

**Arts in Education Briefing:
Creating Success in School, Work & Life**

Presented by The Arts Education Working Group

in cooperation with

Rep. Jerrold Nadler, Rep. Jim Leach, and Rep. Sherwood Boehlert

and

Congressional Arts Caucus Co-Chairs Louise Slaughter and Chris Shays

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122 Cannon House Office Building

Remarks of Richard J. Deasy, Director of the Arts Education Partnership

I am here on behalf of the more than 100 national education, arts, government and philanthropic organizations that participate in the Arts Education Partnership.

We are immensely grateful to Congress for naming the arts one of the core academic subjects to be taught in all American schools. I want to accent the word “academic”. It is a common misunderstanding of the arts that they are not seen as “academic”, that is, as ways of developing and expressing knowledge and understanding, using disciplined methods and processes to do so, and contributing to advances all phases of human life – personal, social, cultural, economic - comparable that is to math, science, history or any other academic subject.

AEP has spent the past decade demonstrating through research that the arts are indeed academic, that is that they require and develop profound intellectual processes and the desire to apply those processes within the arts and in other areas of school, life and work.

We’ve summarized many of those findings in the brochure we have here today: *Critical Evidence: How the Arts Benefit Student Achievement*. The brochure captures what we reported in a large compendium of studies we published three years ago called *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*.

We demonstrated in these studies the ways in which students use the multiple symbolic processes of the arts to develop essential intellectual skills. That is what THINKING is – using symbols to understand and make meaning. Most of us think by talking to ourselves – that is use the symbols called words and their configuration into sentences. The arts employ this verbal form – thoughts expressed in poems or drama, for instance. But the arts employ other symbol systems as well: visual, auditory, kinetic processes for developing and expressing meaning. The painter Georgia O’Keefe said there were many things she didn’t understand nor could say until she learned to paint. This is the experience of those using the arts. We show in *Critical Links* how the use of the variety of symbol systems available in the arts develops a wide range of essential thinking skills – intellectual processes. We also show that the arts **engage** students in learning and motivate them to **apply** their intellectual skills in other school subjects and other aspects of their lives.

What was a revelation to us in the studies in *Critical Links* was that, while all students benefit from the learning required by the arts, students struggling to succeed in school – students from poverty, lacking English, or identified as special education – are particularly benefited by arts learning. Indeed they “close the achievement gap” between themselves and other students.

In light of these findings, we argue that it is a matter of **equity** that the arts be in schools. To eliminate the arts is to deny struggling children – those in danger of being “left behind” one of the demonstrated ways in which we can help them to succeed.

We recently completed a study of high poverty schools that have large populations of such students. These are schools that over the past decade have been transformed into successful schools by infusing the arts into their curricula and into the everyday life of the school.

Recall for a moment that thirty percent of students will drop out of public schools before graduating. Fifty percent of Hispanic and African American students won’t graduate. Fifty percent of teachers will quit within the first five years of teaching. Something is wrong with the culture and processes of schooling that creates this disaffection. The schools we studied belied these statistics.

We called the book *Third Space: When Learning Matters*. We did so because what we discovered is that one of the fundamental effects of the arts in schools is that they change the relationships among students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the broader community. That is, they create a new kind of “space” where students are seen in a new light by teachers. Students are able to reveal who they are, what they know, and what they are capable of doing through the multiple forms of expression and communication the arts provide. They can break the stereotypes and images often imposed on them because of their color, language, dress, past performance, or whatever. They alter teachers’ perceptions and expectations of them.

This happens when teachers treat the students work in the arts – poems, paintings, dramas, dance – as profound forms of self expression embodying deep knowledge and understanding. Teachers have “aha” moments about the students and suddenly a new and dynamic set of relationships become possible. What begins to develop is a community of learners – students and teachers working together to master an art form and to understand the content embodied in the form – the content of the play or song, the content of a student’s life revealed in the work, or the content other of school subjects expressed in the art: history, math, biology.

Learning like this “matters” to students, engages them in the life of the school because they see the relationships – “third spaces” - linking their school learning and their lives outside the school. Such engagement is crucial to learning because all learning is a decision of the learner and the more motivated you are to learn – the more it matters to you – the deeper and more enduring your learning. You become what cognitive scientists call an “adaptive expert” capable of applying what you have learned in one school setting to other situations in school, life, and work. That is what schools are for.

What we also saw in these schools we studied was that the success of students and their relationships to teachers attracted parents to the school. They came to learn and to see their children succeed. They became part of the school’s life.

This creation of a sense of community among the students, teachers and parents is, perhaps, the most profound and important contribution of the arts to schools. The school becomes a democracy, an inclusive community of

learners that welcomes outsiders and comes together in common efforts to serve others – to paint murals on the walls, give performance in school and community, teach young students, run – believe it or not – professional development programs for teachers. This inclusive community becomes the context and opportunity for exploring the contributions and values that the diversity of our population brings to America.

We conclude in the book that it is this creation of community and an understanding of democracy that again make it absolutely essential that the arts be in schools. They allow public schools to fulfill their primary function, which is to prepare citizens who will sustain and enlarge our unique democratic society. The primary function of the school is not to raise test scores, but to raise citizens. The arts are essential to that function.

They are essential, then, for the intellectual, personal, and social development of students. And they are essential for creating communities that generate the culture and values that sustain democracy and civil society. Schools without the arts fail students, they fail their social purpose, and they fail all of us struggling to realize the promise of America.