

Interviewing the Community

Pam Stephens

Chances are that you know the neighborhood surrounding the school where you have interviewed, but how well do you know the community? When we speak of community, we think in broader terms than the people who live within the school's zone. Community encompasses many stakeholders: students and their families, teachers, administrators, school board members, elected political figures, businesses, public service organizations, and so forth. In other words, community includes those people, organizations, and businesses that have an investment of time, energy, or money in learning outcomes of the school.

Finding clues about how the community views the arts in schools requires some detective work that includes carefully perusing the district's website, reading the newspaper, and walking around the business district. Keep in mind that you are looking for evidence that suggests the community values the arts in schools. Here are some questions to consider as you complete your investigation:

The District's Website or Other Written Materials

1. Does the district have a written policy about who teaches the visual arts and how the visual arts are taught? Does the policy support comprehensive art teaching?
2. Does the district have an art curriculum in place that reflects state or national academic standards for the visual arts? Does the curriculum show a scope and sequence?
3. Is learning in the arts assessed? How is assessment reported to stakeholders?
4. Are the visual arts taught in all grade levels? Does each school have at least one art teacher?
5. Does the district have an arts supervisor?
6. Is student-made art posted to the district's website? Do individual schools have websites where student artwork is exhibited?
7. Is there evidence from school board meeting minutes that the arts are discussed in a positive light? Is there evidence that art teachers and their students frequently attend and present to the school-board?
8. Are the arts a part of the school's website? Is there evidence that the arts are meaningfully included in open house events or in parent-teacher meetings?
9. Are afterschool, Saturday, or summer art programs offered? Who teaches these programs? Are the programs of the same quality as regular school-day art classes?

Local Newspapers

1. Does the local newspaper have a recurring column that reports about schools in the community? In comparison to other content areas, are the arts a significant part of the column?





High-quality after-school or Saturday programs that engage students with art indicate that the community values art learning.



2. Are local arts events promoted and reported?
3. Are student or teacher accomplishments in the arts reported with the same regularity and enthusiasm as sports events or events in other content areas?

The Business and Political Community

1. Do neighborhood businesses or public spaces have student-made art on display?
2. Is there evidence that local businesses “adopt” schools by volun-

- teering time in arts classrooms or providing funds or materials to arts programs?
3. Do local business support the arts through scholarships or other rewards and awards?
4. Do local businesses spotlight exemplary teachers including arts educators?
5. What do elected officials say about the arts in schools?
6. How do elected officials support the arts in schools?

The Verdict

It is highly unlikely that any community will provide a positive response to each question that you consider; however, a community that is able to respond positively to a majority of your questions is a community that can be expected to support the arts in schools. In such communities, the anticipation is that arts programs in schools will meet or exceed stakeholders’ expectations. You will be

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expected to step up to the plate and hit a home run with comprehensive, quality art teaching that goes well beyond a forty-hour work week or teaching basic art skills. You will be expected

to be an instructional leader who helps to develop the critical thinkers and leaders of tomorrow.

Conversely, if the school or district that you are considering does not answer in the affirmative to a majority of your investigative questions, you can accept this as a challenge. You can become the change agent that makes a difference in the way children learn and subsequently in the way a community perceives the arts. Through energy and perseverance you can transform the learning environment while providing a sense of personal and professional accomplishment for yourself. ☺

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