

How the Arts Unlock the Door to Learning

Student achievement was down. Teachers were demoralized. Until a bold strategy -- integrating the arts into curricula -- helped students embrace their learning and retain their knowledge. Today the faculty, staff, and students of Maryland's Bates Middle School are crafting a whole new vision of school transformation.

BY MARIKO NOBORI

What do Mars and modern dance have to do with each other? How do you connect fractions with Andy Warhol? At Wiley H. Bates Middle School(1), in Annapolis, Maryland, the answer is arts integration. Every teacher there is committed to weaving the arts and standard curricula together to create a richer and more lasting learning experience for their students.

Topic: Art Integration

School: Wiley H. Bates Middle School

Location: Annapolis, MD

School Setting: Suburban

Target Audience: Grades 6-8

Note: Demographic data below is from the 2011-12 academic year.

Enrollment: 715

Student Population:

46% free or reduced-price lunch
 39% Caucasian
 34% African American
 20% Latino
 2% Asian
 10% receiving special education services
 7% English learners

Note: Expenditures below are from 2010-11 academic year.

Average per-pupil operating expenditures:

School: n/a
 District(county): \$7,451
 State (MD): \$4,694

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Arts integration goes beyond including art projects in class; it is a teaching strategy that seamlessly merges arts standards with core curricula to build connections and provide engaging context. For example, in a science classroom you might see students choreographing a dance using locomotor and nonlocomotor movements to demonstrate their understanding of rotation versus revolution of the planets (PDF)(5). In a math class, you might see students learning fractions by examining composition in Warhol's Campbell's soup paintings.

(See more arts-integrated lesson plans from Bates)(6)

What we also saw in these classrooms were students who were enthusiastically participating in the learning process, and having fun. It's not revelatory to say that the arts can engage kids. But that that engagement can also be leveraged to boost academic growth and improve discipline(7) seems like a secret that really needs to be revealed. When you see how the kids embrace these lessons, hear them tell how art helps them remember concepts better, and learn about the improvements teachers have noted in student understanding and retention, it makes you wonder why more schools aren't integrating the arts in every class.

A Whole-School Reform

Bates decided to become a fully arts-integrated school in 2007 as the primary initiative in a whole-school reform effort. Other initiatives in their school improvement plan (PDF)(8) included Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)(9), an operational framework for implementing practices and interventions to improve academic and behavioral outcomes, and Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)(10), a college readiness system with research-based methods for elementary through postsecondary students. Their principal at the time, Diane Bragdon, had brought the school back from the brink of failure and now was ready to aim its trajectory squarely toward greater success. Bragdon got the support of Anne Arundel County Public Schools Superintendent Kevin Maxwell, long a proponent of schools of choice, who knew well the impact arts integration had had in other Maryland schools. The district applied for a four-year grant called Supporting Arts Integrated Learning for Student Success (SAILSS) from the U.S. Department of Education and was one of 15 districts and schools to receive it.

Since they started implementing arts integration schoolwide in 2009, Bates has seen a 23 percent drop in the average number of referrals and suspensions per student. The school's percentage of students proficient or advanced in math has grown four times more than the state's over the same period, and five times more in reading. Not all lessons are taught with arts integration, but Bates takes pains to diligently track those that have been in a regular log (PDF)(11), and they report substantial improvements in student comprehension and retention.

Why Does Arts Integration Work?

Why does it work? Arts integration uses teaching practices that have been shown in brain-based research to improve comprehension and long-term retention(12). For example, when students create stories, pictures, or other nonverbal expressions of the content they are learning -- a process researchers call elaboration -- they are also helping to better

embed the information. In one eighth-grade math class, students prepared for a test on linear equations by creating photo stories of the steps involved. This required that teacher Laura Casciato spend nearly a full class period teaching about basic principles of design (PDF)(13). She explained the trade-off: "It was an easy decision to spend time on the art because we know that they retain that information better. They're going to look at that test and say, 'Oh yeah, I remember that information from my photo.'"

As with any new initiative, there are a number of factors that must be in place for it to succeed. With arts integration, high-quality professional development is essential. Teachers don't need to be "artistic" to be able to use arts integration; they just need to learn some of the fundamentals so they will be better able to think of ways to merge art concepts with other content. For example, knowing the basic elements of design, such as emphasis, balance, contrast, and repetition, enabled Casciato to teach her students how to create more informative photo compositions to illustrate each step in solving a linear equation (PDF)(14).

(Read tips for administrators and teachers for getting started with arts integration)(15)

Bates used the bulk of their grant money for professional development, which they started in the 2007-08 school year. They have PD Thursdays every other week, and at least one per month is on arts integration. Last year (2011-12) was the final year of their grant funding. Teachers report they are now well versed in arts standards and know how to create arts-integrated lessons(16). Many now train their colleagues and new teachers entering the school.

Beyond engagement and retention, adults and students at Bates cite numerous other benefits of arts integration(17): It encourages healthy risk taking, helps kids recognize new skills in themselves and others, provides a way to differentiate instruction, builds collaboration among both students and teachers, bridges differences, and draws in parents and the community. Plus it's just plain fun.

Lastly, there's equity. If we agree that the arts can provide all kinds of benefits for kids, from intellectual to creative to social-emotional, then shouldn't all kids have the opportunity to learn about and experience them? But far too few schools have either the funding or the bureaucratic support to make this a priority, a lack often born out of fear of sacrificing academic achievement. What Bates and many other arts-integrated schools across the country are showing is that by creating a richer, more memorable learning experience through the arts, they unleash not only a rising tide of academic achievement but they lay the foundation for what it means to be a truly creative community.

What do you think about this Schools That Work story? We'd love to hear from you!

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