

The Benefits of a K-12 Visual Arts Education

By Barbara Place

THE BIG PICTURE

Benefits of a Visual Arts Education

What are the benefits of a visual arts education? This is a topic that has been debated among various K-12 stakeholders for years. This article addresses the question from various perspectives that have been pursued in the research of countless art scholars:

1. Does instruction in the visual arts make a difference in students' overall learning across the curriculum (literacy, science, technology, engineering, math, etc.)?
2. Does instruction in the visual arts make a difference in what have been referred to as "21st-century skills" that are valued in the workplace (critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, teamwork)?
3. Does instruction in the visual arts have positive benefits in students' social and academic achievement (attendance, student engagement, school retention, high-school graduation rates)?
4. What are the benefits of a strong visual arts education for its own sake?

The research is clear on all counts: An investment in visual arts education is an investment in the academic success of all students and in the community as a whole. (There is also a large body of research on the benefits of a visual arts education on teacher motivation and on the community. This article, however, does not address these studies.)

An investment in visual arts education has been shown to pay off in a variety of direct and indirect ways, including **improved reading, writing, and STEM scores; increased student attendance and high-school graduation rates**, and accelerated stu-

dent creativity, innovation, problem solving, communication, and collaboration—all skills valued by the most competitive industries in today's economy. The positive impact of a visual arts education on these critical areas has been demonstrated in numerous rigorous scientifically based studies. Several of these are referred to in this article.

Careers in the Visual Arts

In citing the positive impact of a visual arts education on the curriculum in general, on skills such as critical thinking and creativity, and on academic factors such as school attendance and high-school graduation rates, we tend to forget perhaps the most important reason why schools should offer a strong curriculum in the visual arts—many of our students want to pursue a career in the visual arts. These careers are too numerous to list and are part of nearly every business. They include the more obvious careers in visual arts of film and media, advertising, graphic design, and architecture, but also include careers such as landscape artists, urban planners and designers, and commercial designers. Today's economy is based on superior design. Look no further than the success of Apple for proof of the commercial power of design and the consumer's willingness to pay more for an appealing, unique design.

Today's economy is increasingly dependent on the unique skills and talents of visual artists and designers. In fact, *Fortune* magazine has reported on one study that suggested design is so important in today's economy that major companies need a chief design officer. The article reports, **"Whatever the sector you're in, good design is more important than ever."**

Schools are increasingly focused on career and college readiness, yet schools and policymakers often ignore the importance of preparing our students for one of the most coveted skills in all businesses—design and design thinking. Any new business begins with its look, its logo, and its positioning in the minds of its customers. From the moment a prospective customer looks up a company's website or checks out a brochure, design is reaching that customer. From the moment any prospective customer checks out any product (a car, a vacuum cleaner, a computer), the design in both the product and the promotion of that product is making as great an impact on the customer as the product's other specifications and positioning.

An investment in a strong visual arts education is a positive investment in today's students. The studies are clear and consistently show that a strong visual arts education will pay off in improved test scores across the curriculum, will keep kids

in school, and will prepare future visual artists and designers in the same way that science education prepares our future scientists.

Summary

This report provides examples of the many studies in each of the categories that support education in the visual arts: Visual Arts education as a vehicle for (1) achievement across the curriculum, (2) developing 21st-century skills, and (3) overall academic success.

We then look at the new arguments for the importance of a visual arts education. These include the importance of art and design skills in the emerging design economy and studio habits of mind, which have been shown to transfer across the curriculum. Any school district concerned with career and college readiness should consider an investment in the visual arts as an essential investment in its students and its community.

THREE WAYS WE MEASURE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A VISUAL ARTS EDUCATION

1. Visual Arts Education as a Vehicle for Achievement Across the Curriculum

The benefits of a visual arts education have been demonstrated in a wide body of findings. In traditional educational studies, the majority of the studies focus on demonstrating how a visual arts education contributes in a statistically significant way to academic achievement in the areas of English language arts, writing, and STEM topics. These studies often focus on integrating the visual arts into core content classes. They also focus on integrating core content into visual arts instruction. Following are a few of the many available studies demonstrating that the inclusion of visual arts instruction pays off in big ways in terms of students' test scores in English language arts, math, and science:

Arts integration and the Mississippi Arts Commission's Whole School Initiative Phillips, J., Harper, J, Lee, K. & Boone, E. (2014). Arts integration and the Mississippi Arts Commission's Whole School Initiative. A Stennis Institute Study for Decision Makers

This study examined the impact of the Whole Schools Initiative (WSI), an arts integration model for comprehensive school reform, on students' academic performance as evidenced by their scores on standardized state exams. The study found that students who were exposed to the arts across the curriculum performed significantly better on standardized tests than those who were not exposed to the arts. **"The academic achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students was found to be reduced or eliminated in schools that effectively incorporated the WSI program."** Of course, any study that demonstrates closing the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students is significant in its implications for school districts across the country.

Oklahoma A+ Schools: What the research tells us 2002-2007. Volume three, quantitative measures. Barry, N. H. (2010). Oklahoma A+ Schools: What the research tells us 2002-2007. Volume three, quantitative measures. Oklahoma A+ Schools/University of Central Oklahoma.

This five-year evaluation study demonstrates how the A+ arts integrated school reform strategies, which began in North Carolina, made a difference in the Oklahoma A+ Schools. The A+ Schools model lists as its first essential criterion: "The Arts are valued as essential to the learning process, are taught daily, and are included in planning." The creative process in this model is highly valued.

The study provided empirical evidence that Oklahoma's A+ Schools outperformed their counterparts on academic performance.

The results are quoted below:

- "Higher achievement: OAS students' performances on standardized tests generally meet or significantly exceed state and district averages, a striking finding considering that OAS schools serve a greater proportion of ethnic minorities and economically-disadvantaged students.
- Better attendance for students and teachers.
- Decreased disciplinary problems in schools.
- Happier, more effective educators.
- Joyful, engaged students.
- More parent and community involvement.
- Creative, focused instruction.
- Positive student attitudes about their classroom activities.
- Positive teacher attitudes about art in education, arts integration, and teacher collaboration."

Using arts integration to make science learning memorable in the upper elementary grades: A quasi-experimental study, Brouillette, L., & Graham, N.J. (2016)

In this study, integration of the visual arts, along with the performing arts, in 55 high-poverty high schools in California, demonstrated that students exposed to STEAM lessons demonstrated greater improvement in physical science benchmark assessments than students exposed to a STEM-only physical science curriculum. Students went from the 50th to the 63rd percentile in the district science assessment.

2. Visual Arts Education as a Vehicle for Developing 21st-century Skills

A second group of studies makes the case for a visual arts education by demonstrating that education in the visual arts leads to a wide variety of skills that are critical across the curriculum and in today's increasingly competitive workplace. The skills are a part of what is often known as 21st-century learning skills. These include skills that every art educator knows are core to the study of the visual arts and the creation of compelling artworks and successful designs. They include creativity and imagination, critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration and teamwork. Following is just one example of the many statistically significant studies that have demonstrated how the study of visual arts promotes 21st-century skills:

Learning to think critically: A visual art experiment Bowen, D. H., Greene, J. P., & Kisida, B. (2014). Learning to think critically: A visual art experiment. *Educational Researcher*, 43(1), 37-44.

In this study in Arkansas, thirty-five control groups were compared to thirty-five experimental groups of students, a total of 3,811 students in grades 3-12. The experimental groups were exposed to visual arts instruction before and after a visit to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Two weeks later, all students were asked to respond to an unfamiliar work of art.

Students who visited the museum and had the visual arts instruction prior to their visit showed stronger critical thinking skills. While this study is limited, it is statistically significant, and shows the benefits of arts-based experiences for students and the importance of providing children with opportunities for art education.

The researchers wrote **"the museum visit was most beneficial for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is significant, since it is these students who are most likely to be affected by cuts to school art programs. Policymakers and educators should allocate resources towards providing arts-based experiences to these students who stand to gain the most."**

3. Visual Arts Education as a Vehicle for Social and Academic Success

A third group of studies demonstrate how a visual arts education contributes to overall social and academic success. One of the greatest challenges of local school districts is to demonstrate a high retention rate, particularly in high-poverty school districts where the dropout problem can be significant. Students who do not remain in school, who are frequently suspended, and who are not engaged – along with their families—in the school culture, are at risk of academic failure. The following statistically significant studies demonstrate how schools that offer a strong visual arts education program have **higher attendance, school retention, and high-school graduation rates**. They also show how a visual arts education is highly correlated with factors such as **student engagement, community involvement with the school, and positive student social and emotional factors**.

Arts Education and the High School Dropout Problem Thomas. M. K., Singh, P. & Klopfenstein, K. (2015). Arts education and the high school dropout problem. *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 39 (4): 327-339

This important study tracked approximately 175,000 first-time ninth-graders from Dallas, Texas, for five years. The results were clear that students who had not earned a full credit in the arts faced an increased risk of dropping out of high school at every year during the study. Students of the lowest risk of high-school dropout are those that chose to study the arts more intensely and had moved beyond the one-credit graduation requirement.

Although a causal claim would require further study, it is clear that those students who participated in arts instruction were less likely to drop out of school.

Increasing the school engagement and oral language skills of ELLs through arts integration in the primary grades Brouillette, L., Childress-Evans, K., Hinga, B. & Farkas, G. (2014). Increasing the school engagement and oral language skills of ELLs through arts integration in the primary grades. *Journal of Learning through the Arts*, 10(1)s

This research study documented the impact of San Diego Teaching Artist Project (TAP) on the attendance and speaking and listening skills of children in kindergarten through second grade, with a focus on English Language Learners. The program includes lessons in the visual arts, theater, and dance to students in high-poverty schools.

The study found that attendance rates were significantly higher on days with scheduled art lessons. Teachers reported that their students were more engaged in school as a result of participating in art lessons and that the lessons were beneficial.

Arts education and positive youth development: Cognitive, behavioral, and social outcomes of adolescents who study the arts Elpus, K. (2013). Arts education and positive youth development: Cognitive, behavioral, and social outcomes of adolescents who study the arts. National Endowment for the Arts.

This long-term study by the National Endowment for the Arts collected data from two major longitudinal studies of American high-school students. The study compared the statistical outcomes of students who chose to study art in middle and high school with those students who did not.

There were a wide variety of **academic outcomes and behaviors**, including the likelihood of being suspended, optimism about college attendance, school attachment and engagement, scores on a standardized test of vocabulary, and attendance of postsecondary schooling and subsequent degree attainment.

“The findings seen here provide much evidence for wide-ranging and long-lasting positive impacts of arts participation on adolescents and adults. Importantly, unlike many studies that focus only on academic outcomes, this study provides a better-rounded picture of positive youth development that includes **personal, social, and behavioral factors outside of standardized test scores**. That these benefits were seen to extend into adulthood further illustrates the importance of providing children with opportunities for arts participation in school.”

THE NEW RESEARCH ON THE VALUE OF VISUAL ARTS INSTRUCTION

Art Education as a Vehicle for Career and College Readiness

While there is no lack of studies documenting the value of the visual arts in content-area achievement, overall academic and personal achievement, and higher-order and creative thinking, the exciting new areas to focus on are the many skills—from urban planning to industrial design—that are highly dependent on a solid foundation in the visual arts.

The authors of *Studio Thinking 2, The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education, Second Edition*, have taken a unique approach in making the case for visual arts instruction. Their case is looking at the critical habits of mind that are taught in an effective visual arts classroom, and their hypothesis is that these habits of mind are critical across the curriculum and to future success beyond the classroom. They state,

“For students living in a rapidly changing world, the arts teach vital modes of seeing, imagining, inventing, and thinking. If our primary demand of students is that they recall established facts, the children we educate today will find themselves ill-equipped to deal with problems like global warming, terrorism, and pandemics.

Those who have learned the lessons of the arts, however—how to see new patterns, how to learn from mistakes, and how to envision solutions—are the ones likely to come up with the novel answers needed most for the future.”

The Eight Studio Habits of Mind

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| 1. Develop Craft | 5. Observe |
| 2. Engage and Persist | 6. Reflect |
| 3. Envision | 7. Stretch and Explore |
| 4. Express | 8. Understand Art Worlds |

Each of these Studio Habits can be correlated to standards found in the Common Core State Standards and other state standards, such as the Texas Essential Knowledge Skills. An explosion of articles and books have made a case for a new design and information culture in which all industries require these studio habits of mind and design thinking in order to be competitive in today's world.

In March 2014, *The Atlantic* reviewed a new book, *Hello World: Where Design Meets Life*, written by *New York Times* critic Alice Rawsthorn with the headline, “**Design Is One of the Most Powerful Forces in Our Lives.**”

The importance of skilled artists and designers is shared by key writers and thinkers from fields to urban planning to today's competitive industries in technology and manufacturing.

A school district would not prepare its students for today's competitive economy without providing them with access to quality education in math and science. Similarly, a school district that does not provide its students access to quality education in the visual arts is not preparing its students for a competitive work environment increasingly dependent on superior visual experiences—from the look of a product or a website to the visual experience of navigating a shopping mall, a hospital, or an airport.

Visual artists and designers are critical players in today's economy, and schools are preparing students for those increasingly valued positions.

CONCLUSION

Any exhaustive study of the impact of a visual arts education on our students will demonstrate that a solid education in the visual arts results in gains in the following areas.

1. Students' overall learning across the curriculum (literacy, science, technology, engineering, math, etc.)
2. 21st-century skills that are highly valued in the workplace (critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, teamwork)
3. Students' social and academic achievement (attendance, student engagement, school retention, high-school graduation rates)

There is also a recurring theme throughout the research of closing the achievement gap for low-income students.

Perhaps, however, the most compelling argument for a strong K–12 visual arts education is the fact that schools need to prepare our students for a variety of careers that will require design thinking and a recognition of the importance of superior design throughout an organization—from product promotion to design. School districts that recognize that these skills contribute to the development of future companies like Apple are preparing their students for a competitive and exciting future.

About the Author *Barbara Place has been an educator for more than 40 years. She has taught K–12 Reading and Language Arts, Social Studies, Spanish, and French. She has also taught in teacher education programs at Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Ms. Place has focused her teaching and research on meeting the needs of all students, particularly English Language Learners and students from high-poverty schools. She is the author of Discussions4Learning, a program designed to accelerate oral vocabulary and language based on academically productive discussions of fine art images.*