

## Ten Reasons Arts Education Matters

*Arts education should continue to be an integral part of a well-rounded, 21st century education program that serves to educate the whole child for success in school and beyond.*

K–12 education budget cuts have forced schools and districts across the United States to limit or eliminate arts instruction. Also, because the artistic disciplines are not evaluated through high-stakes testing, these classes are often vulnerable when time is precious and funds are limited.

Elliott Seif, an educational consultant, author, *Understanding by Design*® cadre and ASCD Faculty member, and *Educational Leadership* contributor, shares 10 reasons why we should strengthen and expand arts education in a 21st century world, not reduce or eliminate it.

### Arts education can increase student engagement.

Let's face it—for the most part, children like arts education. It is hands-on, has immediate rewards, focuses on positive achievements, develops concrete products, and fosters collaboration. The arts provide many opportunities for students to show off and demonstrate their skills through authentic performance. The arts enable children to grow in confidence and learn how to think positively about themselves and learning.

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### Children learn positive habits, behaviors, and attitudes.

Learning a musical instrument, creating a painting, learning to dance, or singing in a chorus teaches that taking small steps; practicing to get better at something; being persistent; and being patient, even in the face of adversity, are important for children's growth and improvement. Students gain confidence as they try to accomplish things that don't come easily. In other words, learning an artistic discipline helps young people develop character. Students learn habits, behaviors, and attitudes that are necessary for success in any field of endeavor.

### The arts enhance creativity.

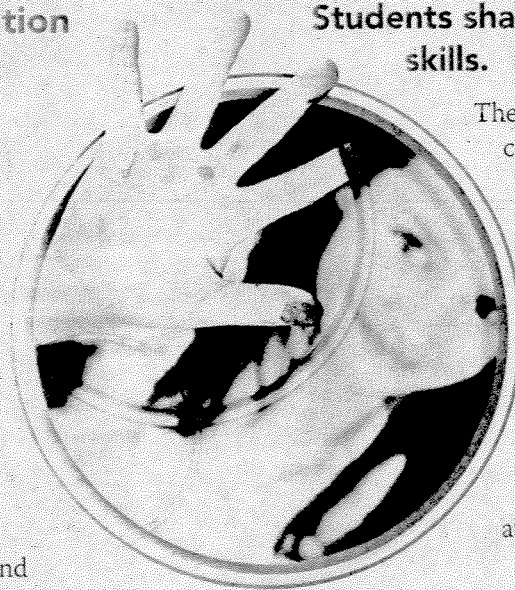
Imagine classes in which students create original artwork filled with color that displays a creative use of space, they develop their own rhythms, or they write and produce their own plays. These classes provide a wonderful environment for fostering creativity, which is an important skill to have in a rapidly changing world.

## Oh Freedom! Teaching Civil Rights Through Smithsonian Collections

*Free Online Conference on Wednesday, February 6*

Tap into this free resource to add rich lessons to your classroom. Explore civil rights through the Smithsonian collections with curators, experts, and educators via live presentations, demonstrations, and moderated forums. You can participate in the live sessions or watch the archived conference at <http://africanamericanart.si.edu/conference>.

This event is presented by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.



### Students sharpen their critical intellectual skills.

The arts foster higher levels of thinking that carry over to learning other academic subjects as well as to life outside of school.

Through the arts, children learn to observe (What do you see in a painting?); interpret (How should we play this music?); see different perspectives (What is the artist's perspective? What is your perspective?); analyze (Let's take apart this play and study each part separately); and synthesize (How do all the parts of the dance fit together to create a whole?).

### The arts teach students methods for learning language skills.

As students learn to read notes, compose music, play an instrument, memorize dance steps, create a painting, and act in a drama, they are also learning how to develop new concepts, build vocabulary, and understand a new language.

### The arts help students learn mathematics.

The arts require measurement, number manipulation, and proportional thinking, all of which foster mathematical thinking. Students also learn patterns (musical rhythms and dance patterns), spatial and geometric relationships (visual art patterns), and three-dimensional skills (making clay models).

### The arts expand on and enrich learning in other subjects.

Works of art provide a visual context for learning about historical periods. Music, painting, drama, and dance help literature come alive. Graphic designs and drawings, such as those made by inventors and engineers, complement learning about scientific and technological principles and innovations.

### Aesthetic learning is its own reward.

The arts teach young people about beauty, proportion, and grace. Students can examine conflict, power, emotion, and life itself. The power of the arts is in its wondrous ability to give us joy, help us understand tragedy, promote empathy, and make the written word come alive.

## Students practice teamwork.

In developing a theatrical production, group performance, or any type of collaborative artistic endeavor, students practice the fine art of teamwork. As they work together, they learn to understand differences and diversity and realize the ways that teamwork contributes to a great performance. By also teaching students how to live and work together, the arts contribute to making schools safer and more peaceful learning environments.

## Arts education is just the beginning.

The arts provide an important avenue where children can develop a passion for learning. Many children discover their talents and interests through the arts and are inspired to pursue careers in artistic fields.

## Arts Education in Action

I just gave 10 reasons why we need to support arts education, but the proof that arts programs work is illustrated by the success of arts education programs in the real world. Recently I visited three schools in the Philadelphia, Penn., area in which the arts are making a huge difference both for individual fulfillment and academic success.

In one local suburban school district, which has a mixed ethnic and minority population, the arts are thriving. The district is committed to implementing arts education at all levels and makes the arts a priority for its students. Even in today's tough economic times, the district budget funds multiple teachers of the arts in every school.

At the elementary level, children in this district learn about well-known artists and their work, create their own artwork, and share their artwork on Artsonia, a website that describes itself as "the largest student art museum in the world" ([www.artsonia.com](http://www.artsonia.com)). Every child in the district's middle schools has the opportunity to either play an instrument in a band or orchestra or be in a choral group.

Every year, the middle schools and high school produce student theatrical events that almost rival Broadway productions. Although this school district is not devoid of problems in other areas, its arts programs stand out as beacons of excellence that enrich student learning and help children succeed academically.

I recently observed another program in Philadelphia designed for returning dropouts. Students gain confidence that they can succeed and develop critical skills through participation in arts courses. Amazing student artwork hangs in the school's hallways and on classroom walls.

In another Philadelphia high school that I work with closely, students designed a beautiful mural for the library and they regularly compose music, hang their artwork throughout the building, and put on shows for parents and outsiders.

## Give Students a Chance for Success

By reducing or eliminating the arts from our educational programs, we are reducing the likelihood of student success. We lose programs that motivate children and provide them with skills that help them succeed in school. We create an education system that "fails" more students. Our students lose a significant part of the educational experience that enriches their lives and helps them examine what it means to be human.

Teachers, boards of education, superintendents, principals, and the community all need to make a commitment to preserve and expand arts programs rather than reduce them. We can do this in many ways: train teachers how to incorporate the arts into their classes and curriculum; use members of the community and local arts organizations to help foster arts education; find grant funds to support the arts; and, ultimately, fund adequate numbers of arts educators in every school and every program.

Arts programs make a difference, and every child should have the opportunity to participate in a strong, multidimensional arts program. The reality is that the arts have a powerful influence on children and learning, and they can make a significant difference in children's lives. It takes understanding, commitment, communication, and hard work to make sure that the arts are an important and meaningful part of schooling. ■

—ELLIOTT SEIF

