



# COLLABORATION

## PAINTS A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR ARTS EDUCATION

By Kristine Hughes

Ask a group of struggling elementary school students which ones want to give up a month of vacation to go to summer school, and you'll see few, if any, raised hands. Most students attend summer school not because it's their idea of a good time, but because they need to in order to advance to the next grade. To many students — and even some teachers — summer school feels more like punishment than an opportunity to learn and explore.

In July 2010, working with a nonprofit organization called Big Thought, officials at the Dallas Independent School District embarked on an approach to summer school they hoped would change that image and engage kids. The idea was to support teachers, artists, and others to replace

worksheet-style instruction with teaching animated by music, visual arts, dance, and theater.

The new arts-rich summer school program that resulted is just another sign of Dallas' initiative, spearheaded by Big Thought ([www.bigthought.org](http://www.bigthought.org)), to bring together schools, cultural organizations, and others to restore high-quality arts instruction to the many classrooms from which it has long been missing. "What's the goal of education: to assess kids or prepare them for life?" asks Craig Welle, executive director of enrichment curriculum and instruction for the Dallas Independent School District. "If you've taken the arts out of the education system, you are no longer preparing kids for life."

### A 30-YEAR DECLINE WITH A NUMBER OF CULPRITS

For many years and a number of reasons, the arts have been on a downward spiral in public education.

The decline began in the 1970s, when municipal financial crises forced local and state governments to severely curtail spending. As a 2008 RAND Corporation report, *Revitalizing Arts Education Through Community-Wide Coordination*, puts it: “The arts and arts teachers became easy targets for budget cutting” (Bodilly & Augustine, 2008, p. 10). School districts all over the country slashed arts programming, to enduring effect. By 1991 in New York City, for example, two-thirds of public schools lacked licensed art and music teachers. Some cities also pared school operating hours, with the result in Chicago, for example, that the school day shrank from seven hours to five hours and 45 minutes. “Not only were the arts instructors gone, but so was the time in the school day for anything other than the very basic subjects,” the report says (p. 11). More recently, the move to assess student achievement through standardized testing has had the effect of marginalizing nontested subjects, the arts included.

This long-term erosion of arts education is evident today in schools throughout the nation. In elementary grades, education in music and art “tends to be spotty, casual, and brief,” with instruction in drama and dance “even more limited,” according to another RAND Corporation study, *Cultivating Demand for the Arts: Arts Learning, Arts Engagement, and State Arts Policy* (Zakaras & Lowell, 2008). In high school, “qualified arts specialists offer arts instruction but reach only the small proportion of students who choose to take arts classes” (p. 51).

In short, “because of the pervasive neglect of arts education in the kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) public school system, most children are given only a smattering of arts instruction, and some are given none at all” (Bodilly & Augustine, 2008, p. xii).

## REASONS TO REVIVE ARTS EDUCATION

Why should educators care about this?

According to research, the arts can make important, positive contributions to individuals and communities, and the earlier people become engaged in art, the better the chance they — and civic life — will reap the rewards (Zakaras & Lowell, 2008).

Sustained involvement in art can confer much good on individuals, from pleasure and captivation to an expanded capacity for empathy (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004). For communities, the arts can strengthen social bonds and give expression to what whole groups need or want to convey.

Offering a perspective different from other disciplines, the arts also provide cognitive benefits that would be a plus to anyone but may be particularly helpful to school-aged children. They can instill a recognition that problems can be solved in more than one way, for example, or that there are many different ways to see and interpret the world. Being involved in doing art — for example, putting on a play or refining an artwork — can also help instill the value of persistence.

For teachers, the arts can be a vehicle for reinforcing academic knowledge or reaching children who may struggle with more conventional classroom approaches to education, says Welle, who has overseen the revival of arts education in Dallas public schools. “Art is one of the ways identified as a means of embedding learning in another way,” he says. “When students create an art project, or sing a song about a subject or act or dance, they learn information at another level.”

## REVERSING THE SLIDE: A COORDINATED EFFORT

These and other potential benefits are more likely to accrue if children get more than the haphazard exposure to art that now prevails in many American public schools. Therefore, a number of communities have in recent years looked for ways to reinvigorate arts education.

One strategy is the coordinated arts learning effort: enlisting the cooperation of many individuals and organizations — schools, artists, local government, cultural organizations, parents, arts institutions, and others — to work together to improve and expand arts education. This work is not easy, according to the *Revitalizing Arts Education* report, which looked at coordinating efforts in six cities. For starters, getting groups and individuals with varied interests to collaborate requires leadership and trust that is built up over years rather than overnight. Sometimes rivalry between advocates of different approaches to arts instruction — integrating arts into teaching of core academic subjects like reading and math versus arts instruction in its own right — gets in the way. The realities of tight budgets and standardized tests remain.

Still, the report found that coordination can be a “sometimes powerful” approach to reviving arts education (p. 79). As evidence, there is Dallas, whose coordinated effort, known as Thriving Minds and managed by Big Thought, is an example of how it can be done. “The 100-plus partners who work with Thriving Minds ensure opportunities for kids to be expressive, to think critically, and to experience learning through lessons grounded in a real-world context,” says Gigi Antoni, Big Thought’s president and CEO. “Most importantly, these experiences are made possible every day, in school and out, to every Dallas child, and will one day hopefully set a standard for education not only in our city, but across the country.”

## DALLAS’ THRIVING MINDS INITIATIVE

Big Thought’s roots go back to the 1980s, when two local arts advocates began a push to bring artists into the city’s public schools. As the early 2000s came around, Big Thought, by



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then an established arts education nonprofit, was delivering arts integration experiences to classrooms all over the city. The organization acted as a kind of broker, working with a variety of different cultural institutions — from the Dallas Museum of Art to the Texana Living History Association — to develop educationally sound programs, complete with detailed sample lessons that were tied to what children were expected to learn in their core subjects.

**Learn more**

The Wallace Foundation's extensive web site offers several reports and resources on arts participation and arts education, including a brief on the Thriving Minds project in Dallas: *From Hip-Hop to Shakespeare: Dallas Blazes "Coordinated" Trail in Arts Education for City Young People* (2008). Visit the Knowledge Center at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org) for more information.

Then, in the middle part of the decade, Dallas' arts education revival effort got a new boost. Michael Hinojosa, a firm backer of arts education, was named the district's superintendent, while Mary Suhm, a longtime supporter of Big Thought's work, was appointed to the city's top nonelected post, city manager. With solid commitment from them, a new and significant grant from The Wallace Foundation, and other support, Big Thought launched the Thriving Minds initiative, which became instrumental in helping schools revive arts as a discipline unto itself, in addition to being an

adjunct to teaching other subjects. One result of the initiative was that today the district requires that every Dallas public elementary school provide weekly at least 45 minutes each of visual arts and music instruction. Also under Thriving Minds, Big Thought began managing 31 of the district's federally funded after-school programs where arts instruction has assumed a major role.

**SHAPING A CORPS OF ARTS INSTRUCTORS**

In reviving arts education in and out of school, Dallas has had to develop a sufficiently large group of qualified arts teachers and teaching artists. For classroom arts instruction, this initially meant some flexibility, because after so many years of decline in school arts, the 140 new certified music and visual instructors needed in Dallas elementary schools were not so easily found. "To fill all of the positions, the district relied heavily on its alternative certification program," Welle recalls. Today, that's no longer the case.

Working with the district, Big Thought has worked to strengthen the quality of instruction delivered by this new corps. With Big Thought's help, the district's planned revision of the K-12 arts curriculum occurred ahead of time and came equipped with planning guides for the arts instructors who would carry it out. Big Thought also helped provide music teachers with professional development in a respected method of instruction developed by the German composer Carl Orff. With years of

experience connecting classrooms to cultural institutions, the organization continues to provide schools with coaches — generally retired classroom teachers adept at using the arts in instruction — to help faculty members plot out meaningful arts integration experiences for students. In addition, Big Thought offers workshops led by expert teaching artists for staffers of cultural organizations, school district personnel, and others. During one recent event, the speaker offered guidance to dancers, actors, visual artists, and others on how to pace after-school arts instruction, how to create a climate that differs from the school classroom, and how to keep kids engaged. Then there's ongoing professional development: During 2010, more than 200 community artists and volunteers took part in this learning, much of which was devoted to how to nurture children's problem-solving skills, according to LeAnn Binford, Big Thought's creative learning workforce director.

**SUPPORT FOR A NEW KIND OF SUMMER SCHOOL**

For 2010, Big Thought and the district drew on what they have learned to create a wholly different summer school.

For years, Dallas students in danger of being held back had been required to attend a four-week, half-day summer session that typically began right after the regular school year ended in early June. The scheduling meant that once the kids finished summer school by early July, they faced a nearly two-month hiatus until school resumed in late August, leaving them open to the summer learning loss that has been identified as a big problem for children. Another downside was that kids were being instructed, for the most part, in the same conventional way that apparently had not worked for them during the school year. "We asked ourselves, 'Is summer school doing what we want it to do?,' and the answer was no," says Jennifer Bransom, Big Thought's director of program accountability.

The refashioned summer school, "Thriving Minds Summer Camp," operated on a full-day schedule in July and centered on a new arts-filled curriculum with a special theme for kindergarten through 5th grade. Mornings were devoted to reading, math, social studies, and science, but taught through creative projects that required classroom and fine arts teachers to work together. The curriculum for 4th graders, for example, revolved around an exploration of Texas. For English language arts, children might be asked to create a quilt of A-to-Z patches about the Lone Star State, with each letter representing a pertinent vocabulary word: "i" for independence and "r" for republic, for instance. To learn about place value in math, the children might research aspects of Texas with large numbers (the populations of big cities, say, or the square mileage of regions in the state) and present their findings in a graph or illustration.

Afternoons were devoted to studio time — music, dance, theater, and visual arts, co-taught by a fine arts teacher and an artist. The four-week session ended with a big presentation by

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petuating the problem.

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Collaboration paints a bright future for arts education

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the students — a show of square dances, for example, by those 4th-grade Texas scholars.

The mantra, says Welle, was “no worksheets.”

Ensuring the success of this recrafted summer school meant offering intense professional development to 800 classroom teachers, fine arts instructors, teaching artists, school principals, and others. It took place over two days last June in a large Dallas high school. The attendees participated in what Binford calls “project-based learning 101” — learning the principles of the project technique, how to apply it, and why it could benefit children. Later in the day, classroom teachers, fine art instructors, and others met separately with curriculum writers to get up to speed on the curriculum and their specific roles in teaching it. There was instruction in administrative procedures as well as team-building exercises, as fine arts and academic teachers, accustomed to working alone, learned to work in tandem.

Equipped with their learning experiences, the teachers and artists dispersed to the 22 school buildings that housed the July program. More than 7,000 students took part, and a mark of the program's draw was that a sizeable portion of them did not have to attend. In addition to struggling students, Welle says, the program attracted children whose families were looking for sound, safe, vacation-time opportunities for their youngsters.

Now, Dallas is gearing up for summer 2011 and applying lessons it learned during the kickoff year. This time, for exam-

ple, organizers plan to offer the professional development earlier and to make it more of an exercise in team-building by basing it at the individual schools where the camps will take place.

Whatever kinks still need ironing out, however, Welle believes that a major accomplishment of July 2010 was its proof that a summer school with art at its center could be more than drudgery for children. “I told the community artists that if nothing else, I'd like the kids to leave at 5 p.m. so excited about what they were doing that they couldn't wait until they came back,” he says. “It's amazing how they took that to heart.”

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