Finding the Will and the Way to Make the Arts a Core Subject:

The fight to have the arts considered a core subject in the schools has been likened to the plight of Sisyphus, toiling unceasingly to push a boulder up a steep hill. The incline has changed over the past 20 years, often as a result of significant events in the overall education landscape. To extend the metaphor, the current state of arts education is best appreciated by looking back down the hill. At the same time, because the arts have not reached the peak, challenges ahead are important to articulate. Thus, the purpose of this article is threefold: To consider where arts education has come from since the early 1980s; to view where it stands today as a core subject in No Child Left Behind; and to see how policymakers can help ensure that the arts reach the hilltop in the near future.

by Douglas Herbert
promise of the arts in Goals 2000 to a reality in schools nationwide.

By January of 1995, not only was the action plan devised and published, but the coalition of national organizations that had coalesced to develop it was formalized as the Goals 2000 Arts Education Partnership. With support from the Arts Endowment and the Department of Education, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) partnered to create an office at the CCSSO headquarters and hired a staff, headed by Richard Deasy, to regularly convene meetings of the Partnership member organizations and to implement the national action plan. Since that time, the Arts Education Partnership, as it is now known, has become a vital voice and point of contact for schools, arts organizations, researchers, advocates, and others, offering reports on a range of topics including early childhood and the arts, research priorities, student assessment, and teacher education.

The Partnership is most widely recognized for the research reports it has produced and disseminated. Champions of Change, which reveals how arts education was a relatively positive one. Positive in the sense that music and art instruction were offered in most elementary schools (94 per cent and 87 per cent, respectively). Similarly, at the secondary level, more than 90 percent of the schools surveyed offered instruction in music and art. However, the arts palette for secondary schools was more limited in dance and theater. Twenty percent of elementary schools provided instruction in dance and only 14 percent in theater or drama. At the secondary level, the number of schools offering dance dropped to 14 per cent, and, owing to the incorporation of theater into the English/language arts curriculum in many secondary schools, the percentage of high schools offering theatre instruction was nearly one-half.

The number of full-time art specialists in schools providing it tempered the widespread availability of art and music instruction. In elementary schools, only 55 percent of the schools with visual arts programs had full-time specialists. Nearly three-quarters of those with music instruction delivered it with full-time specialists. For dance and theatre at the elementary level, the percentage of schools with full-time specialists dropped to 24 and 16 per cent of the schools that offered instruction in those disciplines.

A similar, mixed picture of dedicated spaces for arts instruction emerged from the survey data. Only two-thirds of elementary schools that offered music did so in rooms dedicated to that use. For visual arts, the number of secondary schools that offered dance did so in rooms dedicated to that use. Twenty percent of the schools surveyed offered instruction in music and art. However, the arts palette for secondary schools was more limited in dance and theater. Twenty percent of elementary schools provided instruction in dance and only 14 percent in theater or drama. At the secondary level, the number of schools offering dance dropped to 14 per cent, and, owing to the incorporation of theater into the English/language arts curriculum in many secondary schools, the percentage of high schools offering theatre instruction was nearly one-half.

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cated spaces, as did 87 per cent of the schools offering visual arts instruction. Even dance and theatre, for those secondary schools that offered them, reported improved conditions over the elementary level, with 41 per cent providing dance in specially equipped spaces and more than 50 per cent with dedicated facilities for theatre.

The Question of Leadership

Apart from the status of the arts curriculum and instruction gained through the 2000 survey results, elementary and secondary school principals were questioned about the perceived status of the arts as a core subject. More specifically, they were asked:

• Is arts education included in the mission statement or goals of your school?
• Are arts specialists included in site-based management teams?
• Is there a curriculum specialist or program coordinator at the district level who is responsible for the arts programs in the schools?

In general, the secondary schools reported a greater degree of involvement of the arts and arts specialists in these aspects of school planning and management. For instance, while only 45 percent of elementary schools reported that the arts were in their mission or goals, nearly two-thirds of secondary schools reported inclusion of the arts. Similarly, while only 58 percent of elementary schools reported arts specialists on their school improvement teams or site-based management councils, the percentage rose to nearly 90 percent for secondary schools.

Even more insightful were responses of all principals to this question: To what extent do you think various individuals at your school—administrators, the non-arts faculty, and parents—consider the arts an essential part of a high-quality education? At both the elementary and secondary levels, the responses were sobering and even disturbing. Two-thirds of the elementary principals and nearly three-quarters of the secondary principals said that the administrators at their schools (presumably including themselves) considered the arts essential to a great extent. However, the principals perceived that their non-arts teaching staff considered the arts essential to a great extent in less than 50 percent of the secondary schools. And parents, according to the 2000 survey, considered the arts essential to a great extent in only 39 percent of the elementary and 41 percent of the secondary schools. Clearly, this gap between the value that educational leaders place on the arts and the level of esteem it holds as essential learning for teachers and parents needs attention.

Current Conditions and Concerns

Since these survey results were reported, two major changes in American education have occurred—the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the downturn in most states’ economies. Both of these developments are having effects on arts education, just as they are on other aspects of K-12 education. Unfortunately, there is no reliable, national-level information available to clearly understand the impact of these developments on arts teaching and learning. It is hoped that another FRSS survey of arts education will be conducted next year to provide not only a current depiction of arts instruction, but an analysis of changes since the 2000 survey.

In the interim, various organizations inside and outside the arts education field collect and report on data and information about arts “wins and loses” in local districts. And, given the unprecedented funding reductions many states and school districts are experiencing, the arts are not the only education components undergoing scrutiny if not reductions or complete elimination.

Public education funding—the heretofore untouchable “third rail” for state legislatures and school boards—has suffered reductions in many states. Class-size-reduction efforts are being curtailed in several states. Teacher layoffs are affecting general classroom as well as specialist teachers in a number of subject areas, including the arts. In the face of these conditions, arts education advocates are pressed to “make the case” for maintaining arts programs and arts specialists. As one music education leader has observed, the loss of specialists gives rise to the cancellation of the instructional programs in too many instances, and then reinstating the lost programs is of ten an insurmountable task for arts advocates.

Beyond funding, the requirements of NCLB for proficiencies in reading and
math potentially threaten time in the school day for the arts, particularly in elementary and middle schools. However, strong local policies and enlightened leadership by school boards, superintendents, and principals to protect the arts as essential to a complete education are ensuring that the arts have a continued role. As the requirements of NCLB in reading and math take center stage in New York City, School Chancellor Joel Klein has affirmed the essential nature of arts education. “While working to improve student achievement in the core subjects of literacy and math citywide,” the Chancellor said this past July, the school system and the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs “believe that the arts are an important component of a first-rate education and we will work to include and enhance arts education in all schools in the New York City public school system.”

Similarly, in Maryland, the state board of education, with the support of the legislature and the governor, has set clear expectations that arts instruction, based on the state’s achievement standards and Essential Learner Outcomes in the arts will be provided to all students. Annually, $2.6 million is earmarked by the legislature for improvement of arts teaching and learning statewide, with the major ity of these funds awarded on a per-student basis to the 24 school districts to help implement local strategic plans for arts education improvement. In addition, with the guidance of a fine arts task force that reports to the state super intendent, the Maryland Department of Education is evaluating the districts’ progress and developing options for measuring student achievement in the arts.

Based on the 2003 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, efforts such as those in New York City and Maryland are responding to the concerns of Americans for the arts in schools. According to the poll, 80 percent of Americans have a great deal or at least a fair amount of concern that relying on testing in English and math only to judge a school’s performance will mean less emphasis on art and music and other subjects. Among parents of public school students, that percentage rose to 82 percent. Another recent poll commissioned by Amer icans for the Arts reported that 90 percent of the respondents considered the arts vital to a well-rounded education for all students.7

WHAT HELPS GUARANTEE ESSENTIAL ARTS EDUCATION

Clearly the challenge of moving the boulder up the hill, as a metaphor for ensuring the arts as a core subject for all students, is complicated by a combination of challenges for the K-12 curriculum—historically large budget deficits and revenue shortages at the state and local levels, and, in some districts, shortages of certified teachers of the arts. However, it also is clear from national polls and the findings of NASBE’s Study Group on the Lost Curriculum10 that Americans want arts education and are concerned about its presence in schools. And, based on efforts in a number of states and local districts to improve the conditions of arts teaching and learning, it is clear that enlightened policy about the role of the arts, when supported by state and local resources, can, even in these trying times, keep arts education improvement efforts alive for American students.

To borrow a phrase from the political arena, “all education delivery is local.” State policymakers should consider another recent report when asking how best to support the arts as a core subject. Gaining the Arts Advantage: Lessons from School Districts That Value Arts Education cited thirteen “critical success factors” in school districts where the arts not only survive but thrive.11 While some of the factors are clearly controlled at the local level, such as a superintendent who regularly articulates a vision for arts education in the district, others can be espoused and supported from the state level. Among these are:

• School boards providing a supportive policy framework and environment for the arts.
• Teachers who practice their art and are encouraged by district administrators to grow in their art as well as their teaching competence.
• District arts coordinators who facilitate program implementation and maintain an arts-supportive environment.
• A comprehensive district-wide education vision coupled with a thoughtful implementation plan that apportions resources over time to reach all schools and students.

Getting to the Top

There must be the will—policy—as well as the way—including qualified teachers of the arts, sufficient instructional time and resources, standards-based curricula, and community partnerships—if the arts are truly to be a core subject, sequentially taught and rigorously learned by all students. How to get it done? Here’s one thought: Attack it on three levels simultaneously. First, achieve commitment from lay citizens; second, establish the arts as central within the local schools; and third, win acceptance of the arts by teachers and administrators that includes them acquiring the skill is needed to carry out a comprehensive arts education program.

That trilogy seems simple and
LOOKING BACK

While most recent public education developments are benchmarked by the release of A Nation At Risk in 1983, arts education practitioners and advocates will recall a national report six years earlier: Coming To Our Senses: The Significance of the Arts in American Education. An illustrious panel of American icons, headed by David Rockefeller, Jr. and including artists, former U.S. Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel, educators, and corporate and philanthropic leaders, considered the state of arts education and declared it sorely lacking. Two terms in use today in arts education advocacy—"the arts are basic" and "arts literacy"—have their roots in this document. The arts are “basic to individual development since they more than any other subject awaken all our senses—the learning pores,” the Panel observed in the introduction, followed by this assertion: “We endorse a curriculum that puts ‘basics’ first, because the arts are basic. And we suggest not that reading be replaced by art but that the concept of literacy be expanded beyond word skills.”

Five years later, the "rising tide of mediocrity" in America's schools declared by A Nation At Risk steepened the incline considerably. While the report did not propose a diminishment of the arts in education, its call for more of the "basics" did not necessarily include the arts. The public debate that this report engendered focused on reading, mathematics, and the sciences, with a rare mention if any of the role of the arts in basic education.

To compound the uphill struggle the arts encountered in the early 1980s, the visibility of the arts within the federal education department was eliminated. The former Arts and Humanities Office, responsible for a relatively small but innovative set of annual grants to school districts for curricular and instructional improvements, was abolished in 1981. At the same time, a new chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the independent federal agency charged with looking after the welfare of the arts, became interested in the state of the arts as basic education. With a charge from Congress in 1985 to determine and report on the conditions of the arts in schools, NEA chairman Frank Hodsoll assembled his own blue ribbon committee of educators, artists, and civic and corporate leaders to interpret the results of a national survey and hear from an impressive list of arts tists, educators, and other stakeholders in K-12 education and the arts.

The resulting report in 1988, Toward Civilization, found the arts in education in triple jeopardy. First, they were considered a "frill," not a basic alongside math, reading, and science. Second, in the pre-standards era of the '80s, there was no common agreement across school districts, much less states, as to what students should know and be able to do in the arts. And third, where the arts were taught, there was usually an exclusive focus on producing and performing, when a more comprehensive approach would better ensure arts literacy for students.

The report proposed four “Cs” to provide a balanced arts curriculum: civilization—understanding the role of the arts in history and the multiple cultures that constitute American civilization; creativity—acquiring the sequential skills and habits of mind of the arts disciplines and for us to create a personal vision through the arts; communication—learning the “languages” of the arts in order to express ideas and emotions in words, images, sounds, and movement; and choice—among products of the arts to make critical assessments of what one reads, sees, and hears.

As important as the diagnosis in the report was the prognosis. Toward Civilization contained recommendations for not only the Arts Endowment, but key stakeholders at all levels. Primary among them was putting the arts back in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Others were increased efforts to determine and disseminate effective practices; to devote 15 percent of each week in elementary schools to the arts as well as the same percentage of the school year for middle school students; and adoption by state and local education agencies of policies to make the arts a sequential part of the basic K-12 curriculum.

A forward-looking focus of the report was on needed attention to the media arts. Simply substitute the term Internet or the digital arts for television in this quote from Toward Civilization to appreciate how much more important media literacy is today compared to 15 years ago: "Television may well be the most important innovation in communication since the printing press, and it communicates in images that are as much visual and aural as verbal: learning the vocabularies of the arts, including the media arts, is an essential tool for understanding, and perhaps one day communicating, in the medium of television.”

Another major theme of the report was
It also is clear from national polls and the findings of NASBE’s Study Group on the Lost Curriculum that Americans want arts education and are concerned about its presence in schools.

The call for partnerships became a common theme in 1989 as President Bush and the states’ governors announced the National Education Goals. While the arts did not appear in the goal concerned with “challenging subject matter” all students need to master, arts education advocates, including former Arts Endowment Chairman John Frohnmayer, testified in record numbers before the National Education Goals Panel in its series of regional forums in 1990-91. Their message: The goals are incomplete without the arts as basic education. As the Goals Panel was hearing this message, Federal partners at the Department of Education, the Arts Endowment, and the National Endowment for the Humanities provided support to the Consortium of National Arts Education Associations to develop national voluntary standards in the arts (dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts).

At almost the same time in 1991, the Arts Endowment and the J. Paul Getty Trust, active in the movement of visual art education through its Center for Arts Education and its support for Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE), combined resources to provide $1.25 million to the National Assessment Governing Board for the development of a framework and testing specifications for the first national assessment in the arts in nearly 20 years. Essentially, the development of voluntary standards was running on a parallel track with another national consensus process to create the foundation for a national arts report card. The arts education field and many of its allies were stretched in good ways for two years to ensure that the two consensus processes informed one another and that both products—the standards document and the NAEP Arts Framework—were delivered in early 1994.

As these important developments unfolded in the field, Congress was debating the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. Evidence of rigorous achievement standards in the arts and a forthcoming national assessment likely factored into the decision to make the arts one of the subjects in the legislated National Education Goal 3: “All students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, Mathematics, Science, Foreign Language, Civics and Government, Economics, Arts, History, and Geography.” For the arts education community, the fact that President Clinton signed the Goals 2000 Act at an arts magnet school in San Diego was a fitting symbol of the victory it represented.

Moving From Promise to Practice

With the passage of Goals 2000, the completion of voluntary national standards, and the federal commitment to a NAEP assessment in the arts, the prospects for increasing and improving arts education changed considerably by 1994. All of these developments, however, and especially the arts in the National Education Goals, were federal- or national-level developments. The decisions to install arts programs where they did not exist or to improve the arts curriculum based on standards, to develop assessment efforts, or to adequately staff arts education programs would happen only when and where this validation of the arts as a core subject was met with commitment and resources at the state and local levels.

Recognizing that federal encouragement was not enough, Education Secretary Richard Riley and Arts Endowment Chairman Jane Alexander convened a series of meetings in late 1994 attended by representatives of more than 100 national organizations from the arts, education, governance, and private sectors to consider the prospects for the arts as a core subject. More importantly, the Secretary and Chairman challenged the organizations to determine strategies and actions needed to put the
straightforward, but it’s all the more frustrating that these are the specific recommendations of the Coming to Our Senses panel in 1977! In other words, for the past quarter century we have failed to provide the will and the way to make the arts a core subject. As a result of that failure, two generations of Americans have received a less than complete education in our public schools.

Given the increasing proliferation of the media in our lives and the demands that places on each of us to interpret the world around us (especially as so much of what we see of the world is through the media); given what we increasingly know about the connections between learning in and through the arts and students’ academic and social development; given the shift in our nation’s economy from mechanized labor to ideas and creativity as its driving forces, can we afford to allow another generation of young Americans to receive an incomplete education? Each of us—policymakers, teachers, artists, parents, and corporate and community leaders—must answer that question. Let us respond together, creating both the will and the way to move the boulder to the top of the hill, and do it soon.

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THE COMPLETE CURRICULUM:
Ensuring a Place for Arts and Foreign Languages in America’s Schools

Arts and Foreign Language instruction has been marginalized and is increasingly at risk of being eliminated as part of the public schools’ core curriculum. This report, produced by NASBE’s Lost Curriculum Study Group, examines concerns that schools are narrowly focusing on only a few academic subjects—primarily reading, math, and science—at the expense of other important components of a comprehensive education, such as the arts and humanities.

Claiming the attention of both Education Week and CNN, the report analyzes the benefits of arts and foreign language instruction, addresses the concern that the curriculum is narrowing, and provides strong recommendations for state policymakers to help promote arts and foreign language instruction in schools. (2003, $14.00)