

Mobilizing Support For Integrated Arts Education National Opinion Research Findings

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This memo summarizes our findings and strategic communications recommendations for building a constituency for integrated arts education in public schools. It is written as a guide for advocates to improve their communications efforts. It resulted from a comprehensive opinion research and creative process that was funded by the Ford Foundation in 2004, completed in June 2005. The project was overseen by Douglas Gould & Co., which hired Belden Russonello and Stewart to conduct focus groups and a national poll.

We are deeply appreciative of the support provided by Margaret Wilkerson and Cyrus Driver of the Ford Foundation, as well as to numerous arts education activists across the country whose advice informed this project.

The project included the following components:

- Six brainstorming sessions conducted by Douglas Gould & Co. with arts advocates and school officials in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Dallas and Alameda County, CA, designed to identify messages and strategies that have been tried by proponents and opponents of arts education.
- Interviews with business leaders identified by arts advocates conducted by Douglas Gould & Co.
- Ten focus groups conducted by Belden Russonello and Stewart in four cities. These included:
 - Six groups with active parents of children in public schools, grades K-12
 - Two groups with teachers in city public schools
 - One group with city public school principals
 - One group with city public school superintendents

- A 15-minute national poll in April 2005 conducted by Belden Russonello and Stewart to test messages and zero in on key target audiences of current and potential supporters. The 15-minute telephone interviews of 1068 adults included an over-sample of 152 parents.

Earlier Research

Our recommendations build on earlier Ford-funded research that found that the public framed public education issues in four highly predictable ways, with each frame triggering support or opposition to various policy outcomes. These frames are important to take into consideration in any discussion of the arts in public schools. They include the following:

- *Negligent Parents* – the mindset that irresponsible parents cause students to perform poorly. In this frame, schools cannot be improved because the blame lies outside their purview, in families.
- *Bad Society* – the mindset that social conditions such as crime, drug abuse and chaotic communities cause student and school failure. In this frame, schools are off the hook because they cannot be expected to fix all social ills.
- *Market-based accountability* – the mindset that says schools should be run like businesses and should be held accountable for their failures. In this frame, high stakes tests are seen as necessary and a certain amount of failure is inevitable and acceptable. Failing schools should be punished, as in the sanctions imposed by the Federal No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB).
- *Nurturant community* – the mindset that says that successful communities depend on successful schools to educate our future citizens and workforce. In this frame, more resources for schools are assumed because everyone benefits from success. School failure should be addressed with help, not punishment. Only the nurturant community frame supports the policy agenda being advanced by arts education advocates who favor increased resources for all schools and all students.

The Climate

In addition to understanding how the public frames education issues, arts advocates should be aware of a few other issues affecting the climate in which they operate:

More people today know about NCLB, and fewer and fewer people like what they see.

Financial shortfall is now seen as the biggest problem facing public education. Just five years ago, most Americans, according to a Gallup Poll, cited "crime and drugs" as the leading challenge facing schools. This is a major shift and suggests that the public is willing to listen to advocates' ideas for adding new resources into the mix.

Arts education is being driven out by increased attention to standardized tests required by NCLB, and the public knows it and is unhappy.

Focus Group Highlights

People take a broad view of what constitutes arts education, including music, visual, dramatic arts, poetry, dance, drama, etc.

They view arts education as essential and increasingly short-changed as schools scramble to increase test scores.

The loss of the arts in schools is seen as emblematic of schools' failure, and they don't like it.

Arts integration into the teaching of a broad range of subjects, particularly in earlier grades, is viewed as a way of creating well-rounded students who are better able to succeed in everything they do.

But participants also identified key challenges or barriers to arts integration, particularly the lack of teacher training and a cadre of adequately trained teachers. The other barrier that is voiced is a lack of time in a busy school day that squeezes out the arts.

People feel that schools should educate/nurture "the whole child" – within limits. They stop short of endorsing the "moral education" of students, feeling this is best left to families. And they are skeptical of teachers being able to do this without a lot of support from outside the school.

Teachers support integrating the arts but often feel unprepared to do so.

Principals and administrators say they don't have the budgets or the personnel to increase arts education in schools and feel that curricula would need to be overhauled from above to allow them to bring more art into their schools.

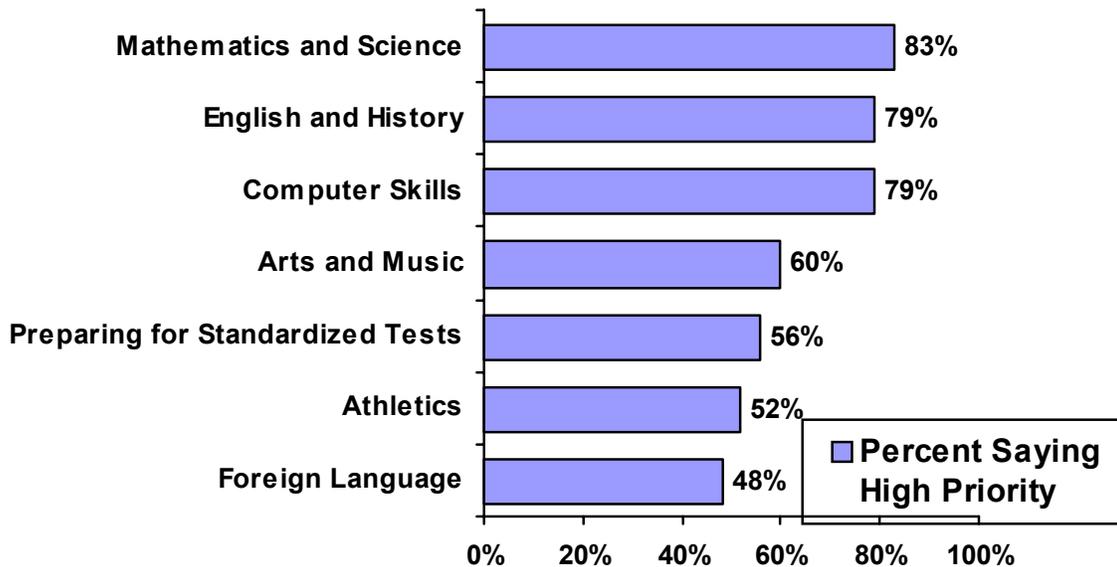
Key Poll Findings

Arts education is seen as essential, not an accessory.

When asked to establish priority subjects for schools to address, the arts are rated higher than many other priorities, including sports and foreign language.

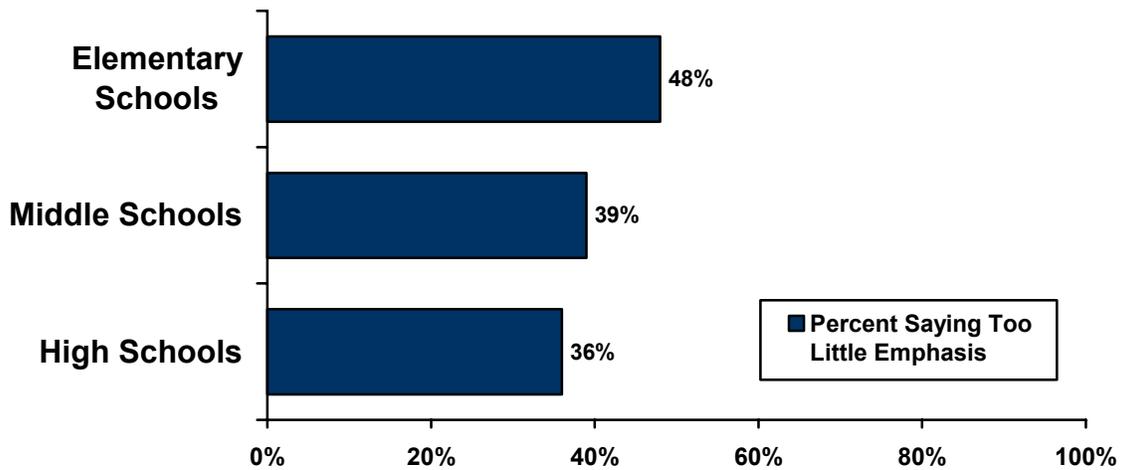
The arts are not emphasized enough for most people.

How the Arts Stack Up Against Other Priorities



Emphasis of Arts and Music

Almost half of the public says that too little emphasis is being placed on arts education in elementary schools. But this concern abates for higher grades. Arts advocates need to do more to educate the public about the importance of arts education in middle and high school.



Arts Integration

The primary concern of this project has been the integration of a variety of art forms into the teaching of a broad range of subjects. For purposes of the opinion research, we defined “arts integration” as follows:

“Integrating the arts throughout the learning process – that is, having separate classes in arts and music in addition to having the arts, such as music, dance, drawing, poetry, or some other expressions of creativity as part of the learning experience in all subject areas”

At the beginning of the survey, researchers found that integrating the arts was a high priority for 46% of Americans and even higher for important potential constituency groups:

- 60% of teachers
- 60% of arts-active parents
- 53% of women under the age of 50

So while almost two-thirds of Americans think arts education should have a high priority, fewer than half think that enough emphasis is being placed on integrating the arts. This is a great starting point for a campaign.

Information Increases Support

Perhaps more important is the survey finding that support for integrating the arts actually increased from the beginning to the end of the poll, suggesting that a key advocacy strategy is simply increasing the output of public information about arts education. Support grows most among certain populations who should be

targeted for “converting” to more active supporters, particularly the following groups:

- African Americans +24%
- Hispanics +17%
- Age 60 and over +17%
- Moderately arts-active parents +17%

Barriers to Arts Integration

The public sees a number of barriers to integrating the arts into public school classrooms including:

63% say teachers will need additional training

36% say it will take away too much time from the core curriculum

30% say that schools need to focus on basic subjects

20% say that the arts distract from standardized tests

Advocates will need to address head-on the issue of the need for more teacher training and incorporate this into their strategies for reforming schools.

Reasons for Support

A number of messages supporting integration of the arts into the classrooms in high schools were rated highly in the poll as follows:

	Very Convincing	Smwt Convincing
Q28. It will help teenagers gain a well-rounded education.	55%	35%
Q28. It will help strengthen teenagers' social skills.	46%	39%
Q30. Teenagers will have the opportunity to demonstrate creativity.	63%	30%
Q31. It will help teenagers learn how to express themselves.	56%	34%
Q32. It will help build teenagers' self-esteem.	50%	36%
Q33. It will help teenagers think more deeply and analyze subjects better.	44%	38%
Q34. It will help teenagers get into college.	37%	39%
Q35. More teenagers will enjoy school and drop out rates will fall.	37%	38%
Q36. It will help teenagers be more attractive to employers.	30%	39%

Focusing on high school presents the biggest challenge given the small number who think arts aren't emphasized enough in high schools.

Arguments of a more aspirational nature, concerning creativity, well-roundedness and improving self-expression, rank as more convincing than many of the arguments typically used by advocates, such as increasing employability and college readiness and cutting drop out rates.

When asked to choose a phrase describing why integrating the arts into teaching is valuable, people divide as follows:

41% Educates the whole child

22% Inspires creativity

18% Broadens knowledge

15% Encourages learning

Decisive Messages

When a regression analysis is performed to see which of the messages are ultimately most persuadable, two messages stand out as being most useful for moving people to support integrating arts education:

Schools should nurture the whole child by integrating the arts into teaching

Integrating the arts helps students become well-rounded

For opponents of arts education, the message that is most powerful to mobilize opposition is that integrating the arts “takes away from the core curriculum.”

Core Supporters

Forty six percent of Americans are core supporters of arts integration—before hearing arguments for and against the issue. But even greater amounts of support appear in some key subgroups including:

Arts-active parents (60%)

Teachers (57%)

Liberals (56%) and Independents (54%)

Well educated (college grads, 54% and graduate-level experience, 56%)

Young women (53%)

Professionals (53%)

Target Audiences To Be Converted

Persuadable people can be found among the following audiences:

African Americans

Hispanics

Older Americans

Moderately arts-active parents

Less educated Americans

Those who worry about teacher training

Advocates are advised to persuade these groups by talking about the whole child and the relationship of the arts to obtaining a well-rounded education.

Arts-active Parents

These are a subset of parents who engage in nine or more arts-related activities with their children in a year, including such activities as listening to music at home, attending concerts, plays, movies, etc. They are more likely to:

- Be teachers
- Have graduate degrees
- Be professionals
- Have kids in grades 6-8
- Be community activists
- Be liberals
- Be over 50 years of age
- Have incomes of \$75,000+

Arts-active parents should be a prime target for recruitment and organizing by arts advocates because of their disproportionately high support for arts education.

Twelve Strategies for Success

1- Arts education advocates are advised to advance:

Aspirational arguments about the value and importance of integrating arts into the curriculum and schools in general. These include the idea that the arts:

- Are essential for a well-rounded education and to ensure well-rounded people
- Help students demonstrate creativity
- Help students express themselves

2- Advocates should avoid:

Utilitarian arguments, such as the arts:

- Help teens get into college
- Help teens be more attractive to employers
- Decrease drop out rates

Talking about isolated skills, talents or getting in touch with their own feelings or personalities.

They also should avoid repeating the “totem pole” metaphor, which reminds people of a hierarchy of importance of subjects.

Instead, they should emphasize the integration of the arts into all subject matter.

3- Advocates should always frame their arguments in terms of the “Nurturant Community,” as was stated above. They should prime any conversation about arts education with a mention of community and the important role played by public education before they talk about the arts. The nurturant community frame is as follows:

All of us benefit when public education succeeds. By improving public education, we improve our community and create more opportunity and a better future for us all. We shouldn’t punish struggling schools, but target more resources to help schools that are in jeopardy.

4- Change the Media’s Coverage of Arts Education. We are currently completing an analysis of media coverage of arts education. But even a cursory overview of the coverage shows that:

There is very little coverage of the issue, a study by the Columbia University School of Journalism has documented that the amount of space and time devoted to coverage of the arts in general has been shrinking.

What coverage does exist is mainly about budget cutting, reminding people that the arts are “not core” or are the “low man on the totem pole” and that the arts must be cut “because there simply isn’t enough money.” There is no discussion of what is actually being lost.

The false trade-off the media presents between arts education and “core” subjects justifies or rationalizes cuts in the arts.

This focus on money also reinforces the market-accountability frame, which we know does not provoke support for reforms arts advocates would support.

5- Go on the offense. Don’t wait until the issue is about your budget. Advocates need to tell their story in the media and other forums using effective messages.

6- Clarify “the ask.” People will respond to a clear action message that urges them to call, write, attend, donate, etc. Arts education advocates must be very concrete and they must not ask people to do too much. The primary target audiences are people who are likely to be very busy with work and family.

Asking them to take a “doable” action will increase the likelihood that they will do anything at all.

7- Pick low-hanging fruit first. Since there are already a large number of core supporters, they should be recruited first, before expending efforts to convince persuadable people.

8- Re-define what makes a successful school. The public’s attention has been focused on test scores, standards and failing schools. There is virtually no public debate about defining a successful school or successful students. We need to advance the idea that successful schools strengthen the community by offering a well rounded curriculum that educates the whole child. This cannot be done without a rich arts curriculum.

9- Allay fears about teacher training. Because teacher training and enrichment is so often part of arts education initiatives, this should be highlighted in all communications. Media coverage of training sessions may be one way to get the word out about these activities.

10- Find and recruit arts-active parents. Schools are already in touch with these potential constituents. They attend performances, exhibitions and partake in a number of creative activities, often in group settings. They need to be added to databases and constantly informed, urged to call, write and attend events to voice their concerns.

11- Information matters – get it out there. The data shows clearly that informing people can increase support, yet the media coverage is sterile. This must change in any community that wants to build a constituency. A media strategy should create a steady flow of stories all year round about arts and the critical role played in schools. This can be enhanced by educational materials distributed at events in schools and in the community.

12- Argue for a bigger pie not a bigger slice. The arts education community cannot succeed if it is constantly re-slicing a shrinking pie. The public already understands the resource deprivation that afflicts public education. Americans will be receptive to increasing resources for public education and the arts if messages are framed properly. This task won’t be easy because the anti-tax advocates are better established and more powerful. This will inevitably lead arts advocates to collaborate with other organizations who share the concern about shrinking resources.

Suggested Message Platform

Strong communities need strong schools

Everyone in the community benefits when public schools succeed, and schools can't succeed without strong arts programs.

Schools need to focus on turning out well rounded individuals who are ready to take their place as citizens, workers and responsible members of the community

Sadly, too many school districts are cutting out the arts and risking our children's futures. This has to change.

Strong schools have strong arts programs

The real purpose of education is to help shape well rounded individuals and to educate the whole child, and this requires integrating the arts into the curriculum

Schools need to help students demonstrate creativity and express themselves, and the arts are the best way to make this happen

Sure English, history, math, and science must be a high priority for schools, and by integrating the arts, you will see big improvements in these areas too.

Help grow arts education to grow strong communities, schools and students

Arts education makes children whole

Teachers must help draw out the individual in every child, and they want and need more training to be effective in this area

Ensure quality education for all kids by ensuring a strong arts-integrated curriculum

Finally

We recommend reading the full polling and focus group reports, which are available on our website, www.douglasgould.com, under the resources section. We will place other resources and ideas on the site as they become available.