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# Revisiting the Arts in the No Child Left Behind Era

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*Schools are responding differently to the mandates of NCLB. The purpose of this comparative case study is to investigate how two Title I elementary schools, one a member of a school reform network focused on the arts and one not a member of the network, are able to exceed AYP targets in reading and mathematics and not compromise teaching and learning in other core subjects. Included in the study is an examination of thinking skills embedded in visual arts instruction and transfer of learning to other content areas. Findings reveal that schools that are committed to the arts that are focused on student achievement data utilizing professional learning communities to build community, integrate curriculum, balance and protect what is important, and focus on effective teaching and learning adds to our collective understanding of how schools can respond to the mandates of NCLB and also provide an enriched learning environment for children where learning is not compromised in other core subjects. Three significant differences were found comparing the two schools: staff focus on excellence in arts integration, school-wide curriculum planning and alignment involving grade-level and all school-wide specialists, and constructivist professional development which results in generative and continuous learning for staff members and positive outcomes for students.*

*Keywords: Arts integration, Professional learning community, Curriculum alignment, Leadership in the arts*

Schools are responding very differently to the mandates of NCLB. Many schools are focusing on reading and mathematics because students' scores in these areas determine whether their school achieves Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Many schools are limiting opportunities students have in the arts even though the arts are included in a list of core academic subjects along with "science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, history, and geography" (Arts Education Partnership, 2005, p. 7) in NCLB legislation. The pressure placed on schools to reach AYP targets through high-stakes assessments has taken its toll on curriculum. Therefore, this study seeks to understand how two Title I elementary schools located in a southwestern state, one a member of a school reform network focused on the arts and one not a member of the network, are able to exceed AYP targets in reading and mathematics and not compromise teaching and learning in other core subjects. This study also seeks to understand how thinking skills are taught in the visual arts and how students transfer these skills to other content areas.

## Background of the Study

All over the U.S., educators and schools are caught up in an accountability system where students' scores on standardized tests determine whether a school is successful or not and whether students are being successful in classrooms or are being left behind. The educational landscape has changed dramatically since 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. The ethnic and language diversity of students mirrors the multicultural tapestry of our communities. The increase in the number of families living in poverty has significantly affected the quality of life and health. Technologies have changed the way we live, work, and learn.

In this high-stakes accountability environment, it is critical to study the impact of the inclusion of reading and mathematics in daily learning experiences for students while some schools are choosing to exclude science, social studies, and the arts. I continue to be very concerned about the contemporary reductionist discourse related to school improvement and seek to contribute to a broader understanding by conducting a comparative case study of two Title I schools who are meeting AYP targets but are also providing a positive and enriching learning environment for students.

## First Case Selection: Highland Elementary

The first case is located in a suburban school district in a community that has more than 100,000 people and was selected for three reasons. First, it has been a member of the A+ Schools Network for six years. Second, it is a Title I school whose API (Academic Performance Index) scores in reading and mathematics have increased each year since joining the A+ Network. Third, visual arts instruction is a content area taught at all grade levels.

As of the 2008-09 school year, total enrollment is 387 students, Pre-K through 5th grades, with ethnic make-up of 74% White, 10% Native American, 7% Hispanic, 7% Black, and 2% Asian. Fifteen percent are identified as Special Education and 48% are eligible for free and reduced meals. CRT results indicate in reading 91% of students in grades 3-5 passed in 2006-07 and 88% passed in 2007-08. In mathematics, 88% of students passed in 2006-07 and 92% passed in 2007-08. When API scores are compared for the same two years, data shows an increase in mathematics for all categories. In reading, data shows an increase for males and a slight decrease in other categories. Student attendance rates increased from 93.7% to 94.1%.

## Analysis of Data

My research involved analysis and synthesis of multiple data sets. Case documents reviewed for both cases were student achievement data, A+ documentation (one school), district site plans, state Accreditation Reports, and the site mission statement. I conducted interviews with the principal and a classroom teacher which were thematically analyzed.

## Findings

Findings reveal that a school committed to the arts that is focused on student achievement data and utilizes collaborative structures to build community, integrate curriculum, and focus on effective teaching and learning adds to our collective understanding of how a school can respond to the mandates of NCLB and also provide an enriched learning environment for children where learning is not compromised in other core subjects.

## Discussion

My investigation of Highland through interviews, classroom observation, and data gathered field notes reveals a school that is committed to “doing what’s best for students” and implementing the A+ philosophy in an exemplary manner. The pressure of NCLB accountability is experienced by everyone but their focus on the Eight Essentials (i.e. A+ program commitments) balances the benefits for students, staff, and parents with the pressure. Belief in the Essentials, commitment to the Framework, and the positive impact the program has on their students is the foundation of everything that happens at Highland. Faculty engagement is high, principal leadership is strong, and A+ Fellows are an integral component of the school’s comprehensive professional development plan.

## Second Case Selection: Hermitage Elementary

I selected this elementary school as the second case for three reasons. First, it is not a member of the A+ Schools Network. Second, it is a Title I school whose API scores in reading and mathematics are very closely aligned with the first case. Third, as a non-A+ school, I will contrast the arts focus between the two schools. It is also located in the same suburban school district as the first case.

As of the 2008-09 school year, total school enrollment is 473 students in grades PreK through 5th grades with ethnic make-up of 68% White, 11% Hispanic, 9% Black and Native American, and 3% Asian. Students identified for Special Education are 18% and 57% are eligible for free or reduced meals. CRT results in reading indicate that 88% of students in grades 3-5 passed in 2006-07 and 90% passed in 2007-08. When API scores are compared for the same time period, data shows an increase in reading for White and female students. Data also shows a large decrease in regular education, male, and economic disadvantaged students. In mathematics, scores were unchanged for female but decreased in all remaining categories. Student attendance rates decreased slightly from 94.8% to 94.3%.

## Findings

Findings reveal that a school committed to educating the whole child emphasizing the arts that is focused on student achievement data and utilizes a professional learning community to build community, integrate curriculum, and balance and protect what is important adds to our collective understanding of how a school can respond to the mandates of NCLB and also provide an enriched learning environment for children where learning is not compromised in other core subjects.

## Discussion

My investigation of Hermitage through interviews, classroom observation, and data gathered through field notes reveals a school that has a strong sense of community and celebrates the diversity of their students and families. Relationships of all stakeholders are valued and the principal and teachers work collaboratively in a professional learning community in making decisions and working on school goals. They feel the pressure of NCLB accountability but work hard to protect what is important and balance the pressure while focusing on results and educating the whole child.

The fine arts are an important part of students' experienced at Hermitage. Visual arts are taught and integrated into content areas in some classrooms, and school-wide events and art installations in and outside the school identify this as a priority. Talented staff members contribute individually and collectively to provide students learning opportunities to be creative, problem solve, and take risks.

## Discussion of Both Cases

Although there are many similarities between Highland and Hermitage, there are differences. While both schools embrace the fine arts, Highland has taken a next step and joined the A+ Network. The Eight Essentials provide a guiding framework for all decisions that affect teaching and learning at the school. Evidence suggests that this framework is foundational to all aspects of teaching and learning at Highland and supports staff in maintaining a focus on excellence in the arts and arts integration. At Hermitage, arts opportunities are contingent on current leadership support and staff expertise, and without it, evidence suggests that arts opportunities for students would be negatively impacted.

Professional development for teachers is another difference. Collaboratively planned at both schools, A+ Fellows at Highland are committed to modeling the Eight Essentials in constructivist learning opportunities for colleagues. Constructivist staff development supports constructivist teaching and learning in classrooms. Evidence suggests that commitment to the A+ Model results in generative professional development which significantly impacts practice.

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Patricia Simons is currently a Ph.D. student at the University of Oklahoma in the Educational Administration, Curriculum, and Supervision (EACS) Program. She received a B.S. Degree in Business Education from Oklahoma State University in 1969 and a M.Ed. in Special Education from the University of Oklahoma in 1975. Oklahoma certificates held: Elementary Principal K-8, Elementary Education 1-8, Learning Disability, and Mentally Handicapped.

She taught special education in grades 6-12 for three years in both public and private school settings and regular elementary in grades T/1 through fifth for 13 years. In 1991, She served as an Assistant Principal at an elementary school in Norman and, in 1992, She became principal of a different elementary school in Norman and served for nine years.

Beginning in 2003, she began consulting in schools in Oklahoma districts prior to enrolling as a full-time Ph.D. student at the University of Oklahoma in 2008. She is currently an adjunct instructor at the University of Oklahoma serving as a university supervisor of early childhood interns completing their classroom placements.

