



ARTS AND MINDS

Conversations about the Arts in Education

On the Record with **Susan Sclafani**,

U.S. Assistant Secretary for Vocational and Adult Education, June 2005



Education Commission
of the **S t a t e s**

The Arts Are Vital to Young People's Success in School and in Life

Susan Sclafani is assistant secretary for vocational and adult education in the U.S. Department of Education. In a speech given at the Education Commission of the States' Spring Steering Committee on May 7, 2005, in Little Rock, Arkansas, she discussed how learning in and through the arts is central to fulfilling the No Child Left Behind Act's goal of improved student achievement.

This summary of her remarks is part of ECS' Arts and Mind Series, which features the views of today's leading thinkers on topics pertaining to the arts in education. ECS is pleased to present this series under its 2004-06 ECS Chairman's Initiative, The Arts – A Lifetime of Learning, led by Arkansas Governor and 2004-06 ECS Chairman Mike Huckabee.

Far from marginalizing arts education in the K-12 curriculum, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) provides unprecedented recognition and support for learning in and through the arts.

Under NCLB, the arts are for the first time listed in federal law as a core academic subject, for which standards of teaching and learning are expected to be as rigorous and as well defined as those established for English, mathematics, science and history. For both their intrinsic value and for the ways in which they help students to succeed in school and in life, NCLB makes clear, the arts are a vital part of a complete education.

The creative skills students develop through participation in the arts strengthen and enhance their preparation for living, learning and working in a changing world.

Music, dance, drama and visual arts programs open children to new ideas, new experiences and new challenges and instill the habits of mind that last a lifetime – confidence, perseverance, a drive for excellence, the ability to analyze and solve problems.

Just as important, the arts serve as unique and powerful tools for reaching, engaging and motivating all learners – and thus can and should play a central role in fulfilling NCLB's goal of improved student achievement.

When we talk about accountability, when we talk about every child learning, that means we've got to look at how each child learns. We have to look at what matters to them, what interests them, what excites them – and anyone who has been in an elementary school working with children knows they're excited about lots of things.

Ask a kindergarten class, how many of you are singers? Every hand goes up. How many of you are dancers? The other hand goes up. How many of you are artists? They're already there. Now do that in a high school. You might get one or two hands tentatively going up. Why? Because somehow through our educational system, we convince students that talent is in short supply, only given to a few – and if you don't have it, you might as well give up because you're not going to be a success.

One of the interesting contrasts between American children and Asian children is Asian children know that the difference between success and failure in school is effort – that if they're not successful, they haven't worked hard

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enough. In our culture, we say it's intelligence – as if we could tell what the intelligence is of each and every child just by looking at him or her. And yet we make decisions every day as if we know for sure what that is.

One of the old sayings in education is that kids don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. And that gets at a point that I think is absolutely critical from kindergarten through high school: it's not only academics that we're responsible for – it's also relationships. It is teachers who care about children, who inspire them to go farther, to work harder because they know they can do it.

And so we have to change the culture of our schools. We want teachers who are concerned about the whole child, and about helping each and every student to develop his or her gifts in all areas. We need to teach children that of course they can do it, and to do it, they have to work at it. It's amazing how much effort children will put in when they know that people believe in them and believe they can do something well.

New Sources of Support for the Arts

No Child Left Behind has been portrayed in some quarters as posing a threat to arts education. You've heard the claims: NCLB doesn't leave any time for the arts. We've had to cut our arts programs because we have to focus all our time and attention on reading and mathematics. There are no federal funds for the arts – Title I is just math and reading.

Let's set the record straight. First of all, Title I is not just about math and reading; it's about enabling students who are economically disadvantaged to achieve at the same level as other students. How do we do that? We do it by giving them a rich, comprehensive, coherent education, including the arts.

So not only Title I funds, but also comprehensive school reform and innovative programs grants, can be used to support arts education. Money available under Title II can be tapped to address the professional development needs of teachers of the arts and to support partnerships that include nonprofit cultural arts organizations.

The arts also can be an important part of learning and enrichment in programs supported by 21st Century Community Learning Centers program funds. Before- and after-school, weekend and summer programs are

excellent opportunities to stimulate students' artistic interests and foster their growth or to integrate arts learning with other subjects, including reading and mathematics. Cultural partners in the community – arts centers, symphonies, theaters and the like – can offer engaging venues as well as skilled instructors and mentors for students.

Making the Case for the Arts

Under NCLB, the arts are on a par with other core academic subjects not only in terms of what federal law provides, but what it requires and expects states to do: clearly define what students should know and be able to do at various points in their schooling; ensure subjects are taught by highly qualified teachers; rely more heavily on what research tells us about what works and what doesn't.

You know, we can look at one program or another and see that it's made a difference in the lives of children, but we cannot legislate on the basis of anecdote.

We need to gather the evidence that enables us to say, if students are engaged in these activities, we see an improvement in their ability to organize their thoughts and write in improved ways. We see an improvement in their ability to read because they're interested in the topic they're reading about, or they've been involved in dramatic arts, which bring to them the beauty and the power of the words on the page. We see that through music, they're improving their self-discipline and their persistence, which are critical skills to improving academic performance, and also improving their mathematical skills and ability.

How do we gather the evidence? We do it in part through the federal grants that say to grantees, you've got to include a rigorous evaluation of the program. We do it by saying to researchers – as the Arts Education Partnership has done over the last 10 years – let's look at the research that's available so we can tell people, yes, this works, this makes a difference. If we want people to put first-class arts programs in place, we need to widely share what we've learned.

There are a number of programs that use the arts as a tool for whole-school change and improvement, to bring a new perspective to the teachers and the staff as well as the students. It gives them the confidence to say, Let's not just do more and more of what we've done in

the past, let's look at a new way of teaching, of learning, of working together so we can in fact make a difference for all the children we serve.

I think it's absolutely critical we also work at the local level in educating people about what needs to happen. It is clear to me our elementary school principals understand this better than anyone, and they know that if they want to have the parents come in for parents' night, what do they do? They have almost every child performing that evening because they know that if their children are performing, those parents are going to be there.

We need to start using that same approach in our middle schools and our high schools, at our community meetings, at our school board meetings and our city council meetings to get people to recognize that these young people are models for their peers and that this doesn't have to be just a small group of children. This can be all of our children. By providing these opportunities for all of our children, we will accomplish what we have set out to do with No Child Left Behind.

Preparing Students for a Changing World

Craig Barrett, the chief executive officer of Intel, talks about the fact that over the last five years, three new nations – China, India and Russia, with a combined population of three billion people – have joined the world economy. Suppose, he says, that only 10% of those people are well educated – and, of course, we know that in those three countries, "well educated" means proficient in mathematics and science as well as other areas. He points out that's 300 million people – more than the population of our nation.

We are in a competition whether we like it or not. Other nations have looked at what we've done over the years and have figured out that education is the key to success. It's been the key to the American dream for generations, and these other countries, too, now are focused on investing in that kind of education.

So, the young people who leave our schools are entering a world in which they are going to have to be well prepared in every area. Ensuring that every child is ready for this challenge is what No Child Left Behind is all about.

When I left school, it was accepted that 40% of the kids would drop out, and it didn't matter – there were good jobs for them. But there is no place for a child who is

not well prepared in the 21st century. Fewer than 15% of the jobs in this nation are for the unskilled, and that number continues to go down.

We simply cannot maintain our old factory model of high school. That system was designed to sort and to sift. Only 20-25% of the students were given a first-class education, another group was given a technical education and the rest were just kind of passing through. That won't work in this century. It won't prepare young people for employment that expects them not only to have a positive work ethic, to get to work on time, to be there and do what's right – but also to be analytical, to be problem solvers, to use technology and be able to communicate in oral and written form.

So the challenge is not that our high schools are suddenly failing, but that we're asking them to do what has never been done before. We're saying that it's not enough to prepare a small segment of students for success – we have to prepare them all. We have students coming into high school who are reading at 4th-grade level, along with students who are reading at the post-college level. Our high schools have students who can barely do whole-number arithmetic but also those who completed Algebra I and geometry in middle school and are starting 9th grade in Algebra II.

With that kind of diversity, a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work. It can't be the same thing for everybody. Again, the arts give us a model – as do career and technical education – of teaching through application, of giving students the opportunity to say, This is what interests me, this is what I'm excited about. Now help me see how I can learn and why I need to learn these other things to get where I want to go.

When students have a goal in mind, they will do whatever it takes to meet that goal. But when we simply put them in classes and tell them they have to take it because we say so, we end up losing many, too many, of these young people. And they have such talent. They have such ability.

If ever there was a group of young people we could trust beyond the three minutes we give them to run from class to class, a group that doesn't have to be with a teacher every minute of the day in groups of 30 – it is these kids.

Imagine the creativity we could unleash if we freed students and teachers from the stifling routine and con-



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**“Think about how
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straints of the factory model. If the school day was more than sitting in class until the bell rings, forgetting what you learned there because you’re moving to the next class, and 40 minutes later the bell rings again and you move to the next class. Imagine if teachers didn’t have to be with kids five periods out of six, but instead had time to work with one another or out in the community on projects with their students.

Creativity and Commitment

Take a few minutes to look at a Web site called What Kids Can Do, which features examples of schools and communities working together to challenge young people, enlist their help with problems, nourish their talents and encourage their contributions as citizens.

These kids are out in the community doing things such as developing materials to teach parents about better nutrition. They’re organizing recycling drives and summer tutoring programs and neighborhood improvement efforts. Where there’s a water quality problem, they’re the ones analyzing the water and taking the results to the health department. And if the health department doesn’t respond, they go to the city council.

These young people – called “Millennials” by the people who study them – are conscientious, committed and optimistic. They want to do what they can to make their community a better place, to make the world a better place. The majority of them say they are doing commu-

nity service or volunteer work because they believe they can make a difference.

Think about how wonderful our young people are, and let’s create schools that are worthy of them. Let’s recognize our responsibility to challenge them, believe in them and prepare them to be citizens of the world, who are confident and comfortable in going anywhere and being successful. This is a generation that’s going to have to do that, and that’s why I feel such urgency not only about No Child Left Behind but about redesigning our educational system to meet the needs of our young people.

With NCLB, for the first time ever we’ve moved past the mantra that all children can learn to a commitment that all children will learn or we’ll know why not. We’ll figure out why not. For the first time, we’ve said we’re accountable for every child, and that is the most critical piece of No Child Left Behind.

It goes back to what John Dewey said a long time ago – the wise man wants for every child the education that he wants for his own child. That’s how we will have a democracy. That’s how we will have an America that lives up to the American dream.

Visit the ECS Web site for more information about the 2004-06 ECS Chairman’s Initiative, the Arts – A Lifetime of Learning, led by Arkansas Governor and ECS Chairman Mike Huckabee.

<http://www.ecs.org/Huckabee>