

Date: September 20, 2011
SUBMISSION TO EDUCATION COMMITTEE

FROM: OCDSB ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE ARTS
RE: **SUMMARY of CURRENT RESEARCH ON THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT BENEFITS OF THE ARTS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Arts experiences form a fundamental part of the curriculum. The benefits derived from arts teaching result from both direct effects (known as “intrinsic” in the literature), as well as from indirect effects (known as “instrumental” in the literature). While indirect effects of the arts are important additions to any school curriculum and program of student experience, in the end, what is most meaningful for total and memorable student engagement are those qualities of the intrinsic (direct) – i.e. the quality of the experience itself.

The arts (dance, drama, music, visual arts, media arts, “new arts”) are a vital part of school experience, for all students, particularly in Grades 1 – 6. Many statements of advocacy focus on indirect benefits – the benefits of the arts in learning other subjects or enriching other school experiences. These statements carry much national and international research evidence backing.

Most studies suggest the following general indirect benefits:

1. **Creativity:** The arts offer increased opportunities to engage in creative thinking and action, both as individuals and in groups. This results in students possessing better future employment skills for the job market of current need and for the foreseeable future. In other words, if the majority of jobs in the future are going to be in fields where creativity and invention are priorities, then the arts help provide essential employment skills.
2. **Cognition:** there is considerable evidence supporting increased test scores on system wide, or provincial standardized tests in numeracy and literacy. In addition, some studies indicate wider benefits including creative thinking (as tested by Torrance style measurements of creative capacity), and general learning how to learn.
3. **Social Development:** the literature currently suggests significant social advantages as measured by the following indicators – a) school performance motivation, self discipline, self image; b) specific school performance, attendance, lower drop out rates; c) general life skill enhancement, team work, empathy; d) greater engagement by “at risk” students, particularly in social bonding, self-regulation and tolerance.
4. **Health:** the indicators most often studied, revealing positive co-relations are – a) improved body image and care; b) greater mental balance; c) greater interest and participation in physical activity; d) reduced substance abuse; e) reduced body abuse.
5. **Community:** the evidence in this category indicates positive dispositions in the following general divisions – a) community identity within the school; b) greater participation in community activities within a school and beyond.

There are some cautions in suggesting that these are complete arguments for the vital role that the arts can play in school experience. Most of them fail to convincingly persuade that ONLY the arts can reveal the above co-relations. For a convincing rationale, the arts must offer benefits that are

unique. The following supports such uniqueness. In general, these are referred to as intrinsic benefits – that are inherent in the experiences themselves.

In general, the arts uniquely provide students with avenues of creating meaning to their experiences. Also, the arts provide opportunities for the examination of emotion. These qualities are revealed in the both sides of the arts – appreciating and expressing.

More particularly, the literature suggests the following categories:

1. **Captivation:** this is a kind of rapt attention, either in response to a work of art or the intense absorption that characterizes involvement in creating art. This level of attention, sometimes called "flow", is strongly argued in the literature as being unique to the arts. It carries students away from the everyday routine into a sphere of connectedness to others, both within the class, the school and into the wider world.
2. **Beauty:** much of the literature refers to the search for beauty as a normal human function. We all need a sense of coherence, congruence, balance, and perfection in our lives. Young children see this in the beauty of sunsets, objects, nature and in a harmony they seek in their own lives. This kind of search often produces a deep connection to the imagination that is intense, meaningful and revealing of resolved emotion. The process of appreciating and creating art are powerful media for this search.
3. **Perceptual Acuity:** the literature generally suggests that students engaged with the arts gain a heightened sense of perceptual acuity, with which they perceive their worlds with much greater attention and expertise. This ability allows them to understand their own behavior and that of others through an increased awareness of feeling. Ultimately, this allows arts nurtured students to interpret their worlds with greater understanding and empathy.
4. **Expression of Communal Meanings:** through the arts, students have an additional language available for unique expressive possibilities that attempt to make sense of their worlds. These can be hallmarks of how they make sense of experience, either personally or communally. Only the arts allow for that kind of meaning sharing among individuals, groups, the school community and the world as a whole.

While the literature suggest that indirect effects of the arts are important additions to any school curriculum and program of student experience, in the end, what is most meaningful for total and memorable student engagement are those qualities of the intrinsic (direct) – i.e. the quality of the experience itself.

The arts need to be primarily valued for their intrinsic illumination of student capacity for meaning-making and for their ability to acquire knowledge that is felt as well as understood.

Appendix: References – p.3 - 5

The following is a selected set of references that were used to compile the above summary. This list is not meant to be comprehensive. For further information on any of the enclosed citations, please contact Michael Wilson at mpwilson@uottawa.ca

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