

FORUM ON ARTS EDUCATION



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A Compilation of Entries from Barry's Blog

barry's blog
News, Advice and Opinion for the Arts Administrator

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RESEARCH

Week Four, Day One

How does the recent report from the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities help to inform the public debate on arts education? What other new research data is out there (FRSS, NEA, WESTAF etc).

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In May, the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (also known as PCAH) released at the Arts Education Partnership's Spring 2011 National Forum a major report entitled, *Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America's Future Through Creative Schools*. Since its release, the report has received considerable media attention. It's also been the focus of meetings with White House staff, the President and the First Lady. Last month, the report served as the catalyst for a White House-sponsored roundtable discussion that honored leaders in arts education who are "Champions of Change."

All of this activity is consistent with the PCAH's mission, which is to advise the White House on cultural issues. President Ronald Reagan created the Committee by Executive Order in 1982. He designated the First Lady to serve as the Honorary Chair of the Committee, which is composed of prominent public and private citizens. *Reinvesting in Arts Education* is designed to further President Obama's Platform in Support of the Arts, in which he argued as a candidate in 2008 for a reinvestment in arts education.

I believe the issuance of this report represents a pivotal moment for our field of arts education, one in which we have a rare opportunity to elevate the conversation about the role of the arts in education policy and practice. We can shape the public debate if – and this is a BIG if – we can come together around some common messages.

Since the release, I've been asked to speak to various arts and education groups about the report and its findings. I've noticed that a lot of people are aware of the report, but most haven't read more than a few snippets of it. (In fairness to overworked people everywhere, it does run 76 pages with appendices.) What's in or not in the report and what its key messages are remain open to interpretation, based more on a set of impressions than on a close reading of the content. This has helped stir up the perennial hornet's nest of divisive issues that stubbornly persist no matter how much we chant the "both/and, not either/or" mantra. The

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list is familiar. Standards-based sequential arts instruction versus arts integration. Teaching artists versus arts specialists. Intrinsic benefits versus instrumental benefits. And so on.

Even if these distinctions were helpful in advancing the field, they will not help to inform the more public conversation about arts education. In fact, to many people outside of our field, these debates sound like a lot of noise. That point was driven home to me again recently when in my home state of Colorado the head of a well-regarded community foundation that supports arts and cultural projects flatly stated that the foundation didn't invest in arts education because they couldn't "make any sense out of it."

Reinvesting in Arts Education has the potential to be a highly effective tool for "sense-making" with a wider audience if we can put aside for the moment the issues that confound us and focus instead on the issues that confront us. Are there aspects of the report on which we can all agree? The answer is yes; there are many points of agreement. Here are "five easy pieces" of prose or text taken directly from the report for which a strong consensus already exists and which we can use to frame our conversations.

1. "Reinvesting in Arts Education." Let's start with the title. A publication issued by an influential advisory committee to the White House with the words reinvesting in arts education in the title ought to be something we can all get behind. Some have argued even using the word "reinvestment" in these economic conditions suggests a certain naiveté. But the title also refers to investing in strategies that build the human and social capital that are at least as important as financial capital in promoting and sustaining any serious change effort. As one example, AEP, in partnership with the President's Committee, has published a new brochure that identifies 15 no-cost or low-cost strategies that principals can use to increase arts education in their schools. The strategies are drawn from real examples gathered from highly-effective principals from around the country.

2. "Two themes emerged...about the provision and distribution of arts education." The result of 18 months of investigation led to two big "a-ha's" that should come as no surprise. First, when it comes to the *provision* of arts education, there is a wide range and diversity of approaches – a "patchwork of approaches," to quote the report. Second, there exists at present serious inequities in the *distribution* of arts education. These conclusions are consistent with the findings from other studies conducted during the last several years and the PCAH report does a good job in making its case. We may not be able to agree on the solutions to these conditions as offered in the report, but we should be able to agree on the basic premises and use them as context for our conversations with the public.

3. "The arts are not flowers but a wrench." This statement appears in the Executive Summary of the report on the PCAH website. They are eight simple words that convey an immediate and powerful image. Yes, we could invoke our "both/and" rule, but it would be so much more effective if we focused instead on the wrench part of the equation. The arts are a tool – a wrench -- that can help students succeed, enhance teacher effectiveness, transform schools, and strengthen communities. And the PCAH report does a credible and accurate job summarizing the evidence-based research that supports these findings.

4. “Develop the field of arts integration.” This is second of the report’s five recommendations. Earlier blog posts have discussed some of the common barriers to developing the field of arts integration, including a lack of time, resources and commitment. To this list, I would add a lack of clarity about what arts integration is as a significant barrier. To many outside our field the concept of arts integration is not well understood. And we don’t make things any easier with our definitions. Most definitions of arts integration suffer from a syndrome I call TMW – Too Many Words. These tend to be definitions laden with qualifiers and caveats. We actually do a better job talking about what arts integration isn’t than what it is (e.g. “it isn’t about signing your ABC’s...”).

We – the arts education field – need to come up with a common straightforward definition of arts integration if we ever hope to get a real conversation started with the public. Here’s my less than perfect stab at it, cobbled together from various existing definitions:

Arts integration is instruction that integrates content and skills from the arts with other core subjects to increase knowledge in both areas.

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I think my definition leaves much room for improvement. So here is my challenge to readers of this blog: Complete the following sentence in 25 words or less: “Arts integration is” To the individual who comes up with the best definition, AEP will present him or her with one of our highly coveted and always useful AEP grocery-shopping bags!

Why is having a simple common definition so important? Because the reality is the arts integration ship has already sailed. Yet too many of us are still arguing at the shore over who should be the Skipper, when we should be onboard leading the way forward. I was reminded of arts integration’s resonance a few weeks ago when I was invited to be a presenter on an art integration webinar hosted by the publication *Education Week*. A total of 2,143 people registered for the webinar and 718 attended the online session, with hundreds more viewing the archived recording on the *Education Week* website. More than 400 questions were submitted in advance or during the webinar. These numbers make it clear that a much wider education audience than we previously believed existed is interested in learning more about arts integration.

5. “Widen the focus of evidence gathering.” This is the last of the report’s five recommendations. Yet to us at AEP, it is one of the most important for our work. Yes, we need to widen the focus of evidence gathering to include more and better research that documents the contribution that learning in and through the arts makes to addressing some of education’s biggest challenges – problems such as reducing dropout rates and increasing rates of high school graduation, college going and college completion. But we also need a “one-stop shop” where access to that research and other high quality studies is readily available in a form that is useful to us and to the public. To address that need, AEP will launch later this year *ArtsEdSearch*, a comprehensive online clearinghouse of arts education research and policy. Fulfilling a vision for arts education research in the 21st century, *ArtsEdSearch* will provide user-friendly summaries of key research findings, point

to areas where additional research is needed, and identify strategic policy implications based on the existing research.

These five “points of agreement” represent just a few areas of consensus that can be drawn from the PCAH report. What are some other points of agreement in the report that we can use to leverage the public conversation about arts education?