

“Eloquent Evidence”

Remarks to the Envisioning Arts Education in Vermont Summit

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I want to thank the organizers for inviting me here today – this is a compelling subject for us to examine together. Thank you Alex Aldrich, Ben Doyle, and the Vermont Arts Council and Vermont College of Fine Arts. It’s an honor to share the podium with Secretary Holcombe and this forum with Paul Costello. It is fitting to be talking about the uplifting effects of the arts on the 13th anniversary of September 11th – a day of losses and of consequences.

Now, you need to know you are hearing from an advocate, someone who’s spent a large part of her life in the arts and in education: proposing and promoting arts policy in Vermont and nationally; founding the [Governor’s Institutes](#), which began with the arts; leading a liberal arts college; arriving at an understanding that the arts are essential to a healthy democracy.

In the next 20 minutes or so I want to take you on a quick trip through the eloquent and urgent evidence that tells us the arts belong at the core of learning and that participation in the arts brings life-long advantages. I will keep posing my fervent question: if we know all this, why don’t we act on it? How can we do more than advocate – how can we offer sustained arts involvement to all children in all schools so that they may benefit in ways that have been documented for decades?

This journey is both a personal and professional one for me. As a new college graduate, I got the perfect job: working for the Vermont Arts Council to place poets in the schools. The Poetry in the Schools Program: PITS. I soon changed it to WITS - Writers in the Schools. I jumped in my little orange VW Bug and drove all over Vermont, finding accomplished writers like David Budbill, Geof Hewitt and Kathryn Davis who were also natural teachers and drawn to the fearless creativity of children. I went finding teachers like Claire Oglesby in Westminster West Elementary, who taught our Governor how to read, and who welcomed the presence of writers in residence to stimulate students’ own expressions; finding receptive administrators who would agree to match the arts council’s funds and insist that teachers work with artists as collaborators. I told

superintendents that writing poetry would raise test scores and improve classroom attendance. I thought I made that part up, but later was proven right by independent studies.

I'll never forget a letter from the parents of a little boy who was having trouble adapting to his rural school. They told me he ran all the way home from the bus stop, shouting excitedly, "The poetry lady chose my poem!" In those days, we compiled annual anthologies of students' work.

Here's one from Halifax Elementary, written by Billy Earle, second grader:

*One day a violin
walked. He played
a note and people
came for food.*

Artistic expression *is* nourishing, isn't it, food for our minds and spirits.

Doris McNulty, who was a 4th grader in Woodbury Elementary wrote:

*In my pencil there are words
tiny words like little seeds
and when you break your
pencil in half they float
in the air and sink in the ground
and budge up like flowers.*

Words as seeds that grow...another metaphor for arts education.

One writer in residence was told by the teacher that a student in the class was a problem and she'd take him out if necessary. The visiting writer found out he was writing a novel at night, in bed, under the covers.

The anecdotes piled up and were compelling. We expanded the program to include the visual arts, film, dance and theater. We learned how important the partnership of the teacher is: the classroom teacher and the few arts teachers who were employed in Vermont's schools back then.

Experience showed that serious art-making and reflection on those processes engaged students, gave teachers new tools, transferred interest from one subject to another, such as from making a play to reading, enlivened the school day, and kept students in school. That was before we had tapped any research to prove those claims.

Taking the arts seriously as disciplines, taught both for their own values and competencies and for their positive effects on other learning, must be a school purpose, a goal of boards of education reflected in school budgets, a State Department of Education policy, a US Department of Education and Congressional priority, and a parental demand!

I may be preaching to the choir but I think it's important to go back and review some of the "Eloquent Evidence" and precepts we already know. There's a pile of it – so I'm hitting the accelerator in my orange Bug. We are headed over some mountains and through some gulfs and I'll take a lot of short-cuts too.

I start with my early 20th century touch-stone, educational philosopher and Vermonter John Dewey, who proposed learning through engagement rather than by rote: learning by doing. "Give the pupils something to do," he said, "not something to learn; and the doing of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results."

Accelerate to 1964 – Vermont Arts Council started by Gov. Phil Hoff and a group of citizens; arts access and education are part of the founding purposes.

1965 – National Endowment for the Arts signed into law by Lyndon Johnson. Focus on arts organizations, not on schools. But by the 70s, NEA is funding artists in residence through the network of state arts agencies, who receive their own portion of federal funding from the agency.

1980 - only two states required the arts for high school graduation; by 1995, there are 28.

1983 – [Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind: the Theory of Multiple Intelligences*](#) comes out, giving educators and advocates greater rationales for learning through the arts.

Mid-80s to 90s – the Getty Trust creates the [Getty Center for Education and the Arts](#) and develops [DBAE – "discipline-based arts education"](#) – taking the subject seriously with approaches based on art making, history, criticism and aesthetics.

1988 - National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Frank Hodsoll, who served under President Reagan, issues [*Toward Civilization: A Report on Arts Education*](#), which strongly endorses the arts in elementary and secondary schools to teach students about “the human condition... to understand what civilization is so...they can contribute to it...to develop skills for creativity and problem-solving and acquire tools for communication.”

1992 -- “The National Conference of State Legislatures emphasizes the importance of the arts in all aspects of education in a comprehensive study: [*Reinventing the Wheel: A Design for Student Achievement in the 21st Century*](#).” [*Quoted in Eloquent Evidence, Arts at the Core of Learning, President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 1995.*](#))

1994 - Congress approves, and President Clinton signs, [*Goals 2000: Educate America Act*](#), in which the arts are recognized as part of the core curriculum. Huge effort goes into devising voluntary “standards” to define what constitutes “a thorough grounding in a basic body of knowledge and skills...the tools to make qualitative judgments about artistic products and expression.” ([*National Core Standards: A Conceptual Framework for Learning. National Coalition for CORE ARTS Standards. 2014.*](#))

1994 -- the year I’m appointed director of the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH), a presidential advisory committee, and in response to mounting research, publish “[*Eloquent Evidence: Arts at the Core of Learning*](#),” to condense research findings and make them available to parents, teachers, arts councils, and school board members. The studies support claims that sustained involvement in the arts “enhances reading, writing and math skills and the arts have far-reaching potential to help students achieve education goals.” ([*Eloquent Evidence, PCAH and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies with support from the GE Fund. 1995.*](#))

The publication reports College Board data that students who studied the arts more than four years score higher on verbal and math portions of the SAT than those with no coursework or experience in the arts. Especially strong was evidence that high-risk students who participated in the pilot arts immersion programs of the day gained in standardized language test scores.

1995 -- Ernest Boyer, former U.S. Commissioner of Education and president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, declares: “during the past quarter century, literally thousands of school-based programs have demonstrated beyond question that the arts can not only bring coherence to our

fragmented academic world, but through the arts, students' performance in other academic disciplines can be enhanced as well." ([Boyer, *The Basic School, A Community for Learning*](#).)

1995 – [The Arts Education Partnership](#) is started, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education: a “coalition...that demonstrates and promotes the essential role of the arts in learning...”

1996 – The President's Committee publishes [Coming Up Taller](#) – the first study of arts and humanities programs for children at risk and how they work to promote resilience. Over 200 such programs are described.

1998 – The President's Committee and the Arts Education Partnership (with support from the GE Fund) publish [Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning](#), seven studies documenting positive changes in youth involved in the arts. Two of these are worth slowing down for. [James Catterall](#) at UCLA analyzed data on more than 25,000 students from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) to find that “high arts” exposure 8th and 10th graders – taking arts for credit in school or out of school, score significantly higher in standardized tests than “low arts” students. “Significantly, the relationship between arts involvement and academic performance was found to be robust for students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds.” Students engaged in music showed greater math proficiency by 12th grade. Theater related to gains in reading proficiency. These findings also held true for the economically disadvantaged kids. This is important, because we know that economic background is still the highest predictor of academic achievement. As a matter of equity, we must be sure that lower income students have the same opportunities to excel.

The other study that continues to reverberate is by anthropologist [Shirley Brice Heath](#), who looked at after school programs in sports, community service and the arts and to her expressed surprise found the arts programs resulted in gains in linguistic skills and the abilities to collaborate, stick to pursuits, show discipline, be expressive, and sustain participation in a challenging team effort.

I think you've observed these effects too. They suggest there really is an “arts advantage” – something that goes beyond the adult attention, safe haven, and discipline found in other after-school programs.

1999 – The President’s Committee and the Arts Education Partnership publish [Gaining the Arts Advantage](#), lessons from 91 school districts that value arts education.

Eloquent Evidence was reprinted for 10 years and updated by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies in 2005 as “[Critical Evidence](#).” The publication mentions in a hopeful but anxious tone the opportunity for the arts in the new *No Child Left Behind* implementation.

2001 – Congress passes [No Child Left Behind](#), which mandates that schools must meet “adequate yearly progress” benchmarks to show that student performance is increasing. Schools that don’t meet the benchmarks, based on testing, must devise strategies to achieve their goals before losing funding. “Adequate yearly progress” measures math and reading skills. I don’t want to steal Secretary Holcombe’s more informed thunder, but will come back to this.

2002 – The Arts Education Partnership issued [Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development](#), summarizing 62 studies. This brings together the most recognized studies on the positive effects on the arts on cognition, critical thinking, feelings of self-worth, and on behavior for the first time.

2004 – The Center for Arts Policy at Columbia College publishes [Putting the Arts in the Picture: Reframing Education in the 21st Century](#). [or [here for similar](#)] It seems each study must have a colon and a subtitle! Here we see the emphasis change from arts education to arts integration: “the arts as an interdisciplinary partner with other subjects.” The authors see “deep structural connections” so that “These activities become part of...studying history, science, reading and writing, and math.”

2008 – The College Board issues its report [Arts at the Core](#), finding from its National Task Force on the Arts in Education. Citing now-familiar research, they issue recommendations the College Board adopts, including number 1: “Utilize arts programming as an effective tool to improve education in general and...to achieve access and equity for all students.” (*Arts at the Core: At the Core of Civilization, at the Core of Education*. The National Task Force on the Arts in Education.)

2010 – the results of No Child Left Behind on the arts are measured in a number of studies. As preparation for testing increases, time for the arts in the school day is squeezed out. More resources are directed toward reading and math –

subject to the benchmarks. Electives are being replaced by remedial math or reading intended to raise scores. The Council for Basic Education surveys elementary school principals and finds that since the passage of NCLB, in 75 percent of schools, instructional time for the arts has decreased. (Beveridge, Tina. [No Child Left Behind and Fine Arts Classes. Arts Education Policy Review, 11:4-7, 2010.](#))

2014 – signs of hope. Courageous educational leaders like Secretary Holcombe speak out about No Child Left Behind. Arts councils continue to partner with their Departments of Education to improve art instruction and promote collaboration among teachers, artists and arts organizations. The [National Coalition for Core Arts Standards](#) publishes a [National core arts Standards](#) that is truly thoughtful, research-based, and promotes “new ways of thinking, learning, and creating.” The proposed standards are based on the notion of artistic literacy – recognizing various art forms have their own symbol systems, histories, materials, and processes.

The Arts Education Partnership is going strong, issuing a 2014 report with the latest research that reasserts “the benefits of an arts education”: boosts literacy, advances math achievement, motivates students to learn, develops critical thinking, improves school culture and more. ([Preparing Students for the Next America: the Benefits of an Arts Education. AEP. 2013.](#))

The Vermont Arts Council, one of the first in the nation, celebrates its 50th anniversary.

The Governors Institutes, which began with the arts in 1984, are now celebrating their 30th anniversary by publishing their own evidence of results.

Vermont still has more poets per capita than any other state. The [Vermont Council on Rural Development](#) implemented its program on the creative economy; we have our own [office of the Creative Economy](#) under Governor Shumlin. We have convincing data showing the significant sector of the economy comprising the arts and creative industries. We know that recent studies of employers tell that they are looking for graduates who possess critical thinking skills, can express themselves clearly, solve problems creatively, work in teams, and understand the cultural and historical context of the work they are doing. The skills and knowledge of the arts map onto those 21st century skills beautifully.

So, I must add, do the liberal arts, which are still the core values of Marlboro College. Fully one quarter of our students incorporate the arts into their often interdisciplinary culminating project, called the Plan of Concentration: studies in anthropology and photography, physics and dance. Our sculptor, Tim Segar, says: “making is thinking.” And making is also reflecting, and problem-solving, and persisting, and learning from failure, letting imagination take shape, creating something new, and communicating it to others. Back to John Dewey.

By now, you’ve heard me make many arguments for the arts in education, for arts learning. Most are what I call “instrumental:” they promote other skills that help students succeed. I haven’t dwelled on the economic argument but we need those creative skills learned in practicing the arts if the U.S. is to keep its innovative edge.

A long time ago I learned that I couldn’t argue for higher appropriations by saying the arts are good for your soul. However, there is also the intrinsic argument. The arts are the most human of expressions, from the time we are small and love to sing and dance and are mesmerized by stories, to the time we are thrilled to learn about others’ lives through literature and drama. We are provoked – the arts challenge our assumptions. We are also exhilarated and uplifted. We understand the world through its cultural expressions. We receive enjoyment, our whole lives, of making something, and sharing our creations. The arts bring transcendence: think of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, or the poem you love the most.

How many more reasons do we need? Think of the potential of each child and ask yourself: why haven’t we acted on this overwhelming and eloquent evidence? No one should be deprived of the means for an expressive life.

Finally, there is a compelling societal reason why the arts should be a part of our schools, community organizations, and everyday lives. Benjamin Barber, political philosopher, puts it this way: “...art and democracy share a dependency on one extraordinary human gift, imagination...Imagination is the key to diversity, to civic compassion, and to commonality. It is the facility by which we stretch ourselves to include others, expand the compass of our interests to discover common ground, and overcome the limits of our parochial selves to become fit subject to live in democratic communities.” (Barber, Benjamin. R. [*Serving Democracy by Serving the Arts and the Humanities*. Creative America Working Papers. PCAH. 1997.](#))

On this day of somber anniversary, at a time when our democratic system is frayed, the gifts of imagination, of empathy, and stretching beyond ourselves may be the greatest gifts we can give our children.

I end with what one of them, Rachel Kane, wrote in the Writers in the Schools program:

Early morning, dark.

Time to trudge

Out to the barn.

A menial sounding task.

But it is nice to go out

In the dark and hear

The welcoming of animals

Eager to be fed.

Rachel, I am so grateful you had the chance to write that poem.

Now we all know *our* task: to recommit ourselves today to advocacy and action; to change kids' lives; to give those gifts to our future.