

Part of the Solution: Creative Alternatives for Youth

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Chapter 6: South Carolina's ABC Project

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South Carolina's ABC Project: Making a Difference in Education

At Redcliffe Elementary School in Aiken, South Carolina, Melinda Gulick's third graders are building a "plant machine." Through imaginative sounds and movements supervised by drama teacher Katharine Doss, the children act out the functions of a plant's root system, stem, and leaves. Science class has never been so interesting.

Nearby, a troupe of fifth graders does energetic versions of "jumping quickly," "skating slowly" and several other combinations of action verbs and adverbs as dance teacher Beverlee Powell directs. Then the youngsters sprawl on the floor to write about "My Favorite Day" in their language arts journals, using the now-familiar action words.

Down the hall, Jennifer Hamada's bright-eyed students in the gifted and talented class mold clay objects and record musical compositions that they will later bury at a selected site. The art and music artifacts are part of an archaeology class assignment on examining history and culture.

Welcome to South Carolina's Arts in the Basic Curriculum (ABC) Project and Target 2000 Arts in Education Grant Program, an innovative infusion of arts activities in the curriculum. The programs have become national models for demonstrating that strong arts education can spark broader education reform, improve academic achievement, reach at-risk children who are not responding to the old style of education, and generate unprecedented excitement about learning among students, teachers, administrators, and parents.

Funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the South Carolina Arts Commission, and the South Carolina Department of Education, the ABC Project is now in its seventh successful year.

"It's working, and it's working well," says Jane V. Slay, the award-winning principal of Redcliffe Elementary, one of eight model sites financed by the ABC Project. Since the arts infusion program was introduced several years ago, this rural school's standardized test scores have risen dramatically: between 1990 and 1994, the percentage of fourth graders scoring in the highest quartile on the nationally recognized Stanford 8 achievement test zoomed from 19 percent to 33 percent. Conversely, the percentage placing in the lowest quartile plummeted from 33 percent to 9 percent. The most dramatic changes occurred with the African-American males. The fifth grade scores were similar. "This is a significant shift," says Slay. "There must be something in our school curriculum that's causing this difference, and we believe it's our arts program." Students and teachers love going to school at Redcliffe; an extraordinary energy permeates the place.

The Indispensable Arts

The goal of the ABC Project is to provide quality, comprehensive arts education — comparable to instruction offered in other basic subjects — for every child in every school in the state. The plan's premise is simple: the arts are an indispensable part of a complete education.

The centerpiece of the ABC initiative is the use of curriculum frameworks developed by the South Carolina Department of Education. The frameworks — curriculum guidelines in dance, drama, music, and visual arts — are a statewide consensus of what children are expected to know and be able to do in the arts.

"The arts are an important resource that can lead toward greater creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills - all skills our students will need as successful adults in the twenty-first century," says State Senator Nikki G. Setzler. Proponents such as Setzler also point out that the arts can be a valuable tool in keeping disadvantaged and at-risk youth — a growing cadre in many communities across the country — in school and away from risky pursuits. "The arts offer for disadvantaged children the one area in which they are not disadvantaged," Setzler says. "The arts can provide these children with ways of achieving success, giving them a feeling of pride. The arts are one area in which background is not a large determinant of success."

These considerations led Setzler to spearhead passage of legislation that has provided nearly \$6.2 million in state finding for arts in education since 1989. The ABC story, however, really begins back in 1984, when then-Governor (now U.S. Secretary of Education) Richard W. Riley engineered passage of South Carolina's omnibus Education Improvement Act (EIA), now recognized as one of the most far-reaching reform efforts in all the fifty states. The EIA concentrated on the basics of school improvement, and it was enormously successful. But it addressed the arts only in relation to programs for gifted and talented students.

By 1987, the South Carolina Arts Commission realized that the state was ready to advance beyond the basics. Under the direction of Scott Sanders, former executive director of the South Carolina Arts Commission and now deputy chairman for partnership at the NEA, South Carolina became one of the first sixteen states to receive a planning grant from the NEA to develop a "blueprint" to make the arts basic to the curriculum for all students. A statewide steering committee -- composed of educators, artists, civic and legislative leaders, cultural and educational institutions, and educational and arts associations -- developed the plan.

In 1989 this collaboration resulted in passage of Target 2000, a school reform package that emphasizes, among other things, the role of arts education programs in achieving higher order thinking skills and creativity. Target 2000 provides generous finding for arts in the schools. Indeed, despite frugal state budgets, the legislature has remained steadfast about arts-in-education funding. For the past five years, the South Carolina legislature has allocated more than \$1 million annually for this purpose.

Arts Education in Action

To date, sixty-five of the state's ninety-one school districts have received Target 2000 arts funding. Each year, more than 100 sites continue to develop arts education programs and to implement proven processes in arts education. For example:

Ashley River Creative Arts Elementary School in Charleston is a magnet school for students from varied ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (40 percent are minorities). At-risk children, particularly, have made large academic gains because of the creative, hands-on approach used here, says Jayne Ellicott, assistant principal. "They learn by doing," she says, "by participating. The creative approach is entertaining, and that grabs the attention of at-risk children." It grabs their attention so well that last year, Ashley River had an incredible 99 percent attendance rate. "They want to come to school even when they're sick," Ellicott says. "At-risk kids learn to do things in front of their peers, and they learn that they're OK. They are able to compete with more advantaged kids because, in the arts, they are no longer behind. The creative approach puts them on a par with the others." At Ashley River, this creative approach permeates all courses.

Pine Street Elementary School in Spartanburg has the popular "Artsploration" program, now in its fifth year. Two portable classrooms house the drama and dance programs, and parent and student attendance at arts programs put on by the youngsters is consistently high. "We're making great strides in putting the arts on a par with other subject areas," says Anne Predmore, visual arts teacher. The arts curriculum is popular with all the children, but especially so with at-risk youngsters and youngsters with disabilities. "They're on equal footing with the other kids in the arts, and that's nice," Predmore says. "There are no auditions. Entrance into the classes is not based on scores. Kids feel at home in the arts where they might not feel at home in other subject areas, and that's wonderful for their self-esteem." Pine Street parents are so supportive of Artsploration that they and the PTA supply 60 percent of the matching grant finds for the artist-in-residence component.

The Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School in West Columbia is a residential school for at-risk youth aged fifteen and older. Using Target 2000 grants specifically designed for at-risk youngsters, teachers at the school created an interdisciplinary arts curriculum called "Arts Afire"; it is credited with helping nearly all the students enrolled the arts cluster pass the state's exit examination in reading and writing. "Their scores are a big improvement from previous years" says Carole Lucas, arts coordinator. She talks about Todd, a youth with emotional problems who last year disliked school and particularly hated library research. Arts Afire classes, such as one that used a drama component, seem to have turned Todd around. "He loved researching the life of Sophocles, the Greek dramatist," says Lucas. "He learned that he was very good at memorizing lines, at being dramatic, at interpreting and analyzing. His oral and written communication skills improved a lot." This year, the eleventh grader is doing much better in all his academic classes. "Now when he doesn't get 100 percent on a test, he wants to know why. He always wants to do more, and better," Lucas says.

And there is Redcliffe Elementary School in Aiken, where the ABC Program has been integrated fully into the curriculum. Drawing on actual case studies compiled recently as part of a grant application, Principal Jane Slay can give numerous examples of students—especially high-risk students—whose lives have been transformed by the arts. Clayton, for instance, was a fifth grader who came to Redcliffe three years earlier as a street-wise kid from New York City, brimming with hostility and anger that erupted often and led to repeated suspensions. But at Redcliffe, Clayton discovered that he loved drama and visual arts; what's more, he was extremely good at both. He became an honor roll student who "felt good about himself," says Slay. Adds a fifth grade teacher: "I think the arts program made a real difference in Clayton's life. I think it saved him."

There was also Russell, a second grader who had been removed from his abusive parents and put with his five siblings in a foster home. Russell was "filled with rage and anger and hostility," says

Slay. But Russell learned that he loved music; he eventually rescheduled his weekly psychiatric appointment so that he wouldn't miss music class. Russell also discovered dance. "He likes dance," said a counselor. "He's a good dancer. That's the way he can shine." Russell continued to have behavioral problems, but teachers said he threw fewer tantrums and began demanding positive attention. His overall school work also improved.

Broad Impacts

The arts curriculum framework, adopted by the South Carolina State Board of Education in December 1993, has served as a catalyst for broader school change. The ABC Project and Target 2000 programs have also helped South Carolinians understand the vital role played by arts education. A 1991 survey conducted by the University of South Carolina Institute of Public Affairs indicated that 94.5 percent of South Carolinians viewed the arts as an important part of basic education, and 76.6 percent favored increased funding to strengthen arts education in the public schools.

An award-winning statewide public relations campaign is helping communities increase support for the promotion of arts education and the arts in South Carolina. Fashioned by Jayne Darke, public information director for the South Carolina Arts Commission, the "In South Carolina, Arts Education Means Business" campaign began in October 1993. It encourages business and corporate support of arts education. The campaign includes video public service announcements for television, brochures for South Carolina's business community, and informational posters and bumper stickers for South Carolina educators and schools.

Future Plans

Over the next two years, educators and administrators will focus on documenting and quantifying the impact of the ABC Project and Target 2000 grants on South Carolina students. "It's difficult to prove to people that the arts work," says Ray Doughty, a professor of music and director of the ABC Project Office. "The American way has always been that the arts are only for the gifted and talented. The arts have always been the 'F' word: it's a frill."

Doughty knows that's not true; he fields two or three inquiries a week from other school districts and states wanting to start their own ABC-type programs. The teachers and principals at the South Carolina schools lucky enough to have received special arts funding since 1987 also know the impact the arts has had on their schools. "I'm here to tell you that we're on the map," says Redcliffe's Jane Slay. "Parents want their kids to come here now."

But to come up with hard data, several special efforts to assess effectiveness of programs are planned for 1995 and 1996. These efforts will include: (1) documenting annually the eight ABC model sites programs, to include qualitative and quantitative information on program developments; (2) reviewing the results of research grants that were awarded in 1993 to study the effects of enhanced arts curriculum on general student performance at two ABC model sites and to conduct a statewide arts education survey for South Carolina; (3) creating an ABC Steering Committee special subcommittee for program evaluation; (4) forming a special Arts Assessment Task Force; (5) hiring an outside evaluator to assess the role of artists in residence and to recommend how to enhance the ways such artists can be used in the schools.

A study currently under way in Beaufort County is looking at test scores and dropout rates, and whether arts education makes a provable difference in these areas. Teachers and principals are convinced it does; leveling the playing field through the arts increases self-esteem and reduces the stresses and risks for children who might otherwise get discouraged and drop out of school.

"Legislators understand the importance of the arts as a basic part of education," says Len Marini, director of research for South Carolina's Joint Legislative Committee on Cultural Affairs. "They also understand the importance of the arts to their constituents."

But funding is the key. "Everything comes down to money," says Rep. Mike Jaskwich, a South Carolina legislator who is a staunch supporter of the arts and chairman of the ABC Steering Committee. And arts education is a fragile item, especially when budgets are tight.

Still, South Carolina's arts education programs have demonstrated graphically the value of the arts in helping all children—at-risk, handicapped, average, and gifted—thrive. The power of arts in education is especially notable with at-risk youth: the arts are helping many of these children transcend the limits of their environment, feel good about themselves, and stay in school. South Carolina's success in motivating all types of children through the arts -- but especially in reclaiming many of its troubled young people -- is an emphatic reason for other states to do likewise.