

Notes from the Arts Education Director:

November 4, 2015

A recent study on the state of arts education in Missouri, commissioned by the Missouri Alliance for Arts Education confirms that arts education is strong in our state and continues to have a measurable positive impact on student achievement on ELA and Math standardized tests. This is good news and a validation for the continuation of efforts to channel resources into arts programs. However, a positive relationship between student participation in arts programs only touches on the impact of an arts education.

Recently, I spent a few days in a Missouri high school and had an opportunity to observe teachers work with their students. I even participated in a few of the lessons. Today I attended a workshop on student learning objectives. Here is what I learned from both experiences:

Developing student learning objectives, designing assessments, working collaboratively with other teachers and administrators to plan and implement instruction that leads to student growth is hard work. It is rewarding, productive work, and it is work that needs to be taken in earnest if we are serious about ensuring our students become college and career ready. I recall a time years ago when my principal told me she wished she could bottle the kind of engagement she observed in arts classes. Teaching for understanding, teaching to ensure student growth, what the best teachers do instinctively, was happening to a high degree in the arts classes. Today, the arts in Missouri schools are not just uniquely positioned to be examples of high levels of student engagement; they are also positioned to serve as examples of rigorous student growth and teaching for understanding. This is what I observed last week:

I spent an hour in an art class where the students and teacher were immersed in a critique of student work. The emphasis was on students developing their work individually, and then reflecting upon and refining it collaboratively. The teacher told me that his class was open to any high school student within the school, and that there was no prerequisite. Students and teacher collaborate on establishing individual, rigorous, assessable learning and growth targets. The teacher and students collaborate on the summative assessment, which in this case, is a student designed exhibition of work. An additional assessment, also designed collaboratively by the teacher and students is based on an interview and written assessment that is evaluated by another arts teacher. Student growth, learning and a striving for understanding, all were in the air during the class I participated in.

I also observed a band leader who was working with her Jazz ensemble in preparation for their district assessment and holiday concert. The energy and pulse of common effort, individual and collaborative engagement was palpable. Students were reading music, playing, responding and collaborating. Not only was each student immersed intellectually, they were physically involved in the collective effort. This process was not just a rote recital of a piece of music. The students, guiding and motivated by the teacher, were responding with their own interpretations. Together, teacher and students arrived at an understanding.

Clearly, over those few days, I was in the presence of master teachers. The arts are unique. They are bundled together: dance, theatre, music, visual arts, and media arts. However, they share commonalities: creating,

responding, connecting, and performing. The arts also share commonalities with the other core disciplines. What a responsibility we have as arts teachers. Not only do we teach our students, we reach other teachers in the core disciplines, parents, administrators who encounter the wisdom of the arts through our efforts and the work of our students. For us, the arts have always been and will remain core.

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