

"Social is just now emerging from the Dark Ages."

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Hartford Performs: Measuring Student Achievement Through Arts Education

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Once in a while you come across a story that seems too good to be true. I was having drinks with my old friend, Mike Stotts, Managing Director of Hartford Stage, which is one of the 19 theatres the National Corporate Theatre Fund (NCTF) supports through our Impact Creativity campaign to sustain theatre education across America. He suggested I check out Hartford Performs, an organization he has been involved with since its founding.

I started snooping around. Brace yourself...this is a big one. Arts education enrichment programs are starting to demonstrate concrete, measurable improvement in student achievement and engagement.

Hartford Performs is a consortium of educators, funders and arts education providers created five years ago with two objectives: to make access to arts education more equitable and to organize it better, meaning to establish an element of quality control and consistency. Arts education is often criticized for its inconsistent, ad hoc quality. Often today, a teacher or principal happens to know an arts organization, no matter how amateur or professional, large or small, and a partnership is born -- a partnership for those kids, that year.

This model does not work for a number of reasons: it's part of what makes arts education so fragmented, hard to measure and sometimes ineffective. It does not address a key concern of the creators of Hartford Performs: the growing achievement gap among our kids. And once that improvised partnership goes away -- a teacher is transferred, kids move on to the next grade, a small arts collaborative fails -- there is no easy way to pick up the pieces and restore what was lost.

There is an alternative way. On an operational level, Hartford Performs vets arts education providers, sets standards, offers funding and simplifies the teacher's task in choosing programs in which to enroll their students. Their website offers a search engine that organizes offerings of 180 service providers by price, grade level, discipline and subject matter. It shows how the offering ties into curriculum standards. It launched three years ago in six schools and has been growing by six schools every year since. The goal is to serve every K-8 school in Hartford.

Some arts education providers were screened out by the vetting process as not providing sufficient services. And among the standards Hartford Performs insists upon is that every year, students attend at least one out of school performance or arts experience. However, the main focus is on arts education integrated into the curriculum and each class gets at least three such experiences a year.

Educators and arts organizations in Hartford patterned Hartford Performs after the famous Big Thought program in Dallas, which serves as a coordinating, funding and research collaborative. The arts education provider community involved with Hartford Performs was led by the Bushnell Center and the Wadsworth Atheneum, and received seed funding from community and other foundations. Mike Stotts and Hartford Stage formed part of the leadership throughout the past five years, as well.

By systematically adding layer after layer of schools, Hartford Performs has a unique opportunity to measure student achievement against a control group of students not receiving this enrichment. And that's where it gets really exciting. In a recent evaluation of the 2011-12 school year, when the cohort of participating schools went from 6 to 12, Public Consulting Group evaluators found slight improvement in reading scores and attendance of the first cohort over two years.

Incubated by the Greater Hartford Arts Council, Hartford Performs has just hired its first executive director, Robert Warren, whose background includes time at Kennedy Center and the Van Wezel Performing Arts Center in Sarasota, FL. Robert has a national perspective on arts education and he is as impressed as I am how Hartford Performs is making a difference to these kids.

"We did a summer reading program around *Antigone*," he said. "You would not believe how responsive the kids were to that material. Retention, enthusiasm, and even some test scores are going up. Most of all, as we phase this program into schools, teachers and principals tell us the entire atmosphere of the school changes. It becomes a pleasure for them to come to work."

It's this excitement from the students, and the engagement from teachers, that is starting to show up in these results.

As Robert pointed out, anecdotally we know how critical these programs are; but now through the phased implementation process and measurement, data is emerging to substantiate the experience.

Every community can learn from this experience. Creating a collaborative vehicle to better allocate educational resources, raise educational standards and measure impact is badly needed if arts education is to keep its place at the school table, and this model is very rare.

I owe Mike another drink!

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