

## Topics in Arts Integration:

# A National Coalition for Arts Integration



### School:

Virginia Commonwealth University  
School of the Arts  
–  
Arts Education Department  
Arts Integration Think Tank  
Spring 2012

### Authors:

Dr. Sarah B. Cunningham, *Executive Director, Research*  
Lauren Austin  
Cindy Eide  
Jessica Evans  
Elaina Fejes  
Valerie Graves  
Luke Meeken  
Meghan Sandler  
Joshua Spees  
Jesse White  
Molly Williams

### Contact us:

*for more information:*  
[ArtsIntegrationThinkTank@gmail.com](mailto:ArtsIntegrationThinkTank@gmail.com)

*or comment on our blog at:*  
[artsintegrationthinktank.blogspot.com](http://artsintegrationthinktank.blogspot.com)

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### { Executive Summary

In October 2011, the Arts Education Policy students were approached by arts integration programs to examine and brainstorm a National Coalition for Arts Integration (NCAI). Graduate students at Virginia Commonwealth University's School of the Arts then founded the Arts Integration Think Tank (AITT). Members of the think tank interviewed program directors in Connecticut, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. These programs gave us a cross-section of approaches, varied implementation, and varied pedagogies. Helpfully, programs range from a few years old to twenty years old. As a result, we were able to consider how young, developing arts integration programs continue to learn from pre-existing models, while innovating so as to suit the needs and goals of their state education systems. Interviews were also conducted with art education professors, teachers, educational entrepreneurs, education leaders, and executive directors. Due to limitations provided by our course schedule and the brief duration of this project, we were not able to conduct interviews of many significant, existing arts integration projects or multi-school programs. However, any extension of the Arts Integration Think Tank (AITT), to include additional universities or graduate students, may consider expanding expert interviews to include a more comprehensive sampling of education experts. We were satisfied that we collected adequate information to provide reflections that may be useful. This document reflects eight weeks of intensive examination of issues surrounding arts integration, arts integration policy, and areas of investment for a National Coalition for Arts Integration (NCAI).

This Policy Brief should be used to generate dialogue and reflection related to taking actions to establish a coalition that will effect positive state and national policies in support of arts integration. While the recommendations of this report may seem reflect ideas

or goals already articulated in the arts education research, community, or policy world, this report seeks to find a place for prospective research in arts education. As a result, the AITT reflected on what sorts of actions should be taken based on each topic, attempting to propose actions we thought to be appropriate to the research. From this, we have developed a list of recommendations or considerations for taking action. However, all AITT members recognize the tension between knowledge and action: if we wait to be experts, then we will miss the chance to take action, failing to provide a specific kind of leadership to the many changes currently at work in the general education sector; if we take actions too hastily, the dire consequences result in flawed education programs for young people as well as weakening the role of the arts in the general education sector. Through this report, we sought a balance between knowledge and proposed actions.

In addition to interviews, each graduate student contributed one essay to explore a topic of specific relevance to arts education. As part of our research, the Think Tank built upon Gail Burnaford's literature review, *Arts Integration Frameworks, Research & Practice* (2007) as well as the President's Committee on Arts and Humanities (PCAH) recent report *Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America's Future through Creative Schools* (2011). Topics were chosen through a range of conversations with the Think Tank and often reflect a member's existing area of expertise and interest. Certainly, this document is not intended to be an exhaustive reflection on arts integration literature. This Brief is not intended to cover all components of robust arts integration. The table of contents reflects an external constraint: ten students compose the Think Tank and, therefore, this Brief reflects their ten investigations. As such, although we discussed a range of topics in our brainstorming sessions, we were not able to cover all germane

Executive Summary (Cont.)

topics such as: “folk arts and arts integration,” “arts integration and higher education,” “teaching artists and arts integration”, and “diversity of leadership in arts integration.” On occasion, we address one area from different views. For example, in considering assessment we reflected in the grading actions of teachers and schools as well as proposing a national accreditation program. The semester calendar provided a second constraint. When approached to conduct this special project, the AITT had eight weeks remaining in the semester. As a result, readers must appreciate the intensive efforts made by VCUArts graduate students, some of whom were examining arts integration and education policy for the first time in their academic careers.

The value of contributions from Masters level graduate students should be seen for their two potential strengths. First, from state to state, program directors do not have the resources to reflect and study their work in depth. While the idea for a Coalition was revisited at the 2011 annual professional development meeting sponsored by NEA and NASAA, state arts agency directors returned to under-resourced environments, without available time to devote to ongoing reflection. Such arts education leaders lack budgets to hire expert researchers to do anything but very basic program evaluations. At this time, they certainly do not have the resources to conduct prospective brainstorming on the national level. Such brainstorming is usually the purview of the Arts Education Partnership (AEP), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA), the State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education (SEADAE), the President’s Committee on Arts and Humanities (PCAH), or the U.S. Department of Education. While PCAH and U.S. Department of Education, through the 2011 Reinventing Arts Education report, provide open public support and encouragement to

arts integration programs, they have not yet devoted resources to examining and exploring a National Coalition for Arts Integration. Thus, graduate students are an incredible resource and extend our thinking in times of limited resources. Additionally, but no less importantly, this report engages the next generation of educators and education leaders at their formative stages related to research, teaching, and personal aspirations. By participating in imagining future policies, graduate students can provide novel insights into the future of American education from the point of view of those who will build education for the next generation.

The Arts Integration Think Tank has chosen to divide this report into three sections: The Philosophy of Arts Integration, Best Practices / What Works, and What a Coalition Should Do.

Recommendations

First, we examine the philosophical foundations of art integration. If a NCAI must address how to define arts integration, the Coalition must address the foundations that provide the conditions for robust programs that further develop and ignite the concept of arts integration in general education. Authors recommend that the Coalition establish a philosophy, rather than a rigid definition. After examining numerous definitions, we found that sticking to a rigid definition might exclude important contributors to arts integration, while also fostering an approach of prescription rather than the culture of creativity typical of successful arts integration programs. Further, authors recommend that such a philosophy meet the needs of the current generation of students and they also recommend reinventing the contemporary philosophy of education to focus on process as a valuable outcome. Top recommendations from Section I include:

- 1. Embrace a complex, not a simplified, approach to creativity.**
  - By selecting creative skills that are most significant to arts education, examine more closely the “real” relationship between arts and creativity.
  - Face the fact that boundaries are blurred for all disciplines in successful arts integration, and that creativity is native to all disciplines.
- 2. Adopt a constructivist approach that includes active learning, new modes of thinking, teaching to habits of mind, collaboration, and whole-school culture change.**
  - Support meaningful learning relevant to a student’s life.
  - Prepare students for a fast-moving, fast-thinking, global society.
- 3. Use an arts integration approach to prepare students for nuanced professions that resist formulas.**
  - Foster regional, school, educator, and student autonomy or “individual self-rule” advocated by workforce innovations.
  - Educate students to expand and pursue their curiosities and passions.

Recommendations (Cont.)

Second, we review best practices or what seems to be working for arts integration programs. Authors of this section examine school culture and climate, the needs of rural schools, appropriate pedagogies, reflection on implementing programs, and a study of arts integration and academic achievement. However, authors in Section II also advocate a complex, multifaceted approach to arts-integration. Indeed, they were most clear that the rule of what works in arts integration reflects that there is no one fail-proof approach to successful arts integration. They “anchor” the discussion around these topics, while recommending opening avenues for further inquiry. As such, the authors move away from viewing education reform as a practice of imitating models or best practices toward a vision of student, teacher, community, and school efforts co-constructing learning through smart choices appropriate to their particular circumstances. Such guidance rings true when states face unusual economic circumstances.

**4. In rural communities with limited resources, establish arts integration leadership teams that include parents, students, teachers, administrators, arts professionals and community organizers to better serve rural students.**

- Do not ignore the unique needs of rural education: improve research contributions on rural education.
- Collaborate with teaching artists and community resources to deepen arts teaching in rural schools.

**5. Use multiple pedagogical approaches to expand learning, deliver rich content and align with emerging innovation strategies.**

- Establish a list of favored approaches including but not limited to: learning communities, co-constructive learning, project-based learning, and multiple intelligence awareness.
- Arts-deficient schools with arts-integration friendly pedagogical approaches may be ideal sites to introduce arts integration programs.

**6. Focus on arts integration to help students become more accomplished students overall.**

- Recognize that arts integration can be motivational and promote cognitive development.
- Look at already established programs as examples of strategies for organically pairing different disciplines.

**7. Heed the important role that teachers and administrators play in supporting arts integration and leading changes in their schools.**

- See teachers as potential researchers, contributing to arts integration knowledge and resources, but also becoming the “expert” in their school community.
- Look to teachers for guidance on ideal subject-area linkages throughout the school and to lead important collaborative links which anchor successful arts integration.

Recommendations (Cont.)

We conclude this project by presenting some actions steps for a National Coalition. Section III provides three very specific recommendations. The first author examines current assessment practices and recommends an expanded concept of assessment that supports the philosophical values and best practices described in the first two sections. Another author explores the possibility of an arts integration “accreditation” program to provide an accountability mechanism that reflects both high standards while embracing the flexibility recommended in the previous sections. The next author closely examines how technological networks may support ongoing conversations in order to build a coalition based on a rich conversation that, while serving policy-makers and education directors, also includes educators and students. We also offer an additional appendix that lists sample networks where ongoing conversations take place related to arts education. This exhaustive list will serve readers to begin to explore potential sites to keep this conversation going. Further, specific essays might be shared as part of professional development institutes or activities with classroom teachers.

**8. Use the Coalition to build better assessment at the individual and classroom level.**

- Develop meaningful assessments that draw from a variety of resources, where students play an active role articulating their learning experiences, such as portfolio assessment.
- Look to “town meeting” and other alternative models as a way to engage a variety of observers (not only the teacher) to participate in student growth. Such forums don’t necessarily focus on a finished product, and can provide important public feedback to the quality of student work, growth, and/or process.

**9. Create an accountability mechanism that serves the unique purposes and mission of arts-rich schools.**

- Develop an accreditation model that recognizes the values articulated in the first two sections. Creates high standards, including recognizing school responsiveness, and developing mechanisms that provide feedback, validation, and establish legitimacy.
- Consider developing evaluations and measures that can be used to develop an accreditation program.

**10. Open communication between programs, administrators, teachers, students, and the public.**

- Establish collaboration and professional development through various online tools that communicate best practices, research, and future goals of arts integration experts, professionals, and students.
- Consider a strong online community to serve as an essential site of disruptive innovation by ‘introducing innovation at the edges of the education system’ and communicating the philosophy of arts integration.

For the Full Report, please email:

ArtsIntegrationThinkTank@gmail.com

or

contact Dr. Sarah Cunningham at:

sbcunningham@vcu.edu or 804.564.7591

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Dr. Michael Bitz, Founder,  
The Comic Book Project + The Youth Music Exchange

Ann Chamblin, Art Teacher,  
Patrick Henry Charter School

Jean Irwin, Arts Education Program Manager,  
Utah Division of Arts & Museums

Dr. Rebecca Jacobsen, Department of Teacher Education,  
MI State University

Sara Wilson McKay, Chair, VCU Art Education Department,  
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