NASBE member Dorie Combs is serving in her second year on the Kentucky State Board of Education, and during the past year was a member of NASBE’s Lost Curriculum Study Group. An Associate Professor at Eastern Kentucky University and a former seventh-grade teacher, Combs prepares the next generation of teachers for the challenges they will face in middle and high school classrooms. “Education has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember,” says Combs, adding that she always knew she wanted to be a teacher.

As a member of the Study Group, Combs helped form the recommendations released in The Complete Curriculum: Ensuring the Arts and Foreign Languages in America’s Schools. Here Combs shares with us how Kentucky uses many of those same principles to successfully incorporate arts into its K-12 curriculum.

**How is arts education approached in Kentucky? Is there a strong focus on incorporating the arts into instruction?**

The number one thing that we do in Kentucky is include standards for the arts in our core content—including visual arts, music, dance, and theater. We assess children and their knowledge of arts in the 5th, 8th, and 10th grades. We ask students to demonstrate their knowledge of the arts, of arts history, and of different forms of art through analysis, comparison, and even evaluation of works of art. I think having specific standards in Kentucky is critical, because schools are more likely to teach what is assessed. It’s maybe an unfortunate truth, but it is a truth. Another important thing that we do is to maintain a state-level staff who provide assistance and resources for instruction in the arts.

We’ve also formed some great partnerships. Kentucky Educational Television and the National Endowment for the Arts have worked with us to produce an arts tool kit for teachers of all grade levels that includes: lesson plans, CDs, access to resources on the web, and videos for music, drama, and dance. Teachers get an entire notebook of resources. The Kentucky Arts Council works with the state to provide summer teacher academies—a series of arts workshops across the state to help teachers address the assessments. These weekend intensive training sessions for teachers include follow-up and long-range planning. This fulfills a key point that our study group made about providing teachers with training and resources.

What I see as a parent is that my children are learning about art at a level that I don’t think I was exposed to until I was in college—like studying artists and their works through an historical perspective or learning about the elements and different styles of dance.

**Are you concerned about arts education being marginalized or cut in Kentucky?**

When they start squeezing money, it’s so easy to lose arts funding. Bigger cities where they have a strong arts support group, are not going to allow schools to remove the arts from the curriculum. You see support for the arts in wealthier communities. It is the smaller, rural communities that are in more danger in losing funding for arts programs. Those are the schools that need them the most—they don’t have the museums, orchestras, or dance companies. It’s very easy for smaller schools and school districts to say, “We just don’t have money for this.”

**How have you used the experience and knowledge that you gained by working with the Lost Curriculum Study Group?**

Being a part of the Study Group has really inspired me to work harder at training teachers to integrate the arts. It’s been one of my goals this year to bring art, music, or movement and performance into my classroom. The study group reminded me of how important this is. I have found that I don’t have to be an artist to inspire my students to appreciate and make and do art. I have believed for a long, long time that many children learn through the arts and with the arts, and that they could demonstrate what they knew better through the arts than they can by taking multiple-choice tests. Arts education is not just making art, but that is part of it—it’s also knowledge and appreciation of art, and it is using art as a vehicle for learning. Arts education has to include those three things.