

Preface

The Arts Education Partnership (AEP) was founded ten years ago during a surge of concern over the quality of public schools, a surge that led to the development of new federal and state laws, standards, and accountability systems. The concern first found a strong voice in the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, that famously warned of a “rising tide of mediocrity” in American education.¹ The so-called “standards movement” prompted by the report gained momentum when the first President George Bush convened governors and corporate and educational leaders at a 1989 summit to set national goals for education. The federal *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, passed in 1994 during the first administration of President Bill Clinton, incorporated these goals and demanded new actions by states to use the federal money provided by the law to improve their schools. The law named a set of subjects that should be taught to students in all schools. The arts were included.

The U.S. Secretary of Education at that time, Richard Riley, and Jane Alexander, then chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, were both strong arts education advocates, and believed the arts could play an important role in fulfilling the intention of the law. They jointly convened some 140 national education, arts, corporate, philanthropic, and civic organizations in a series of meetings to develop a coalition and plan for that purpose. In 1995 the two federal agencies entered into a cooperative agreement with the state departments of education through their national association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the state arts agencies through the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies to create an administrative entity that would support and convene the coalition and assist in implementing its plan. AEP was born and has since been sustained by continuous financing and guidance from these four agencies, carrying into the administration of the current President George Bush.

From the beginning, a fundamental concern of AEP has been to strengthen public understanding of the effects of learning and participation

in the arts on the intellectual, personal, and social development of children and young people. Of equal concern has been the identification of schools, school districts, cultural organizations, and communities that engage students in quality arts activities. AEP has published a series of reports and research studies over the years to address these concerns. The reports are in wide use in schools, colleges, and communities throughout the country. *Third Space* is the latest and, in many respects, the most original and provocative of those publications. It both embraces and extends in important ways themes and findings from our previous research work.

Earlier Research

In 1998, AEP released one of its earliest reports on the impact of the arts, *Young Children and the Arts: Making Creative Connections*, showing the role of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic stimulation embodied in the arts in the cognitive and personal development of children from birth through grade three. In 1999 we published our study of public school districts throughout the country that sought to reach all students in their schools with arts instruction and participation. The study was done in cooperation with the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and funded by the GE Fund (now GE Foundation). Ninety-one districts were featured in the report, *Gaining the Arts Advantage: Lessons from School Districts that Value Arts Education*. Factors identified in *Gaining* as important for implementing arts education in an entire district are now used in communities across the country to assess strengths and weaknesses in their arts policies and programs. A crucial finding was the essential role of communities external to the school in creating policy and political support for the arts and participating in partnerships with schools to provide quality arts programs for students.

A significant step forward in research on the effects of arts learning on students came with the 2000 publication of *Champions of Change: The Role of the Arts in Learning*, a set of seven studies supported by the GE Fund and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and published with their support by AEP, again in cooperation with the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. Among the important findings

in *Champions of Change* was the capacity of the arts to reach students who otherwise were not fully engaged by other school subjects and experiences.

The promising findings in *Champions of Change* prompted senior leaders at the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Arts to fund AEP work in identifying and analyzing other research studies of the effects of arts education on young people's learning and to publish a compendium of the strongest of the studies. AEP released this compendium, *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*, in 2002. It was described by leadership of the American Educational Research Association as a benchmark for future arts education research. *Critical Links* analyzed and summarized findings from sixty-two studies of the effects of dance, drama, music, visual arts, and multi-arts experiences. The studies illuminate the profound and complex intellectual and emotional processes involved in learning the arts, and the interrelationships between those processes and student learning and development in other areas of school and life.

Among the significant implications of the *Critical Links* studies (reinforcing what we first reported in *Champions of Change*) was that while the arts had effects on all students, they could be particularly beneficial to students from economically disadvantaged circumstances and for students who typically had difficulty learning in school. These findings had enormous import for the challenges facing American education, specifically for strengthening the hand of schools with large populations of students from families of poverty. These so called "high poverty schools" often also include groups of students who are learning English for the first time, or who are assigned to special education classes, a percentage of whom are Black or Hispanic. These student groups tend to score lower on standardized tests and are the target of efforts to "close the achievement gap" as measured by these tests.

We saw indications in our studies that the arts helped these students to achieve, leading us to consider a study of schools with such populations at which students were succeeding and where the schools identified the arts as a reason for that success. In light of the positive effects of arts learning, we believed it was a matter of equity that schools

extend the benefits of the arts to all students in the school, including those who struggle to learn. But, how might that be done?

Federal officials again expressed an interest in supporting our work. Congress provided funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to develop and conduct the study. Likewise, generous support once again came from the GE Foundation. The Ford Foundation added its support while the project was in progress. Lauren Stevenson, senior associate for research on the AEP staff, and the assistant editor of *Critical Links*, led the study. *Third Space* tells the story of what she and her team of researchers found.

That story has wider implications than we initially believed for the daunting problems facing American students and schools. While the arts can indeed engage students in ways that contribute to their success on standard measures of achievement, we began to see that they play an even richer and more profound role in preparing students to cope in the present and contribute in the future in an America and a world of enormous opportunities and equally enormous conflicts. As one of the educators interviewed for the study put it, the arts give students a centered life from which to navigate through their present and their future.

The challenge to American education has never been simply to raise test scores—that is a relatively recent and limited goal. The challenge has always been to raise citizens who are capable of active participation in the social, cultural, political, and economic life of the world’s longest experiment in democracy, an experiment demanding a free, educated, and committed citizenry. We were amazed to discover anew the role of the arts in realizing that vision and creating that democracy. That is the larger story we believe *Third Space* can tell. That is why we offer it as a compelling reason to fully embrace the arts in our schools. It’s how to sustain our democracy.

Richard J. Deasy
Director
Arts Education Partnership