

NORTH CAROLINA ASSOCIATION FOR MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION

JOURNAL

James Davis, Ph.D., Editor
Coastal Carolina University

Fall 2018, Volume 31, Number 1

Eight Ways to Make Your School Arts-Friendly

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An arts-friendly campus can offer many benefits to each and every stakeholder. Regardless if you explore the feelings and thoughts of students, parents, teachers, administrators, or other stakeholders, when it comes to a school that is inundated with the arts, feedback is positive. Review the eight strategies below, assess where you are as a school, identify where you want to be in the end, and then create a plan full of meaningful action-steps to get you there! Loving art, and being smart, really do go hand-in-hand.

#1: Embed ARTS into your CORE, and CORE into your ARTS!

When planning to make your school arts-friendly, make sure your teachers have everything they need for planning at their fingertips. Utilize school funds, grants, and donations to make all materials easily accessible. In addition, work to make it simple for teachers to know and refer to the arts standards for their particular grade level. No cumbersome websites or bulky notebooks should be allowed. Work to provide the standards, color-code items when you can, and make trainings realistic, time-sensitive, and applicable.

In the end, CORE teachers keep the ARTS standards in front of them while planning, and the ARTS teachers keep CORE standards in front of them during all planning sessions. It is a win-win! A math lesson on fractions which integrates the work of a famous artist, or a music lesson being tied to figurative language ensures that students are hearing the needed academic terminology numerous times throughout the day and forming meaningful connections between core subjects and the Arts.

#2: Purposefully plan for collaboration.

Administrators and other school leaders should work to ensure there is time for effective collaboration if any arts-based initiative is going to be successful. Collaboration is authentically crucial. While it is easy to say, creating time for collaboration can be extremely difficult. With the master schedule, plan electives so that each elective teacher has time available to “push in” to other classrooms. This creates and showcases a true partnership between core classes and the arts. In addition, utilize all staff members for supervisory duties so that those focused on instruction have the needed time to collaborate.

Aside from scheduling efforts, ensure all planning times are protected, remain action-oriented, foster collaboration, and are grounded in best practices that support academics and the arts. Administrators and other leaders may need to model effective collaboration. In the end, with true collaborative efforts, remember the saying, “if you always do, what you’ve always done, you’ll always get, what you’ve always gotten.” Plan, collaborate, and do things in a more meaningful manner.

#3: Schedule with intentionality.

Scheduling with intentionality can help a school achieve several different goals. It not only helps you raise student achievement, but it also offers you the chance to plan in a purposeful manner as you create and foster a lifelong love of the arts. While there are many different ways to expand what you may be doing with scheduling, as you schedule now or later, research and explore the following options, as a sample, for you and your team:

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- **Create a Double-PLC Block:** In most schools, professional learning communities are already a requirement. Typically, this is a time to explore and plan for various goals and objectives that are linked to multiple pieces of data. A double-PLC block, when planned

correctly and appropriately monitored, offers higher gains at a more rapid rate. Core teachers are included as well as elective teachers. Every adult in the building plays an important role. You will quickly see that all stakeholders are researching and brainstorming ways to integrate the arts into practically any classroom. Not only does instruction improve, but students also enjoy learning.

- **Assess and Expand your Afterschool Activities:** Start focusing on fewer teacher meetings, and more afterschool options. Most administrators fail, as they place more items on a teacher's plate, but do not remove anything from the "already full" plate. This can cause frustration and also negatively impact student achievement. Utilize memos, hold all parties accountable, and engage in one-on-one critical conversations so that you can drastically reduce whole-staff meetings. Also, explore "flipped" PD opportunities to protect teacher's time, where teachers can absorb required information on their own time, and use afterschool time for student-centered activities. This will allow you to look at where you are with afterschool activities and then offer more options.

Requiring teachers to lead a club can be both rewarding for students and teachers. You can let your mind run wild and consider a pottery club, a drumline, theater club, a photography group, chorus, and a dance club. The opportunities are endless! Allow students the chance to be in as many groups as they like and spotlight teachers who go above and beyond with their groups and creative activities. This helps you foster an "ARTS" culture. In the end, you see that the clubs offer all students, including struggling students a chance to shine in a different arena. Afterschool activities, when done well and with fidelity, can boost self-confidence and positively impact work inside the arts classroom and inside the academic arena.

- **Think Outside of the Box:** This is one of those things that is easy to say, yet harder to do, in a meaningful, ongoing manner. Do something different, in fact, do anything different. As an example, identify an Art's Coordinator and create a classroom called "The Innovator's Inn." Make this a place where the teachers have a weekly scheduled 45-minute block of time in the Inn. During this time, the group will have a small collaborative arts project related to their core focus, or the team can visit stations that are both core curriculum and arts-centered. This is a wonderful opportunity for teachers to brainstorm, plan, dialogue about students, and tie everything back to the arts. Teachers can also sign up for a time at the Innovator's Inn when they bring their students to experience many different arts-related projects. This is a place where anything is a fair topic and the opportunities really are endless.

Teachers report that with intentional scheduling and creative exploration, they are already seeing a marked improvement in student enthusiasm, academic achievement, and a more positive mindset holistically.

#4: Engage in backward-planning.

Simply put, plan backwards. Start with your intended goal in mind and then figure out how you will use the arts to get there. With everything you do, think of the arts as a vehicle to get you where you need to be. Often teachers will find ideas that they see as intriguing and will figure out how to link them to the assigned curriculum. What we need and want to do is to start with the curriculum and

then come up with the creative ideas. We focus on the arts and core objectives that need to be taught and then figure out how we will teach it in a way that addresses the needs and interests of the students in our classroom community. By planning this way, our planning and delivery is more intentional and highly effective.

Consider purchasing or creating a reference catalog that has ideas for simple integration for each area of the arts. Creating a play, designing a social media platform, and choreographing a collaborative dance are all simple ideas that can be embedded into any area of the core curriculum. The list, once started, can go on and on! Begin with the end in mind, and then integrate the arts to help you build a pathway to success.

#5: Make student interests a top priority.

Give students the chance to “steer the wheel” or instead, “hold the paintbrush!” Support student interests by using a variety of strategies to help build authentic excitement. Allow them to choose reading materials and let them have choices when it comes to creating an arts-based product to showcase what they have learned in any of the content areas. Incorporate flexible seating when you can. Encourage them to look at learning through a different lens, through an artist’s lens.

Although “Room Transformation” is the new buzz word, it is not new to a great deal of veteran teachers. Changing the physical environment of your classroom in order to peak excitement about an upcoming topic is a wonderful way to heighten engagement. Spend a day as “surgeons” while you experience hands-on opportunities to learn about the body systems. Turn your room into a rainforest when you are learning about this specific ecosystem. In addition, make sure that all teachers are focusing on each of the multiple intelligences when planning and structuring lesson plans and units. We have a variety of student interests within each of our schools and it is up to each teacher and administrator to ensure every student has an opportunity to get “hooked” within each unit, every day. Student voice matters and it serves as a strong springboard for creative things and academic success that can be developed via the arts.

#6: Avoid the comfort zone.

Step outside of your comfort zone and get creative. Do not be afraid to put yourself out there, be vulnerable, and try something drastically different. Students come from a variety of backgrounds and carry with them a load of burdens each day when they enter our schools. A traditional teaching environment of “sit and get” gives them time to daydream and at times, worry about the concerns they carry with them.

We want to be extremely creative with our instructional deliveries. We have to make learning so engaging that for those hours during the school day students are able to forget about the worries they had when they woke up. For many, we are their safe space. That safe space should be enjoyable and engaging. This may require educators to let go of the reins a bit and allow your students to sincerely create, explore, and discover. Often teachers want to control the process and the outcome of a project. We have to allow our students to learn and explore through the creation process. This may mean the physical outcome of the project does not match what you as a teacher initially envisioned. However, the learning that took place during the process will far surpass anything you imagined. Let go, exit the comfort zone, and let students learn in a way that is more engaging, more differentiated, more relevant, and more fun.

#7: Know that hard work lies ahead.

Be aware that when you first start working toward a more arts-friendly school, you will work harder than you ever imagined. However, the energy and excitement in the school will be worth it. As it becomes more natural, your schedule will begin to flow and your students will have a better understanding of what arts integration really is. Be a rock-star. Embrace those words, "BE A ROCK-STAR!" Avoid being completely traditional, avoid being luke-warm, and avoid being boring. Be willing to put in the extra hours and work, knowing that your students and your school will benefit in the end. Hard work pays off 100% of the time.

#8: Encourage every child to be the best artist possible!

Encourage and support your students through their journeys in becoming artists. Some students are natural born artists, public speakers, and entertainers. They do not mind doing things that may feel silly or uncomfortable at first, if it benefits and enhances the learning process. However, some students will be self-conscious initially, when they are asked to share a vocabulary word associated with a series of movements, in front of their peers. Encourage them and let all students know that there is no right or wrong way to navigate their learning process, as long as the desired destination is reached. Also know, being a caring person in an arts-focused school does not mean that you have to compromise your standards in any way. Learning must occur and that is the bottom line. With that said, learning, combined with the arts and genuine encouragement can yield extraordinary results.

In the end and as you reflect, with everything you do, think ARTS. With lessons and clubs, think ARTS. With the physical layout of your school and what you place on the walls, think ARTS. With partnerships and community support, think ARTS. In the end, an art-friendly school not only impacts student achievement, but it also impacts the daily quality of education for students across our nation, every day. Truly, when you combine ART and HEART, we have a winning combination for changing what effective learning looks like!

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