

MAKING YOUR VISUAL ARTS PROGRAM VISIBLE AND VALUED

Advocacy Tips for Visual Arts Educators

Visual Arts Education includes film making, media arts, digital arts, ceramics, sculpture, drawing, painting, graphic design, jewelry design, and more (refer to CBEDS visual arts course listings and descriptions www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/subjects.asp)

A. Five things you need to know to sustain and grow your program

There are fundamentals every skilled visual arts educator needs to master and do in order to be a successful teacher. The same is true of advocacy. What follows are basics to do in order to succeed as an advocate for your core subject area. Remember this is a continual on-going work and needs innovative collaborative thinking and “live actions” so there is a real presence of your program.

- 1. Become a member of your district arts team (DAT).** DAT teams are commonly comprised of a district administrator, school site administrator, arts teacher, generalist teacher, parent, community member, chamber of commerce member, higher education member, and school board member. High school-only districts sometimes include a student. This team helps maintain an ongoing dialogue about arts education district wide, communicating with administrative staff, the school board, city council, and local legislators. If your district doesn't have a DAT team go to resources through TCAP, CAAE or your organization (see Advocacy Resources below) and help/work to set up such a team.
- 2. Be able to clearly articulate data/evidence that shows your students' learning outcomes and core academic gains provided by your instruction.** Use electronic portfolios, web evidence, and ongoing performance and promotional opportunities (see B below) to demonstrate the learning that has occurred among your students. Employ multiple and frequent assessments to create a documentable trail of evidence, concluding with the outcomes that can be measured against clearly defined benchmarks. Remember, the documented processes by which your students demonstrate learning is as important as the performance, exhibition or product.
- 3. Work collaboratively with all the arts disciplines in your school and make sure your program is positively visible throughout your community.** As hard as you work, you don't function in a vacuum—collaboration with your arts colleagues will make each of your programs better. Your community starts with your classroom, a stage, an exhibition space, and school, but you need to let everyone in the district know about the good work that you do: school board, city council, parents, and the community at large.
- 4. Communicate regularly with school and district decision makers.** Your principal, department chair, district curriculum specialist, superintendent, marketing spokesperson, PTA, and DAT team are all key players that are critical to the success of your program. Always make your discussions with these individuals and groups positive and factual and back up your points with examples of student learning, which can be anything from a video presentation of a classroom or visual arts learning exercise to an invitation to a working session. The point is, always show that there is genuine learning

taking place in your classroom and for any staging of exhibits or visual performances.

- 5. Become familiar with the California State Visual Arts Standards and use them as the benchmark for judging excellence.** . Today, it is important that you measure your students' learning and your own teaching against widely recognized content and skills standards. Competitions which provide trophies and awards are great, but unless the judging is professionally adjudicated using the Visual Arts Standards, the win is not proof of quality instruction.

B. Market your program

Visual Arts educators are busy, but it is important it is to let your community know about the learning that takes place every day in the classrooms. To do that you have to market your program—it's as much a part of advocacy as writing to your legislator. This work tells everyone what happens during class time/the instructional time as well as before, during and after an exhibition, show or visual performance is mounted and struck. Showcasing your teaching and student learning will gain you partners and supporters. Remember, you don't need to do this alone—parents, administrators, colleagues, business leaders, and students all have a role in making sure that visual arts education remains in the core curriculum. The following eleven tips are just a starting point; be creative and come up with your own ideas to promote your students' learning in your program.

1. Showcase visual arts student sequential learning throughout the school, not everyone will be putting on large scale exhibition or visual performance. How do you then showcase that student learning, is it through demonstrations, lunchtime visual arts genre improvs, community demonstrations or presentations? If you do any type of a visual production that could include production and rehearsal stills, storyboard displays or design sketches, billboards and posters of current and past exhibitions or performances, student-constructed sets, displays/exhibits as background prior to a school assembly or meeting.
2. Include a “preview” or “pre-performance” prior or after selected exhibitions or performances that showcase the sequential class studio work that led to the final outcome; make a point to invite community leaders and business supporters, as well as parents and school decision makers. If you don't do larger performances or exhibitions tie learning to reading and language arts, make the most of that through videos and live demonstrations during open house, back-to-school nights, at a chamber of commerce meeting and the like (see # 3 below).
3. Create community service opportunities for your students (i.e.: live creating performances at elementary or neighboring schools, school board meetings, business gatherings, senior centers, etc).
4. Create, maintain, and communicate a calendar of your school and district's upcoming classroom events, classes, exhibitions/productions/performances, and other department-related events and post in the cafeteria, school office,

PTA bulletin, and the school and district website; if possible, included other arts disciplines' activities as well

5. Offer local businesses looped DVD videos that illustrate student sequential learning in a variety of visual arts media, with an emphasis on valuable work place skills. Make available framed shots of the past as well, along with flyers and posters of your current work.
6. Maintain an article or column in the local newspaper and the school newsletter; if possible create and maintain a department blog through a local online media source.
7. Collaborate with your arts colleagues and create a quarterly newspaper which includes all of the district's visual and performing programs; feature one discipline per issue. Or – include articles within existing school newspapers or school parent news letters.
8. Create press releases for your local print and online media and PSA “spots” for television and public radio that showcase both your program in general and specific scheduled events; make a point to keep current as to who is the contact person for every news organization and what the procedures are for submitting announcements.
9. Have your students “present” at the chamber of commerce, business meetings, PTA gatherings, and school board meetings. Make sure the presentations contain evidence that the student are learning from sequential standards-based visual arts instruction. Emphasize student learning so community members “see” that student learning and excellence. Teach your students the standards language and how to verbalize their classes as part of the core curriculum. For instance, a presentation by tech students could easily illustrate the math skills employed to construct a set piece, a tessellations art piece links easily to mathematics. A short demonstration by a small visual arts ensemble can be followed by an explanation of how the skills employed meet specific standards and use work-place skills such cooperation, creativity, and problem solving.
10. Prepare touring exhibitions/performances which address the elementary level standards to K-4 schools, and make a pitch after each to work with the generalist teachers to create visual arts-based cross-curricular lessons, utilizing a variety of media.
11. Reach out to other subject-area teachers in your school and offer to collaborate with them in integrated units of learning. For example, ask your history teacher to teach and link with you and your ceramics instruction when they study ancient civilization and its resulting arts and societal representations. Merge such performances in the elementary reading texts with language arts, combining reading, language arts and the visual arts. Know the elementary reading and language arts reading, create visual arts units of study to augment those readings – help the elementary teachers infuse that aligned instruction into their classroom learning instruction.

C. Know the intrinsic value of your course instruction and the potential student-valued gains and how each is impacted by existing and new research.

Knowing what exactly is learned in a visual arts class—the intrinsic value—is key when it's time to make your case for funding, creating, maintaining or saving a class or a program. To articulate that, you need to know your facts and the research that supports them. It's time consuming to keep up sometimes, but legitimate data is often the only thing that administrators and other decision makers are interested in. So keep yourself up-to-date of the latest research, use it to your advantage, and adjust your instruction accordingly. And don't keep new findings to yourself—share this information with your colleagues through the avenues mentioned above. Here are some specific tips.

1. Go to the visual arts education professional organizations' (see additional advocacy resources) websites and review their indicators of the values gained by participation in visual arts; use these to bolster your case for continuing or expanding the coursework when you talk to parents, administrators, students, and other teachers.
2. Use multiple landmark arts research studies, such as *Critical Links*, *Champions for Change*, and *Learning, Arts and the Brain* to illustrate the cognitive learning that occurs as a result of arts instruction. The Arts Education Partnership (www.aep-arts.org) is a good portal to a wide range of arts education research. Non-visual arts/media arts specific organizations are also good sources. (For example the National Arts Education Association (www.naea.org), features Elliott Eisner's "Ten Lessons that the Arts Teach," a particularly good summary of the value of arts education in general.)
3. Speak knowledgeably about the scope and sequence of your program's courses, and be able to explain their connection to sequential standards-based learning instruction. Remember, it is the connective thread of content and skills laced through a semester or year that scaffolds and builds learning - that scope and sequence - not a single work or end product. If your courses and instruction are not sequential and/or standards-based, review your curriculum syllabi and instructional practice and refine them in a way that will improve opportunities for student success. You may discover that re-organizing your current pedagogy will re-energize your teaching and better define the goals you have for your students.
4. Become familiar all forms of assessment—formative, summative, and performance—and be able to comfortably talk and demonstrate how you use each to demonstrate student learning; include how students evaluate their own learning as well. If assessment of visual arts students is new for you, query your professional organization about professional development assessment opportunities and other resources that can bring you up to speed.
5. Be able to articulate the 21st Century Skills learned through visual arts. Attributes such as creativity, critical thinking, empathy, collaboration, and problem solving have always been inherent in all arts learning, long before the 21st Century Skills label, speak to the new global economy, and include skills

more important than ever to our emerging workforce. To learn more about 21st Century Skills go to www.21stcenturyskills.org.

6. Become a member and active participant of your state and national professional organizations. In California, contact the California Art Education Association (CAEA) at www.caea-arteducation.org. You *are* a professional, and their resources are for you to use. If there is something you need that does not seem to be available, say so and they will assist you. Visit the website often for updates and, as a member, be an advocate as well. Become acquainted the California Alliance for Arts Education (www.artsed411.org) and their lobbying work for the four arts, including theatre.

D. When your program is faced with cutbacks, be factual, assertive, and positive

If you are faced with course cutbacks or program elimination, review the above tips and decide which can help you. If you have done your homework and are knowledgeable, you will be in the best possible position respond to a crisis. Here are some specific things to bear in mind:

1. Be rationale and listen carefully to the reasoning behind proposed cuts to your program. You should be passionate about your program and its value, but little is gained if you are “all emotions,” defensive or angry.
2. Present local/national data about the value of music as a core subject area and specific evidence of student learning by your students.
3. Seek letters or in-person support from parent, business leaders, colleagues, and students to help you explain your program’s value. If a community acts on behalf of programming, some courses and programs may be retained. Districts respond to community voices—without them, decision-makers may have no way of knowing whether or not a visual arts program is truly valuable to the community. Remember to publicly thank supporters and contributors, too.
4. Bear in mind that, in some instances, no matter how well-reasoned your arguments are, cuts may be made. Districts strapped for funds are often forced to make cuts, no matter how well-regarded a program is. If that’s the case, ask that other programs, particularly co-curricular ones, share equally in the cuts. In other words, it’s not unreasonable to ask that the athletic departments, sports programs, other arts areas and after school clubs take like funding cuts, of equal amounts.
5. If your classes or program are cut, begin strategizing how to reinstate the lost courses. Make sure you maintain a careful record of your annual enrollment numbers for your classes and of those students who reenroll in your visual arts program. Those past numbers will be part of your presentation when it’s time to make a pitch for restoring cut classes.

Advocacy resources

Here’s a list of organizations that work on behalf of visual arts and arts education in general. Remember, you are not alone. The mission of each of these organizations is to help students and teachers of the arts. Use their resources.

California

California Arts Education Association (CAEA) (www.caea-arteducation.org)
California Dance Education Association (CDEA) (www.cdeadance.org)
The California Association for Music Education (CMEA) (www.calmusiced.com)
California Educational Theatre Association (CETA) (www.cetoweb.org)
California Alliance for Arts Education (CAAE) (www.artsed411.org)
Advocacy Toolkit developed by Monterey County for California County Superintendents
Educational Services Association www.california.artstoolkit.com
Advocacy Toolkit materials developed by Alameda County www.artiseducation.org

National

National Arts Education Association (NAEA) (www.naea-reston.org)
National Dance Education Organization (NDEO) (www.ndeo.org)
National Dance Association (NDA) (www.aahperd.org/nda)
Educational Theatre Association (EdTA) (www.edta.org)
American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) (www.aate.org)
The National Association for Music Educators (MENC) (www.menc.org)
The Kennedy Center's advocacy resources (www.artsedge.kennedy-center.org)

For additional resources contact your professional organization or the CDE Visual and Performing Arts Consultant.

7-3-09 Compiled by Nancy Carr