



*A+ Schools and Turnaround  
Arts schools commit to a  
model of school improvement.*

**Valerie Norville**

## Arts in Turnaround Strategies

Every student deserves arts instruction for its own sake, as an essential ingredient to a well-rounded education. Yet arts education adds value for a whole host of other educational purposes: among them, enhanced writing and reading, ability to retain information, problem solving, and critical thinking.<sup>1</sup> Interest in models of whole-school reform that focus on integration of the arts across content areas, now in place in a handful of schools, is being bolstered by evidence that students at lower achievement levels appear to benefit from it the most.<sup>2</sup>

### Turnaround Arts

One such program is Turnaround Arts, launched as a pilot in eight schools in 2012 by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and now run by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Running in 79 Title I schools in 17 states and the District of Columbia, the program is designed to turn around low-performing schools: to improve school climate, culture, and academic achievement and to deepen instruction and engagement with students and parents.

Leveraging the arts for school reform is different from introducing arts integration at the school level, even though many of the ingredients are the same, explained Yael Silk, executive director of

Arts Education Collaborative. There are many schools that have arts specialists or teaching artists work with nonarts teachers to develop units that use dance to teach science or music to teach reading, for example. "When a school adopts an arts integration model," Silk said, "they are committing to creative teaching and learning strategies, they are committed to teaching in and through the arts, and they are committed to breaking down the content silos inside the building to allow for richer learning to take place."

For Turnaround Arts schools, in contrast, turnaround is the goal. School teachers and leaders commit to eight pillars under this model: 1) principal leadership, 2) the strategic use of arts specialists, 3) nonarts classroom teachers integrating arts into core content, 4) the use of teaching artists and community organizations, 5) the engagement of the district, parents, and community, 6) strategic arts planning, 7) professional development, and 8) improvements to the school environment. High-profile artists such as Yo-Yo Ma and Sarah Jessica Parker have served as Turnaround Arts teaching artists.

Each participating school identifies its own school improvement goals and receives coaching to match arts interventions and local arts partners who can help address those needs. Consequently, the

program is tailored, with its implementation varying from school to school, Silk said.

## A+ Schools Networks

The longest-running model of whole-school reform that embraces arts integration as a lever is A+ Schools, born in North Carolina in 1995 and now in place in 180 schools, with networks in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma, and pilot schools elsewhere. Like Turnaround Arts, schools adopting the model make commitments that go beyond adding arts integration. A+ Schools commit to essential elements in the areas of daily arts planning, instruction, and integration; curriculum; multiple learning pathways; experiential learning; enriched assessment; collaboration; school climate; and infrastructure, which encompasses leadership support, resources, time, and space.

“When we say ‘whole school,’ we mean it,” said Michelle Mazan Burrows, director of A+ Schools at the North Carolina Arts Council. When schools are exploring whether to join a network of A+ Schools in their state, 85 percent of the certified staff must vote to agree that the fit of the program to the school is good, she said. “And when we train them, 85 percent of the staff have to be with us for the training.” The training includes three annual offsite summer institutes as well as onsite follow-up and support, which continues as schools ponder how to sustain the program on an ongoing basis.

Visitors may not be able to tell whether they are observing a dance class or a science class because the content is integrated, Burrows said. “When we bring people into an A+ School, they are struck by the level of student engagement. There’s a hum of active learning.”

In arts education classes and nonarts classes alike, teachers make cross-disciplinary connections even as they teach to their state standards for a given discipline. Schools commit to planning time that crosses disciplines and grade levels. Even rural schools commit to this, though it can be more challenging to figure out how to do this in the face of staff and resource constraints.

## Evidence of Outcomes

Evaluations of North Carolina’s network found evidence that the program significantly

contributed to student learning, teacher effectiveness, school culture, and community involvement.<sup>3</sup> Students in the largely Title I schools are meeting or exceeding student growth measures, Burrows said, though she cautioned that it would be hard to show that the program was the causal factor, given the variety of ways in which the program is implemented and the multiple initiatives and interventions that North Carolina schools have fielded simultaneously.

A focus solely on student achievement also understates the program’s benefits, such as improved school climate and quality professional development, Burrows said. “One of the most interesting things for me is that the study shows that the longer the professional development connections, the more active and sustainable the arts integration in the schools is.”

She also hears positive reviews from North Carolina middle school staff whose students have come from the A+ Schools network. The students “are just broader thinkers because their learning has made connections for them beyond just a single discipline,” she said.

Evaluations of the Oklahoma network of A+ Schools also showed students performing at or above average on state academic measures and that the schools that exhibited the deepest engagement with arts integration and the A+ elements performed consistently higher than schools for which the process was “an add-on to more traditional ways of teaching.”<sup>4</sup>

A 2014 evaluation of the Turnaround Arts pilot program found that the eight pilot schools—all among the lowest performing 5 percent of schools in their states—did see gains. Seven saw reading proficiency rates rise, six improved math proficiency, and all eight improved in either reading or math. On average, the schools showed a 22.55 percent improvement in math proficiency rates and a 12.62 percent improvement in reading proficiency rates—significantly higher than the cohort of analogous schools in their districts and states receiving federal School Improvement Grants.<sup>5</sup> Attendance rates rose significantly in half of the schools, and the schools reported taking fewer disciplinary actions.

Other research hints at the impact of arts integration more broadly. In a randomized control trial study of arts-integrated and traditional science units taught to middle school

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students, Mariale Hardiman and colleagues found that arts-integrated instruction was as effective or better at producing students' long-term memories of science content. But groups of students reading at basic levels benefited more than proficient and advanced readers from arts-integrated instruction.<sup>6</sup>

Future research could helpfully address open questions about arts integration, Silk and Burrows said. For example, studies could tease out the degree to which faithfulness in implementation affects results. How are outcomes affected by changes in student-staff ratios, instructional minutes, and the amount of time a teaching artist engages with nonarts teachers? More broadly, Burrows said, "I'd love to know what is it about the arts that so heavily engages kids and that also makes them stronger and better thinkers."

## Policy Implications

Many states have updated their arts standards over the last few years, and many of the revised state standards reflect the National Core Arts Standards. In addition, federal law and many state statutes require arts instruction. Yet some districts may insist on rigid allocations of time for tested subjects that make it more difficult for schools to allocate adequate time for the arts, arts integration, and arts exposure in and outside of school, Silk said.

"There is a significant amount of fear," Silk said. "If we reallocate instruction time or if we use different instructional strategies, what will happen to us if [test] scores don't do what we need them to do? That is a very real barrier for teachers and administrators."

Research on the impact of arts integration in schools is not vast, and of those studies, few address the use of arts integration as a strategy for whole-school reform (also see the article, page 36). The body of research on what is most effective for whole-school reform is also thin, especially research of the rigorous, well-designed variety—with sufficiently large sample sizes and randomized controlled trials for the interventions being studied.

Yet no one wants low-performing schools to wait for evidence that exceeds the ESSA definition of "promising" interventions. "It's terrible to go to a school where there are only

negative stories in the press and most people in the school believe in the narrative that 'We're destined to fail here,' " said Silk, a coauthor of the Turnaround Arts pilot evaluation. "We've been in reform for many years, and at best we're seeing incremental change. What these interventions did relatively quickly was change the narrative, and I think that's incredibly powerful."

"I had teachers and administrators telling me that this was the first time that they'd been working at the school that they were feeling hopeful, that they had positive things to say about the school," she added. "This was the kind of investment that changed the mind-set of the teachers, the students, and the parents when they came to visit."

As state boards of education ponder creative approaches to helping struggling schools, they may want to visit a school where—as with A+ Schools or Turnaround Arts schools—the arts are harnessed to whole-school reform goals. In addition, they can talk with teachers and students about the impact of arts learning and arts integration initiatives in all schools and work with stakeholders to advance an arts education for all students. ■

<sup>1</sup>Ken Elpus, "Arts Education and Positive Youth Development: Cognitive, Behavioral, and Social Outcomes of Adolescents Who Study the Arts" (Washington: National Endowment for the Arts, 2013); Mariale Hardiman, Luke Rinne, and Julia Yarmolinskaya, "The Effects of Arts Integration on Long-Term Retention of Academic Content," *Mind, Brain, and Education* 8, no. 3 (August 2014); Peter Gouzouasis, Martin Guhn, and Nand Kishor, "The Predictive Relationship between Achievement and Participation in Music and Achievement in Core Grade 12 Academic Subjects," *Music Education Research* 9, no. 1: (2007): 81–92; D. H. Bowen, J. P. Greene, and B. Kisida, "Learning to Think Critically: A Visual Art Experiment," *Educational Researchers* 43, no. 1 (2014): 37–44.

<sup>2</sup>Mariale M. Hardiman et al., "The Effects of Arts-Integrated Instruction on Memory for Science Content," *Trends in Neuroscience and Education* 14 (March 2019); James S. Catterall et al., "The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies" (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>C. A. Nelson, *The Arts and Education Reform: Lessons from a Four-Year Evaluation of the A+ Schools Program, 1995–1999* (Winston-Salem, NC: Thomas S. Kenan Institute for the Arts, 2001).

<sup>4</sup>Michael Raiber et al., "Recognizably Different: Meta-Analysis of Oklahoma A+ Schools," *Oklahoma A+ Schools: What the Research Tells Us: 2002–2007*, Volume 5. (Edmond, OK: Oklahoma A+ Schools and the University of Central Oklahoma, 2010).

<sup>5</sup>Sara Stoelinga et al., "Final Evaluation Report: Turnaround Arts Initiative" (Washington, DC: President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 2015).

<sup>6</sup>Hardiman et al., "Effects on Memory for Science Content."