

A Rationale for Preventing Future Failures of Imagination

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The AEAI recognizes there are many spectacular fine arts programs supported by enthusiastic administrators and highly qualified teachers across the State of Indiana. While a small fraction of students who participate in these programs go on to seek further education in visual arts professions, it is important to remind the general public that one of the most important benefits of a quality visual arts education is the development of an array of thinking skills, related to the expansion of the imagination. The visual arts, more than any other subject within the school curricula, focus on the exploration and study of the image. Let us not forget the human mind represents ideas and dreams through images. The development and growth of one's ability to express ideas with forms and images is the heart of the art education experience.

An examination of the activities taking place within the art room reveal learning distinctive from other kinds occurring in regular classrooms. Where much of the educational activity in today's schools consists of text-oriented seat work based on extended and selected response assessments, the art room is that unique place where individuals are encouraged to experiment and create with personal ideas using a myriad of artist materials and techniques.

Eight-year-old Greg has an idea for a drawing. In an earlier lesson, Greg's art teacher examined the expressive use of elements in the paintings of Van Gogh. This presentation has inspired Greg to incorporate many of these same elements of design into his own art. He begins by outlining the shape of a giant S vertically onto the center of his paper. U-shaped scale textures are rendered onto the surface of a giant dragon. Landscape elements are incorporated into the picture. Greg continues adding more details in order to animate his art. Working on a large sheet of paper, Greg knows his drawing will require a lot of work. He enlists the help of his curious friends Jason, Edward and Frank. The four boys discuss which areas of the drawing need further development and work cooperatively over the next several class sessions. Greg suggests they might render parts of the drawing with sophisticated drawing techniques learned in previous lessons. They agree to use crayon resist and crayon etching to enhance the drawing's surface. Each day in class, the boys reflect

and evaluate the progress of the work before making new changes.

The activities that unfold in the art room provide opportunities for children to practice conveying ideas into physical form. Greg's example reveals the exploration of a complex story concept and its manifestation from idea to visual representation. Executing the steps to realize an idea and representing it in two, three, or four dimensions requires individual attention to a vast array of quality control details. The assembly of these qualities within an art work requires a synchronization of consciousness with imagination and the sensory, emotive and cognitive realms.

School boards and administrators, who control the curricular offerings of their local school districts, must be reminded from time to time that students, who participate in art education programs, have increased cognitive advantages over peers who have not had such experiences. Children with visual arts experiences are more skillful at attending to detail, observing, innovating, inventing, cooperating, and conceptualizing with visual and mental forms than their counterparts who have little or no practice in the visual arts. We are all born with brains but the mind is cultivated through experience.

Students engaged in comprehensive art education learning experiences have greater opportunity to become masters of their imagination. This is a bold claim, one that art educators do not make lightly. We facilitate the expansion of our student's imagination on a daily basis. Whether we are studying the artistic creations of artists or cultures, exercising children's capacity to express forms or ideas based on imaginative thought, sharpening our skills at observing and visual perception, the refinement of imagination is one of the key areas of development in a quality art education program.

Sadly, the AEAI has received a growing number of reports regarding the marginalization of visual arts programs in school districts across the state. Exact numbers are hard to tabulate because curricular deficiencies are something school districts do not like to publicize. During the next year, AEAI will begin to gather more substantial data and critically analyze this situation. A 2007 report from the Center on Education Policy indicates 44% of 349 schools surveyed from across the U.S. cut instructional time in one or more subjects at the elementary level in art, music, social studies, civics, and physical education since 2002. Currently, the Indiana State recommendations for student learning in the visual arts are approximately 60 minutes per week for elementary children and ninety minutes per week for middle school students. High school graduation requirements for an academic honors diploma require at least two elective courses in the fine arts.

We know that learning is time-sensitive. When a student who is interested in the visual arts is denied course offerings because of program elimination or rule

changes that deny opportunity, a student's ability to fully realize their potential will have been short-changed. It is hard to imagine what might have occurred in the Renaissance if the 15th Century's most important art teacher, Verrocchio, had not influenced and facilitated the development of Leonardo da Vinci.

A citizenry populated with creative, divergent, imaginative thinkers will be most beneficial to this state's future prosperity. Ideas and intellectual property dependent upon visual thinkers will become assets in the new economy of the 21st Century. The refinement of the imagination as developed through the visual arts will provide future designers, engineers, scientists, entrepreneurs, innovators, professionals and others with the creative edge they will need to compete in an increasingly competitive and uncertain future. Brainstorming without perceptive, imaginative counterparts becomes an exercise of inconsequential group think.

If the education that shapes our children's thinking ability fails to engage the visual imagination at a psychologically meaningful level, the well-rounded education U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings believes "all children deserve" will have been skewed. The power to control curricular offerings within schools lies with elected school boards and the administrators who advise them. Teachers and parents must stand firm as a bulwark against possible arts education program cuts. Full consideration for the development of imagination in our future citizenry will be of critical importance if we are to face the challenges and solve the problems of the 21st Century.

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