State-L.A. faculty, this program is very popular with the students. As a 1990 graduate explained, "Most of us are enrolled at California State-L.A. as well as at Arts High. We do extra work for college credit. Over the last two years

Arts Advocacy Strategies

To help educators present a strong case for arts education to decision makers at all levels, the Kentucky Alliance For Arts Education and the Kentucky Arts Council have published an annotated bibliography that presents a research-based rationale for comprehensive, integrated education in the arts. *Building A Case For Arts Education: An Annotated Bibliography of Major Research—1990* presents quantitative and qualitative research that validates the ability of quality arts education programs—in the areas of dance, music, theater, and visual and multi-disciplinary arts—to assist schools in meeting their educational goals.

Copies of the bibliography are available from the Kentucky Alliance for Arts Education, P.O. Box 13280, Lexington, KY 40583, or call (606) 254-4358.

in the 11th and 12th grades at Arts High, I have earned enough credits to enter college as a junior."

Embracing Arts High's mission, the first principal hired a chair in each of the four arts areas: theater, dance, music, and visual arts. These chairs, who wrote the initial course descriptions, were selected on the basis of three criteria: (1) knowledge of and experience with curriculum writing, (2) professional knowledge in their arts specialty, and (3) a vision for the departmental approach to arts education.

Next, the principal recruited 12 teachers from 49 cooperating school districts of Los Angeles County. Selection criteria were (1) excellence in their academic areas, (2) breadth of knowledge, (3) an abiding interest in the arts and the artistic accomplishments of the students, (4) flexibility in using traditional support services, and (5) acceptance of the equal status of the arts program within the overall school curriculum. These experienced faculty members, on loan from their home school districts, joined in and guided initial program development. All of the academic faculty have a secondary interest in the arts in addition to their expertise in their subject area. The arts faculty members bring a wealth of experience and expertise to the arts program. The school's bylaws require all decision-making committees to have members from both the arts and academic faculties, thus insuring continuous cross-fertilization.

Now in its sixth year, Arts High's instructional program lives up to the faculty's original vision. To fulfill high school graduation and college entrance requirements, traditional courses are taught in the first five periods of the day. After lunch, three hours are reserved for the arts specialties. Teachers point out that arts and academics are not mutually exclusive elements; one of the greatest strengths of the school is the way in which the academic faculty works art themes into their subject areas to enhance students' learning experiences. For example, one mathematics teacher discusses aspects of theater set construction to illustrate fundamental principles of geometry and measurement.

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Is Arts High a Success?

In the self-study accreditation report of May 1989, a large majority of students said they were pleased with the curriculum and the arts training they received. They found Arts High provides the best possible atmosphere in which to train for a career in the arts. As one student said, "We're all here because we want to be, not because we have to be. We have the same interests, so getting up at 5:00 a.m. is not an inconvenience." Still another student said, "This school is a dream come true."

Parents also express their support for the high school. For example, the father of two sons who attended the school was disappointed at first when they opted out of a traditional high school with its athletic programs to enroll in Arts High. But when he saw the success they achieved in developing their musical talents, he became an avid supporter of the school.

Despite high levels of student and parent satisfaction, the school faces various obstacles in recruiting and retaining students. A major problem for students is transportation to and from school. Because the school does not provide transportation for students, some students must commute for as much as two hours on busy Los Angeles freeways to get to school.

Publicizing the school and its programs has been another problem.

When the school first opened, local newspapers and television stations created a media blitz proclaiming Los Angeles' new *Fame*. Since then, however, media attention has gradually diminished, and so have applications. To add to the problem, some feeder schools avoid publicizing the opportunities at Arts High because they are reluctant to lose their best arts students to a specialized school.

Many students enter Arts High with only the "C" average minimum admission requirement, yet state test scores are exceptionally high. For the past two years, for example, their reading scores have been in the top 10 percent and math scores in the top 25 percent statewide. In the newest section of the California Assessment Program test, the writing sample, Arts High seniors scored at the 95th percentile.

But the school is proudest of the students' accomplishments in the arts, which lead to recruitment by universities and prestigious arts institutes such as Juilliard. In May 1990 the school's jazz combo was named number one in the nation at the "Musicfest USA" competition in Oakland, California. During its brief existence, the school has also had three Presidential Scholars in the Arts. Accomplishments like this led to 230 offers for further study extended to the 135 graduates last year. Supported by almost \$500,000 in scholarships that year alone, more than 80 percent of the graduates continued on to colleges or arts institutes.

In these days of widespread student apathy, the benefits of having students who are excited about being in school cannot be overestimated. Enthusiasm for this specialty school energizes students, faculty, and administrators. There is no doubt that creating a school of choice is a challenge, but we all think it is truly a challenge worth taking. □

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