

Principal

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ELEVATE YOUR EXPERTISE

How to leverage professional learning for school success

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Professional Learning in Arts Integration Improves Outcomes

Armed with instructional strategies that incorporate artistic expression into the core curriculum, teachers can improve student engagement and well-being

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The declines in student engagement that were developing prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and were exacerbated by school closures have compelled schools to broaden efforts to support students' emotional wellness. Schools are increasingly interested in strategies that support student mental health and well-being through approaches that include relationship-building and student expression.



An Arts-Integrated Network

ArtsNOW provides professional development to help educators and administrators incorporate arts-integrated learning solutions. For more information, visit artsnowlearning.org.

ArtsNOW is an affiliate of Young Audiences, which offers training and resources for teaching artists/coaches. To learn more, visit youngaudiences.org.

These efforts go beyond the local level. National educational leaders are hyperaware of the need to support children's mental health and well-being. For instance, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona recently cited the improvement of learning conditions as a focus area as part of the "Raise the Bar: Lead the World" initiative and other investments in supporting student mental health and well-being.

When schools provide multiple avenues for students to express their views and interact with their peers productively, it helps build their coping skills and capacity to regulate their emotions in healthy ways. Many schools see a need to support all students proactively by equipping them with the skills to deal with stress, frustration, and pressure.

As a result, teachers and leaders are weaving alternative approaches to support student well-being into their existing routines. One school relies on professional learning to increase teachers' understanding of how to help students develop positive coping skills and know that emotions such as stress, anger, and frustration are normal and can be shared with others.

While counselors are often responsible for classroom lessons on social skills and therapeutic interventions to support students' mental health, professional learning that equips teachers with strategies to support relationship-building and student engagement can have an additional positive impact on student well-being. That's where the arts can help.

ART THERAPY EVERY DAY

Creative art therapy has been used widely in schools to address the specialized needs of individual students. Researchers suggest that "artmaking" can be "harnessed in a strengths-based context," and that exercising creativity is a useful way to achieve psychosocial growth. But the arts aren't often integrated into the typical school day, and many students miss out on these benefits.

One way for schools to bolster students' creativity and ability to express themselves in positive, healthy ways is by using various art forms as vehicles through which they deliver subject matter content to students. This allows students to engage with content while simultaneously building their interpersonal skills, problem-solving, and capacity for understanding the feelings or beliefs of others as well as their own.

With a finite amount of time in the school day, it's a challenge to allocate a sufficient amount of instructional time to arts-based wellness approaches while maintaining

the necessary focus on core content areas. Some schools have addressed this challenge by using arts-integrated strategies to deliver core content in subjects such as language arts or science while also building students' collaboration skills and self-awareness. Some examples include:

- Asking students to step inside the mind of a character in a story and write about things from that different perspective;
- Having students work together to design a skit about how characters in a book could interact to resolve conflicts;
- Working in teams to develop a musical chant that demonstrates understanding of plant and animal habitats and how organisms rely on each other; and
- Using a work of art such as a photograph or painting as a catalyst for writing by asking students to reflect on their thoughts and feelings about what is conveyed.

GETTING TEACHERS THE TRAINING

In 2020, the Education Commission of the States published a resource, “Supporting Student Wellness Through the Arts,” outlining the multiple benefits of using the arts to improve students’ emotional wellness and coping skills as part of its Student Mental Health series. The authors suggest leaders provide arts-based professional development as a core component of student wellness.

A key consideration for schools seeking to integrate the arts into their classrooms is support for and collaboration among teachers, which impacts their comfort level with the use of arts-based strategies. Teachers might be reluctant to use these strategies if they don’t see themselves as artists, dancers, actors, or musicians.

Many schools are addressing this challenge through multiyear professional development and job-embedded support that helps teachers build

Core Concepts: Professional Development

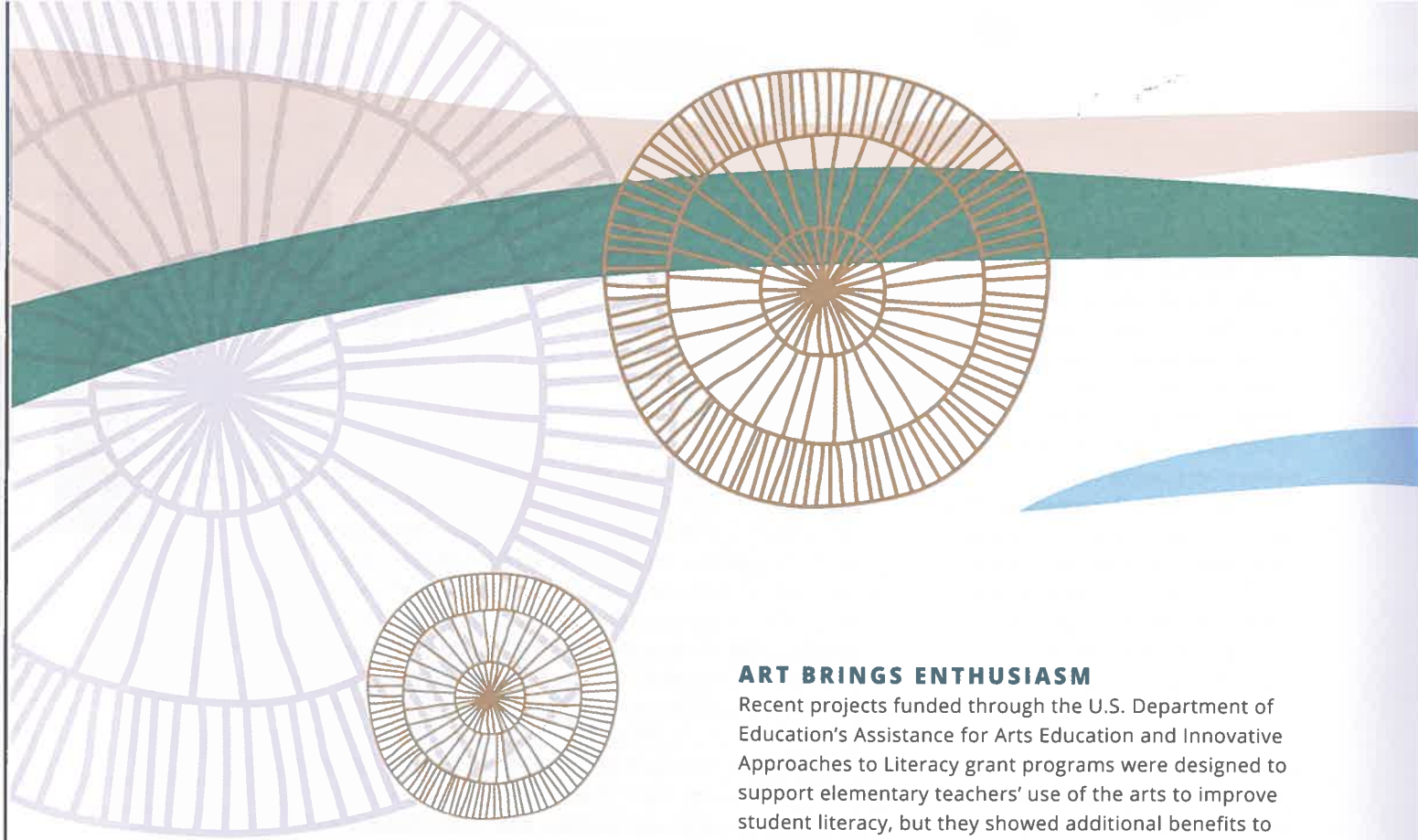
- Teachers and school leaders are seeking alternative approaches to support student well-being, and integrating the arts into other lessons can help.
- Arts-integrated strategies can build students’ collaboration skills and self-awareness while delivering core content.
- Professional learning can help teachers improve their comfort with arts-based instructional strategies, even if they don’t see themselves as artists, dancers, actors, or musicians.
- Schools that employ arts-integrated strategies have experienced improvements in students’ emotional wellness and increases in teacher job satisfaction.

their skills in, and understanding of, arts integration, which teaches arts standards and content standards simultaneously. Several districts in the Southeast partnered with the nonprofit organization ArtsNOW to design and deliver lessons that incorporate music, dance, drama, visual arts, and other art forms.

Providing teachers with sample lesson plans, lesson demonstrations, co-teaching, and collaborative lesson planning helps them deliver more engaging content to students while increasing students’ capacity to express themselves in positive ways. “I wasn’t into drama, but I had a teammate who was, so I would work with her on drama lessons,” one teacher says of the collaborative exercises. “I was more into visual arts and she wasn’t, so I helped her with those lessons. It is helpful bouncing ideas off people comfortable in different art forms.”

As with any new approach or instructional strategy, there will be early adopters and others who learn to integrate the approach more gradually. Showing teachers how creativity and expression can support students’ emotional wellness and involvement in classroom activities encourages buy-in, however, and most teachers enjoy the professional learning.

A similar organization, Arts Grow SC (AGSC), is dedicated to providing equitable access to arts-based learning opportunities for students in South Carolina. Initially founded as a three-year collaboration between



the South Carolina Department of Education and the South Carolina Arts Commission, AGSC now follows a collective impact model that relies on partner organizations to provide high-quality professional learning experiences to teachers, with a focus on using arts integration to improve learning outcomes in core subject areas.

A recent teacher survey conducted by AGSC says that 87 percent of participants felt that the professional learning provided had some or a large impact on instruction in their content area. Additionally, 77 percent believed that the professional learning positively impacted students' academic performance. And 92 percent of teachers said that AGSC's professional learning had some or a large impact on how frequently they provided their students with opportunities to (1) make meaning from diverse media to better understand the world, and (2) use diverse formats to communicate for a variety of purposes and to different audiences.

ART BRINGS ENTHUSIASM


Recent projects funded through the U.S. Department of Education's Assistance for Arts Education and Innovative Approaches to Literacy grant programs were designed to support elementary teachers' use of the arts to improve student literacy, but they showed additional benefits to student engagement and enthusiasm.

In a project that lasted from 2019 to 2022, fourth and fifth grade students in four elementary schools were asked whether they enjoyed when teachers integrated art forms into their lessons. Responses indicated several benefits to students' emotional wellness: "It makes me feel like I can tell people how I am feeling without talking [and] helps me figure things out if I am stressed," one student said. "I love art; it calms me down," said another.

Another student liked that arts integration "gives us a chance to work with other people in our class and helps me express myself in different ways." "Music helps me focus and think happy thoughts if I'm ever stressed about something," another noted.

Teachers said that students taught with arts-integrated strategies tend to ask for more lessons that integrate the arts. And 98 percent of teachers said students benefit from participating in arts-integrated lessons, saying that relating subject matter content to an art form encourages hands-on, deep learning.

Additional benefits observed in arts-integrated schools were increases in teacher job satisfaction, which can contribute to retention. In a recent survey administered by ArtsNOW, 81 percent of teachers agreed that using arts-integrated strategies in classrooms increased their enjoyment of teaching, and 68 percent agreed they were more likely to remain in teaching if they could use such strategies. The principal of an arts-integrated elementary school in Charleston County, South Carolina, says that the applicant pool of teachers wanting to transfer to her school is larger due to its focus on arts integration.



The arts can be woven into core content to support student self-expression without detracting from what needs to be covered during each school day.

CREATING EDUCATIONAL MAGIC

Arts integration is “educational magic,” says Judith Condon, principal of Angel Oak Elementary School in Charleston County, but “it takes time. Don’t let that spook you.” How can a school or district leader begin to explore ways to increase the use of arts integration in their classrooms?

Some schools have had success by integrating the arts into a single content area or grade level and expanding integration the following year. Other schools begin by incorporating student wellness and emotional health into lessons with art or music teachers. Some start with a small group of teachers—maybe one per grade level—who embrace the arts and want to participate in additional training. They often end up serving as teacher leaders who can influence others through shared lessons and demonstrations.

Few educators would dispute that students need additional support with psychosocial growth and the development of healthy, positive interpersonal relationships and stress management skills. Yet, educators find it increasingly difficult to squeeze “one more thing” into the school day. To help teachers integrate the arts into your school’s curriculum:

Equip the staff. To improve relationship-building, engagement, and ultimately student well-being, equip teachers with professional learning that helps them introduce innovative strategies for classroom learning, such as arts-integrated lessons.

Find the time. Schools struggle to allocate sufficient amounts of instructional time to arts-based approaches while maintaining a focus on core content areas. Integrated approaches help by encouraging deeper learning.

Support collaboration. Collaboration among teachers increases their comfort with the use of arts-based learning strategies, even if those teachers have never seen themselves as creative artists, performers, or musicians.

Build student skills. Finding ways to deliver core subject matter content to students using the arts has an added benefit: The approach builds confidence and problem-solving skills while enhancing interpersonal skills.

Explore how the arts can be woven into core content to support student self-expression without detracting from what needs to be covered during each school day. With adequate professional learning for teachers, arts integration can be an efficient, effective way to provide broader support for students’ well-being and mental health—and equip them with the communication and coping skills needed to address the everyday challenges they will encounter throughout life. ●

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