



AEP Analysis of NAEP Arts Assessment Results

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2008 National Assessment of Educational Progress in the Arts (NAEP Arts). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Available at:
<http://nationsreportcard.gov>

BACKGROUND

On June 15, 2009, the National Assessment Governing Board released results of the 2008 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the Arts, the “Nation’s Arts Report Card.” The NAEP is administered nationally in various subjects according to schedules set by Congress. NAEP provides the only national data on student achievement in the arts, or in any other subject area. In addition, by surveying students, teachers, and school administrators, the Assessment can provide important data on the conditions of arts education in America’s schools. The NAEP Arts Assessment was last administered in 1997. The following is an analysis of the 2008 results.

METHODOLOGY OF THIS ANALYSIS

Several summaries of the NAEP Arts Assessment results already exist. These include summaries on the AEP Website as well as the various reports of the National Center for Education Statistics. See Additional Information, below.

This *AEP Analysis of NAEP Arts Assessment Results* is not another summary. Rather, its purpose is to *interpret* the NAEP results within the existing research and policy contexts of education, and specifically the effort to reform education in order to ensure complete, quality learning experiences for all students. The analysis looks at the NAEP results from four perspectives: educational access and equity, educational quality, complete curricula, and the adequacy of research.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The National Assessment Governing Board has released results of the 2008 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the Arts. It was the first NAEP Arts Assessment since 1997.
- Results of the assessment reveal broad and persistent achievement gaps in music and visual arts based on socioeconomics, race, ethnicity, gender and school type and location.
- Learning in the arts encompasses high-level content knowledge and higher-order thinking skills; often, however, teaching and learning do not take place at these complex cognitive levels.
- Little is known about the wide-scale and equitable access to arts learning. NAEP findings highlight the need for more systematic and effective research on these variables.

PERSPECTIVE 1: ACCESS AND EQUITY

The NAEP findings show that a significant gap at eighth grade separates the achievement levels of White and Asian students from African-American and Hispanic students. For example, scores for responding in music for White and Asian/Pacific Islander students were 29 to 32 points higher than scores for Black and Hispanic students. Scores for responding in visual arts for White and Asian/Pacific Islander students were 22 to 31 points higher than the scores for Black and Hispanic students. Scores for creating in visual arts for White and Asian/Pacific Islander students were 8 to 12 points higher than the scores for Black and Hispanic students.

But here, as elsewhere, the data provoke more questions than they answer. A panel member at a recent conference remarked, “This is not evidence of an achievement gap, but of a teaching gap” (Panelist, AEQ Conference, Seattle, June 19, 2009). The data from administrators portray enormous deficits. Entire schools (representing 16% of students) offer no music instruction or offer it less than once a week. The results for visual arts are even more serious—24%. These numbers mean that “instruction” hardly exists in these schools, provided that you define instruction as having definable scope and sequence.

How do these deficits play out unequally among affluent and impoverished school districts, and with what consequences for minority children—consequences reflected in the NAEP achievement data? Here, again, the data are dismaying in their implications: Students from lower-income families (students eligible for free/reduced-price school lunch) scored 28 points lower in music and 9 points lower in visual arts than students who were not eligible. Students who attended city schools had lower average scores than students who attended suburban, town, and rural schools—differences of 13, 14, and 8 points respectively. The average responding score in music for eighth-graders in public schools was 14 points lower than the score for students in private schools and 10 points lower in visual arts.

In addition to these gaps along lines of race, ethnicity, poverty, and school location and type are gender gaps. Female students scored 10 points higher than their male counterparts in the responding sections of both music and visual arts. Female students scored 6 points higher than male students in creating visual art.

The achievement gaps in music and visual arts at eighth grade mirror those that the NAEP has revealed in other subjects, including reading and mathematics. Since the arts often provide a lifeline for students who are struggling in other subjects, reanimating their interest in academics or even preventing their dropping out or failing, the presence of these disparities suggest that the lifeline may not be available for those who most need it, a disquieting prospect for advocates of disadvantaged or at-risk youth. In his August 2009 letter of support for arts education, U. S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan reinforced this interpretation: “The arts can help students become tenacious, team-oriented problem-solvers who are confident and able to think creatively. These qualities can be especially important in improving learning among students from economically disadvantaged circumstances. However, recent NAEP results found that only 57 percent of eight-graders attended schools where music instruction was offered at least three or four times a week, and only 47 percent attended schools where visual arts were offered that often...[W]e can and should do better for America’s students.”

These data should give educational leaders pause, as they show that the various promises of arts education demonstrated by a decade of research published by the Arts Education Partnership¹—access to arts education for all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, income or gender; arts-rich learning experiences for

¹ For example, *Third Space: When Learning Matters* (2005), *Critical Links: Learning the in Arts and Student Academic and Social Development* (2002); *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning* (1999).

inner-city youth; the provision of culturally relevant curricula and pedagogy; and the engagement of disadvantaged populations through cultural connections—all remain illusory goals.

The NAEP results in music and visual arts demonstrate that the achievement gaps are real and substantive, that these gaps mirror those in other subject areas, and that the arts, often portrayed as a safety net for disadvantaged and marginalized students, are often not available where they are most needed.

PERSPECTIVE 2: EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

Many state reform efforts are driven by an emphasis on creativity and 21st century learning, designed to gird the U. S. workforce for a global economy that prizes creativity, innovation, and technological expertise. Related to this imperative is the realignment of state and district standards, curricula, and assessments with global competencies. Both these interrelated initiatives argue that the teaching of subjects, including the arts, should be reanimated via a focus on thinking skills, cross-disciplinary understandings, and global concepts.

Each administration of a NAEP Arts Assessment adds to the argument that the arts constitute cognitive activity worthy of 21st-century minds. The NAEP Arts Assessment demonstrates not only that learning in the arts can be assessed but that it encompasses high-level content knowledge and higher-order thinking skills. Stuart Kerachsky, NCES Acting Commissioner, noted, “In both music and visual arts, the tasks, whether responding or creating, had significant intellectual content and often required academic knowledge.” In fact, since the 1997 NAEP Consensus Framework, NAEP Arts has demonstrated conclusively that the skills and content of the arts are complex and multifaceted and lend themselves to the highest forms of assessment.

However, relatively little teaching and learning take place in the arts at these complex cognitive levels. For example, the percentage of eighth grade students whose teacher had them choose their own art project in visual arts class at least once a month decreased from 47% in 1997 to 39% in 2008. The percentage of students who reported being asked by their teacher to make up their own music in music class at least once a month showed an increase from 16% in 1997 to 17% in 2008—a statistically insignificant change from an already impoverished level.

PERSPECTIVE 3: A COMPLETE CURRICULUM

It has been the official view of the U.S. Department of Education since the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994 (Goals 2000: Educate America Act) that the arts are a core academic subject. Across the nation, most states have policies in place that support and even mandate that arts instruction be offered in public schools. Thus, NAEP data on the extent to which these official policies reflect actual classroom practice are critical.

From the preceding findings, it is clear that at best we have only partial data on the extent to which music and visual arts are being taught in schools and at what frequency. Perhaps we have no way of knowing how effectively or at what level of quality they are being taught; such information would constitute the “Holy Grail” of arts education research. But somewhere in the middle, we ought to be able to find the answers to the following questions:

- Where they are already in place, what do arts education programs look like? When respondents to the school survey indicate how often eighth graders attending their schools might receive instruction in music and visual arts, how are they defining instruction?
- Do they focus on knowledge or skills, or both?
- Does their teaching encompass adequate scope and sequence, such that a student may develop progressively more advanced levels of proficiency?

- Do these programs teach the arts as separate subjects or do they integrate the arts with other subjects, and at what level of sophistication and complexity?
- Do the arts units or lessons cluster around concepts and big ideas?
- Do they include authentic, performance-based assessment?
- What is the training of teachers in the arts, including their access to professional development?

It seems likely that *Arts Education in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools*, the study conducted in 2010 by the U. S. Department of Education via its Fast Response Survey System (FRSS), may provide the answers to some of these questions.

PERSPECTIVE 4: THE NEED FOR MORE EFFECTIVE RESEARCH

As noted above, many questions remain on the table following the NAEP Arts Assessment. This is appropriate, since all good research generates new research questions as it highlights areas where comparatively less is known. The NAEP Assessment highlights the need for more and better research on the opportunities of young people to learn, including more data on the conditions of teaching and learning in classrooms, better data on the implementation and impact of policy, and more effective communication of research findings to the audiences and stakeholders who can use the findings to effect change.

For example, school administrators surveyed in the NAEP reported that 57% of eighth graders attended schools where instruction in music was available “at least 3 or 4 times a week,” compared to 43% in 1997. Conversely, 8% of eighth graders attended schools in 2008 in which instruction in music was not offered, down from 9% in 1997. In 2008, 16% of students attended schools in which music was offered “less than once a week” or not at all. Since NAEP provides no information on the reliability of these responses, the comparisons in access to arts learning are likely to be anecdotal and perhaps even impressionistic.

Another critical need is better translation of research via the media. Since the release of the findings, the major interpretations of the NAEP results in national media have highlighted selected findings but generally failed to convey much of the substance. For example, a headline in the June 15, 2009 edition of *Education Week* noted, “NAEP Finds Schools’ Offerings in Arts Hold Steady.” Another outlet claimed, “Music, arts education changed little in past decade, report says.” Where these press reports point out the troubling achievement gaps that persist in the arts and mirror those in other subject areas, they may not be highlighted sufficiently to gain widespread attention.

AEP RECOMMENDATIONS

The AEP recommends the following:

- Educational leaders, including advocates for universal access to a complete education with the arts as a core component, should closely study these findings and craft messages that help broad constituencies of policymakers, administrators, and parents to understand their implications. Although they do not provide the complete picture, these findings are relevant and actionable.
- The arts education field should determine the most critical information that the future NAEP Arts Assessment will be able to provide and work proactively with the National Assessment Governing Board to ensure that appropriate questions are included.
- Given that the next NAEP Arts Assessment is not scheduled until 2016, the next opportunity for learning about the conditions of arts education in America’s schools will be the seven arts education surveys to be conducted under the Fast Response Survey System in 2010 by the U. S. Department of Education. It will be incumbent upon the arts education community to use the findings from this survey to help education leaders to understand better the status of arts education in America’s schools.

- Given their demonstrated importance as core components of the curriculum, dance and theatre should have a place in the next NAEP Arts Assessment.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For additional information on the NAEP Arts Assessment:

<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/main2008/2009488.asp>

<http://www.aep-arts.org/NAEP.html>