

Study: Arts education has academic effect

By Tamara Henry, USA TODAY 05/19/2002

WASHINGTON — Schoolchildren exposed to drama, music and dance may do a better job at mastering reading, writing and math than those who focus solely on academics, says a report by the Arts Education Partnership.

"Notions that the arts are frivolous add-ons to a serious curriculum couldn't be further from the truth," says James Catterall, education professor at the University of California-Los Angeles, who coordinated the research.

The report is based on an analysis of 62 studies of various categories of art — ranging from dance, drama, music and visual arts — by nearly 100 researchers. It's the first to combine all the arts and make comparisons with academic achievement, performance on standardized tests, improvements in social skills and student motivation.

Catterall says the studies suggest that arts education may be especially helpful to poor students and those in need of remedial instruction.

"While education in the arts is no magic bullet for what ails many schools, the arts warrant a place in the curriculum because of their intimate ties to most everything we want for our children and schools," Catterall says.

The report took two years to produce, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education.

Gerald Sroufe of the American Educational Research Association describes the report as "a benchmark" and "a starting place for future research in the arts because it represents a fairly comprehensive picture of what research-based knowledge exists." However, he says, the report is "necessarily a thin volume, including some rather thin studies."

Eileen Mason of the National Endowment for the Arts says that President Bush has requested \$11 million to support arts education projects.

"We are eager for more research," Mason says. "We want to learn more about how we can best convey to our children the knowledge and skills required to create, perform and respond to the arts. At the same time, we need to know more about how the arts help to develop other capacities of our children, such as language, reading and spatial reasoning."

School officials often complain that arts programs tend to be the first cut in schools facing budget deficits.

G. Thomas Houlihan, executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, acknowledges that many school superintendents, principals and teachers are unaware of the value of arts education.

He says copies of the report will be distributed to school leaders throughout the nation.

Houlihan says he was impressed by the one study finding that "arts motivate and reach certain students."

Expanding the mind

The Arts Education Partnership, arguing for the importance of arts in schools, says various art forms benefit students in different ways:

Drama. Helps with understanding social relationships, complex issues and emotions; improves concentrated thought and story comprehension.

Music. Improves math achievement and proficiency, reading and cognitive development; boosts SAT verbal scores and skills for second-language learners.

Dance. Helps with creative thinking, originality, elaboration and flexibility; improves expressive skills, social tolerance, self-confidence and persistence.

Visual arts. Improve content and organization of writing; promote sophisticated reading skills and interpretation of text, reasoning about scientific images and reading readiness.

Multi-arts (combination of art forms). Helps with reading, verbal and math skills; improves the ability to collaborate and higher-order thinking skills.