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Increasing the Arts in Public Schools:
The Arkansas Success Story

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Introduction:

Since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was passed, there has been a lot of discussion in the academic world about whether or not this is a beneficial policy. However, from what I have learned most of the talk has focused on its impact in areas such as low-income school districts and special education funding. I wanted to know how the arts have been affected by the Act, since it is an area that often gets overlooked when discussing education. As a double major in Music and Educational Studies, I have the unique perspective of knowing how the two topics can become intertwined and benefit from one another. I also personally believe the arts should be an important part of every child's education, even though I know that is currently not always the reality.

I have worked in two arts classrooms in Hartford and one dance class, and have seen firsthand how the arts can enrich a child's education. On the other hand, I have seen the negative affects that limited budgets, overworked teachers, and mandated testing can have on a school's art program. Furthermore, the literature that one does find regarding NCLB focuses on the negative affects it has had on the arts in public schools. This led me to wonder whether there were any states that had made efforts to increase the arts since NCLB was passed, and land on the question:

Since the signing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, why and how have some states increased arts education in public schools?

No Child Left Behind and the Arts:

The No Child Left Behind Act was created in an effort to better all school systems across the country, with the basic goals being to "see that all children receive a high-quality education" and to "promise to close the achievement gap and bring all students to

proficiency by 2014.”¹ Additionally, “NCLB requires states to adopt content and achievement standards, to measure student progress toward those standards, and to implement a series of interventions and sanctions in school and districts that fail to meet their targets.”²

The way NCLB measures classroom success is through mandated standardized testing. Each state must create a target performance goal for success based upon the tests. From the results, a school can receive either a passing or failing grade. One way in which this method is described is a Standards Based Accountability (SBA) system. If a school does not meet the success standards, it is labeled as failing. Once labeled failing, the school has a short amount of time to improve before it students are allowed to leave the district, budget cuts occur, and restructuring is required. The result of all this can be described as a scare tactic, forcing teachers and administrators to mold to a system rather than do what they think is best for the students and school.

Additionally, NCLB defines which academic areas count as “core” subjects and should be taught in the classroom. However students are only required to take tests in reading, mathematics, and science as part of the Act. A common grievance expressed by proponents for the arts is that although the arts are defined as a “core” subject, “because the arts are not included in most state standardized test, schools are cutting these

¹ Sunderman, Gail L. *Holding NCLB Accountable: Achieving Accountability, Equity, & School Reform*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008, p. 1.

² Hamilton, Laura S. *Standards-Based Accountability Under no Child Left Behind : Experiences of Teachers and Administrators in Three States*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2007, p. 1.

programs and putting all their money into teaching state standards and raising test scores.”³ To sum it up,

“In theory, NCLC is intended to create equitable educational opportunities for all students and close the achievement gaps among different groups of students...in practice, researchers argue that NCLB is ‘substituting on form of educational inequity for another’ (von Zastrow 2004, 9).”⁴

Though the act is relatively new, and the long-term affects have yet to be seen, there are already several studies and books published on the negative affects of NCLB. Those pertaining to the arts have similar themes as far as what the top problems are, particularly concerning teaching to the test, reduced funding and reduced classroom time for the arts. Data collected in a study done in Ohio public schools indicates that “both arts and non arts teachers believe instructional time and classroom practices have been altered in the district to accommodate NCLB requirements, resulting in a loss of both access to and learning in the arts.”⁵ This sentiment is echoed by other authors, who take for granted that a decrease in arts is an obvious consequence of NCLC.

Going even further, another study not only focused on budget and instruction time, but quality of instruction. This study, done in Virginia public schools, looked at the aspect of arts integration as a means for using the arts to aid learning other subject areas. The study not only found “the arts in a subsidiary role to the tested areas,” but made the point that “although there may be a small to moderate decrease in the actual amount of

³ Rohrer, Ken. "Leave no Arts Behind." School Arts 105.1 (2005): 48.

⁴ Spohn, Cydney. "Teacher Perspectives on no Child Left Behind and Arts Education: A Case Study." Arts Education Policy Review 109.4 (2008): 3.

⁵ Spohn, Cydney. "Teacher Perspectives on no Child Left Behind and Arts Education: A Case Study." Arts Education Policy Review 109.4 (2008): 5.

arts instruction, what may be equally, if not more, important is the nature of the arts instruction that is provided and the ways in which high-stakes testing may modify the instruction.”⁶ This goes much further than the basic claims of other studies and starts to generate questions regarding curriculum and classroom practices as opposed to allotted instruction time.

Literature Review of the Arts:

One might ask why it is necessary for the arts to be taught in schools at all. If there are other subjects that might be considered more important, why not save the arts as an after school activity? Of course, proponents for the arts come right back with many reasons as to why it is critical to have the arts in schools. Eric Jensen introduces the topic of arts education by stating, “The arts enhance the process of learning. The systems they nourish, which include our integrated sensory, attentional, cognitive, emotional, and motor capacities, are, in fact, the driving forces behind all other learning.”⁷ The arts foster a creative ability, which can be translated into problem solving and finding alternative solutions to difficult tasks in any subject area.

In the book *The Arts and the Creation of the Mind*, author Elliot Eisner discusses the idea of the arts as a cognitive function. Thinking is a cognitive event, and along with creative problem solving, the arts enable us to notice things around us that we otherwise may not have seen. Furthermore, the idea that “the arts liberate us from the literal”

⁶ Kornhaber, Mindy L., Mishook, Jacob J. "Arts Integration in an Era of Accountability." Arts Education Policy Review 107.4 (2006): 4.

⁷ Jensen, Eric. Arts with the Brain in Mind. Alexandria, Va: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001, p. 2.

means that they enable us to view situations from others' perspectives and understand what we might not have experienced for ourselves. This leads into the idea of the arts as cultural transmission. The only way a society survives is through the transmission of its culture from one generation to the next, and "The arts are necessary to preserve and understand culture as well as serve to more fully and humanely educate us about our world."⁸ It therefore stands to reason that without the arts, we wouldn't have a cultural identity.

Another important fact to point out is that studies report that "groups of students who participate in the arts are found to have consistently better communication skills, friendships with others, and fewer instances of violence, racism, and other troubling nonproductive behaviors."⁹ Thinking further into the future, one can bring up the fact that the arts prepare students to become part of the creative workforce that dominates the economy today. The arts help develop initiative and creativity, planning skills, and in many forms helps the young learn how to work together. Additionally, the arts teach that the way something is formed matters. Understanding how something works is a skill that relates to real life experience more than the memorized facts needed to do well on standardized exams.¹⁰

Despite all of this, there is barely any research regarding how individual states have been able to increase the arts in the face of NCLB. There is little information out there beyond the basic policies that have been implemented, and there has been little

⁸ McDonald, Nan and Fisher, Douglas, *Developing Arts-Loving Readers: Top 10 Questions Teachers are Asking About Integrated Arts Education*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002, p. 4.

⁹ McDonald and Fisher, p. 5.

¹⁰ Eisner, Elliot W. *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

reported on regarding actual school practice once a pro-arts policy is in place.

Additionally, there are numerous questions surrounding the funding of these policies, and how certain districts are able to work out classroom time for the arts where others say it is impossible. In order for the arts to be brought to the forefront, as many would like, there has to be more visible examples of successful implementation of arts in public schools in the NCLB era.

Why Arkansas:

Through the haze of information simply reporting that the arts have been cut in schools as a result of No Child Left Behind, one can find some groups acknowledging that they have been able to do just the opposite. One such group is called the Education Commission of the States (ECS). After speaking with a policy analyst for the group, Mary Fulton, she explained to me that the ECS is a non-profit group, has been around for about 40 years, and serves a few different functions. They track various education issues throughout the country ranging from pre-kindergarten to secondary education. There are also short-term projects that are in specific areas such as the arts or special education. They will look at research, model policies, and at what is truly at the district level to inform state policy. Their constituency includes governors, legislatures, state board heads, and state departments of education.

This group that has taken the stand that the arts have to be a right, and not a privilege.¹¹ This attitude was largely brought about by the former Governor of Arkansas,

¹¹ Sack, Joetta L. "ECS Wants to Put Arts Back on States' High-Priority List." Education Week 24.31 (2005): 33.

Mike Huckabee. He was appointed as Chairman of the group in 2004 and served until 2006 during his term as Governor from 1996-2007. Though I was not able to be in direct contact with former Governor Huckabee, there are several interviews in which he explains why he chose the arts and his plan for putting the arts in schools. Huckabee sums up his views on the issue by saying,

“There is compelling evidence that shows student involvement in the arts can make a significant difference in improving educational outcomes for all kids – in terms of their academic achievement, their engagement in learning, and their social and civic development...State policymakers play a critical role in helping realize these goals.”¹²

Not only is Arkansas a good case because of the specific efforts of Huckabee, but also there are certain details that make it more interesting. One is that it is in the bottom ten states as far as education spending and typically “luxuries” such as the arts in schools are thought of being reserved for those who have the money to afford it. And on a lighter note, Huckabee has been known to joke about the fact that he knows it is surprising that a conservative Republican is so passionate about the arts.

Research Methods:

In order to fully understand what went on in Arkansas, I had to not only find numerical data, but also talk to people who are in the state and went through the policy change and implementations. It is this line of thinking that led me to a two-pronged approach to my research. The first was numerical data and official documentation of Arkansas state legislation as well as school numbers and programs. The information I

¹² Deasy, Richard J. “A Conversation with Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee on his 2004-06 Education Commission of the States Chairman’s Initiative: ‘The Arts – A Lifetime of Learning.’ July 15, 2004.

found constituted half of my primary research, as I was analyzing it in regards to my specific research question.

The second was interviews with people working and living either in Arkansas or working on issues in the state. I conducted phone interviews with three individuals, which I recorded and transcribed after getting consent forms expressing their knowledge of the research I am doing and their participation in it. The first person I talked to was a woman named Marynell Branch, former Policy Advisor for the Arts under Governor Huckabee. The second was Mary Fulton, policy analyst for the Education Commission of the States. The third was a music teacher at a public charter arts school in Arkansas. Additionally, since I could not speak to Mike Huckabee personally, a transcript from an interview with him in 2004 done by Richard Deasy, Director of the Arts Education Partnership, rounded out my line of interviews.

Justifications for the Arts:

Former Governor Huckabee is personally connected to the arts through his love of music. A common story told, both by the former Governor and those who know him, is that of his first guitar, which he received when he was 11. He believes that being involved in music made him the person he is today. However, I spoke with Marynell Branch, his policy advisor for the arts and childhood friend, who told me that they were not offered arts classes in schools growing up, further fueling his desire to get the arts in public schools today.

Beyond his personal connections, there are a few main reasons Huckabee cites as to why he is such a major proponent of the arts, which are all listed on the ECS website

under the Chairman's initiative.¹³ These facts help when it comes time to try to get legislative and policy changes made, because there are studies and data to back up what Huckabee believes and has personally experienced. Academically, "arts education can help improve academic performance, problem-solving skills, creativity, and self-expression."¹⁴ Another major point is that the arts can be a catalyst for increased interest in school and therefore greater attendance and higher grades. The teacher that I spoke to told me a story about a student who was not doing very well in school:

"Last year I had one student who just struggled in his core classes and he just couldn't find his thing that he was good at or really liked. And he started taking guitar...And he just blossomed throughout the year in guitar. It was amazing-he had focus in my class, and then by the end of the year because of that, in some of his other classes his grades were getting better because he finally had something that he really enjoyed so then in turn he liked coming to school and he liked being a part of this atmosphere."¹⁵

Additionally, she pointed out arts that involve more than one child teach students how to cooperate as part of a team, and improves social skills. And as Ms. Branch added, the arts prepare students for today's creative workforce.

Others working at both the state and national level echo these thoughts. Ms. Brach referred to a study showing that students who were offered a rich curriculum, which includes the arts, would have more diversity and bring more of a creative economy approach to their state. Similarly, when I asked Ms. Fulton the reasons she has found for policy makers to put arts in schools, she spoke about the fact that sometimes the arts are

¹³ <http://www.ecs.org/html/projectsPartners/Chair2005/Huckabee.asp>, accessed November 3, 2008

¹⁴ <http://www.ecs.org/html/projectsPartners/Chair2005/Huckabee.asp>, accessed November 3, 2008

¹⁵ Arts Teacher, Personal Interview. 5 November 2008.

the only thing that keep children going to and engaged in school. Similarly, there are the less tangible skills, such as innovation, creativity, imagination, and thinking outside the box that the arts bring students.

Overcoming Challenges:

Huckabee has said, “What makes this issue particularly important right now to me is that I don’t hear it talked about much in mainstream education circles.”¹⁶ He goes on to say that the arts are mostly considered as extracurricular, and deemed not absolutely necessary in schools. This idea was echoed by the music teacher from Arkansas who said that when it comes time for budget cuts, the arts are always the first thing to go.

Huckabee thinks that in order to change this, policymakers need to be more aware of the arts as a core subject. By this he means that arts simply need to become as commonplace as math and reading, something that people don’t think twice about having in schools. A comparable example Huckabee gives is the way people think of pre-school now. Up until a short time ago, pre-school was thought of as something extra whereas now it is considered a necessity. Huckabee thinks proponents of the arts can follow this example by pushing the issue at policy meetings, putting it on the agenda, and not stopping until people understand the importance of the issue.

Interestingly enough the teacher who I spoke to, who does not have any policy experience, expressed a similar idea when I asked her what can be done to make the arts more prevalent in schools. She believes that if people understand why the arts are so

¹⁶ Deasy, Richard J. “A Conversation with Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee on his 2004-06 Education Commission of the States Chairman’s Initiative: ‘The Arts – A Lifetime of Learning.’” July 15, 2004.

important, there will be less resistance to them in schools. At this point, she still gets complaints from parents about children who receive poor marks in her class, claiming its *just* a choir class. But what she thinks is that if people are brought up knowing the importance of the arts, then getting them in schools wouldn't even be an issue.

Something that is noteworthy is the fact that Marynell Branch told me there were some arts standards in place before Huckabee took office. However, their standards were very loose and up for interpretation. Ms. Branch pointed out that a school could say they offered arts instruction, but it would be simply playing a record or coloring in a fill in the blank. So it was former Governor Huckabee's desire to have strict instruction with certified teachers available to all students in the state. One can see the push for legislation start early in Huckabee's term. House Concurrent Resolution 1013, which was passed in 1999, called for the House and Senate Committees on Education to conduct a survey of the effects of teaching the arts and music in the public elementary schools of the state.¹⁷

He then continues with House Bill 1883, which was passed in 2001 and set forth several arts requirements.¹⁸ This bill stated that all public elementary schools are required to provide instruction in the subjects of visual art or music, and instruction must occur for at least 40 minutes once a week. The classes must follow state visual art and music frameworks. Additionally, the classes must be available to all students in grades 1-6. In order to make this happen, the bill stated that the Department of Education shall

¹⁷ Arkansas House Concurrent Resolution 1013

¹⁸ Arkansas House Bill 1883

provide a stipend of no less than \$100 per class to each school for materials or equipment.

In addition to instruction time and budget, the second section of the Bill created a pilot program called Future Art and Music Teachers Pilot Program. This was developed and implemented by the Department of Education, and required in at least six schools in the state. The idea is that students in 11th and 12th grade are given the opportunity to give visual art and music instruction to students in grades kindergarten through six.

In 2005, in the midst of Huckabee's term as ECS Chairman, House Bill 1034 refined the requirements for arts classes in schools to be more specific.¹⁹ For example, after June 1, 2005 all arts teachers in schools had to be certified in arts instruction. Also, instruction time was increased to 40 minutes for visual art and 40 minutes for music, as opposed to simply one or the other. Additionally, House Bill 2099 was passed in order to make "instructional materials" more easily accessible to schools.²⁰ The bill defined what qualifies as "instructional materials" which mean that schools are exempt from paying sales tax when purchasing these items. Though the bill was not created solely for the arts, sheet music, art supplies, and audiotapes were included on the list of items.

In addition to legislative changes, Huckabee instituted several programs throughout the state to increase the arts in public schools. Ms. Branch discussed one program with me called "Play it Again, Arkansas." This is a program designed to get more instruments into public schools, especially when there are many families who cannot afford to purchase instruments on their own. Through Play it Again, people can donate their used instruments and they will be distributed to public schools throughout

¹⁹ Arkansas House Bill 1034

²⁰ Arkansas House Bill 2099

the state. Ms. Brach said this program was a huge success, even getting Vh1's Save the Music involved to increase publicity and effectiveness. After the initial surge, the program continued to do so well that it now has a full time director.

An organization that both Ms. Brach and the teacher I interviewed spoke about was the Arkansas Arts Council. This group arranges for artists and special art programs to visit public schools throughout the year through grants and a cost-matching process. The Arts Council has a list of approved artist who schools can apply to have come visit and work with students for a set period of time. The teacher I talked to spoke very highly of the program having had a Native American storyteller and flute player come to their school. They also plan on having what is referred to as the art-mobile come to their school later in the year. She said its an art exhibit on wheels which they have come to the school every year, and that the Arts Council is a great avenue to tap into.

Another method of bringing arts into the classroom is the idea of arts integration, rather than having the arts only being thought of as its own subject, teachers can integrate the arts into the other core subjects. According to the music teacher I spoke with, she believes this to be one of the most effective means of teaching. The arts can reinforce other topics, as well as make non-arts subjects more interesting for children. For example, teachers can do something as simple as using the "Fifty Nifty United States" song in order to get students to learn all of the states. She finds a common sentiment among non-arts teachers that they would like to have an integrated classroom, but they simply don't know how. However, she would like to see a shift towards project-based learning where schools is less about taking a math class or science class, and more about just learning.

Of course, there is a discrepancy between districts with respect to how much time and money can go into the arts. Though each school is required by state law to have a certain amount of instruction time, it is no surprise that wealthier districts are in the fortunate position to provide additional funds to allow schools to offer more than the minimum. According to Ms. Branch, funding for public schools is done at a district level. This means that those who live in poorer areas do not have the means to pay for additional resources. On the flip side, the arts teacher I talked to lives in an area that is home to Wal-Mart headquarters. This means there is a huge resource of wealth and available tax money and donations for the children in this district. She says that it obviously affects the public schools because they have a very nice performing arts center and are able to bring in outside groups in to perform.

Ms. Branch cited allocation of funds as one of the greatest obstacles in getting the arts required in schools. Its all good and well to mandate curriculum change and required funds in order to assist in that change, however if the money isn't there it simply isn't there. She says the Governor recognized this problem and it is one of the reasons he helped to re-work the districts in the states to reduce the number of districts and therefore create a more cost effective system. To do this, one of his goals was to have more equity of scale, with more students in different districts, along with reducing the actual number in the state. And though Ms. Branch pointed out that Arkansas still has one of the lowest per capita spending per student out of all the states, this reworking of the system was effective to help the situation. Additionally she made note that there is now a larger portion of the education budget going towards the arts than there was before the governor took office.

Another problem the state has faced is teacher certification and training regarding the arts. Reducing the amount of districts helped in that there was not a need for quite as many certified arts instructors as before. Ms. Branch mentioned that another common solution is to have one art or music teacher travel between several schools. While this is not an ideal option, it is at least getting certified personnel into public schools.

Additionally, Ms. Fulton brought up the very interesting point that by requiring the arts in schools you are effectively saying that arts teachers are required. By doing this, there is a trickle down effect that arts must be offered in lower schools so there are people who foster interests, passions, and talents in the arts and want to pursue teaching in this area. The hope is that this will eventually inspire change to require arts past the 6th grade level.

Something worthy of discussing is the possibility of assessments in the arts as a means for having a consistent arts standard across the state. Though this is a relatively unexplored area, Ms. Fulton mentioned that there are a few states that currently test in the arts as they do for other core subjects as defined by No Child Left Behind. In fact, the music teacher I spoke to said that the arts staff at her school is currently working on coming up with an arts assessment for all students at the school. This will simply be a measurement for teachers and administrators, however she discussed state-wide testing as a possibility and probably effective way to require adequate arts instruction in schools.

Lasting Success in Arkansas:

Since the changes made by former Governor Huckabee are fairly recent, it is hard to see a lasting or overall trend. However, there are already several example of success with the arts throughout the state. As I mentioned before, Ms. Branch said there has been

an increase in state funding for the arts. Similarly, the fact that all schools in the state must offer a minimum of 40 minutes of instruction in both visual art and music is a huge accomplishment in itself. There is also a greater awareness of and request for arts in schools as is demonstrated by the fact that an arts charter high school was established just last year in compliance with the charter school that the teacher I spoke to works at. Also, it is interesting to point out that even though upper grades do not have strict standards for the arts, there is a state-wide requirement of one-half credit in the arts in order to graduate from high school. This is reflected in enrollment numbers in the arts in high schools state-wide, according to the Arkansas Department of Education.²¹ In fact, comparing the 2003-2004 fiscal year to 2006-2007, there is an increase from 18,766 to 21, 517 high school students enrolled in art. Similarly, the amount of students taking drama for credit increased by nearly half in those few short years.

Conclusion and Thesis:

The question to ask now is; what does this mean for other states? If Arkansas, one of the lowest education spenders per capita, can increase the arts in a no Child Left Behind era, shouldn't it be possible for other states to follow suite? This state can serve as an example to others hoping to increase the arts in their public schools. From everything I have researched, it isn't the tests and studies proving that the arts are beneficial which inspire the most change. In fact, I concluded that:

Despite low education spending and mandatory testing, it is possible to increase the arts in public schools with a few key players who have a passion for the arts, and spread awareness among those who are able to make changes at the state level.

²¹ <http://adedata.k12.ar.us/>, accessed November 3, 2008

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Interview Questions (potential questions; not all may be used with each interview subject, and I may ask follow up questions to these if appropriate):

1. Mike Huckabee pushed for increased budgets for the arts in Arkansas, how was his plan put into action?
2. What was arts funding like before NCLB as compared to now? Was there an equal emphasis on the arts before NCLB?
3. Was there a state-wide philosophy on the value of the arts in education before NCLB?
4. Are there any major opponents to increased arts funding?
5. How much of the overall education budget in Arkansas is allotted for the arts?
6. How are the arts incorporated into classroom curriculum?
7. Is the fight for increased arts funding easily done state-wide or does it have to be a focused effort district by district?
8. Are the arts being increased everywhere in the state, or only in certain areas? Which areas and why?
9. What additional challenges has NCLB added to getting arts funded and then included in everyday curriculum?
10. Besides funding, are there any specific programs that have been brought into classrooms regarding the arts? What are they and what do they do? Are there any model programs?
11. Who really makes the decisions for each school district, is it done at the state or local level? Who oversees how allotted money is spent?
12. Are there any other states that are taking similar steps to Arkansas? Have they influenced how your state has tried to advocate for arts funding?
13. Does the Education Commission of the States work with the Arkansas School Board, or do they work separately?
14. Is it the state's belief that the arts are beneficial for students in regards to "academic" areas, and if so, how?
15. Is there a general agreement among teachers and administrators as to how important the arts are in schools? If so, what is it?

16. Has NCLB affected charter schools differently than public schools?

17. Are there opponents to charter schools?