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Oct. 6, 2008

News Release

First-Of-Its-Kind Study Reveals Higher Student Achievement at Colorado High Schools That Offer More Arts

School leaders say time is the biggest barrier to providing more in-depth arts education to hone in-demand work force skills such as imagination, creativity and innovation.

A first-of-its-kind study by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and the Colorado Council on the Arts (CCA) reveals that public high schools offering more arts education have higher academic achievement, regardless of student ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

New survey data released today associate arts education with higher scores on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) in reading, writing and science – and lower dropout rates.

“The benefits of arts education are clear,” said Elaine Mariner, CCA executive director. “Students’ involvement in the arts has a positive impact on their overall achievement and helps keep them in school.”

Colorado is one of only three states to conduct a similar comprehensive study of arts education in public schools. In all three states, schools that scored high on the survey’s arts index had lower dropout rates.

“For many students, the arts can be the crucial connection that motivates them to learn and gives them the confidence to tackle what can be challenging subjects, such as math or science,” said Mariner.

The findings also show that most of Colorado’s public schools – with elementary schools in the lead – choose to offer some formal arts education to a majority of students, regardless of geographic location or socioeconomic makeup of the student population: 93 percent of elementary schools (grades K-5); 86 percent of middle schools (grades 6-8); and 83 percent of high schools (grades 9-12).

Yet the survey data suggest that an estimated 29,000 Colorado public school children attend schools that do not offer any formal arts education.

On average, elementary students study two hours of formal arts education a week from mostly experienced, certified teachers. But similar data are not available for middle or high school students because they have more discretion over selecting their arts courses and because class schedules vary widely, making it harder to interpret results.

The study shows just over half of all Colorado high schools make the arts a graduation requirement and they factor students’ performance in the arts into grade point averages and class rank. High schools with an arts credit graduation requirement offer more arts courses than those without a graduation requirement.

“These results will benchmark progress in years to come,” said Commissioner of Education Dwight Jones. “Providing a strong arts education is as integral to learning as teaching reading, writing or math. We must do significantly more to provide a complete education that includes the arts. At a time when employers are demanding a more creative and imaginative work force, 53 percent of Colorado’s high school students are not taking any arts courses. That’s worrisome.”

Time is a factor

Offering the arts is a choice for many public schools in Colorado. While the state does not mandate that every student take arts education, it does require that school districts offer the arts. State standards specify what students should know and be able to do in music and the visual and performing arts.

School leaders said their biggest challenge is finding the time to offer the arts. Almost three-fourths agreed that the amount of time needed for math, reading, writing and other subjects is their biggest barrier to offering the arts in their schools. Other factors include whether the arts are a priority for parents and whether schools can find qualified arts teachers. They also reported decreased funding in the past five years for music, theater, visual arts and dance.

Next steps

Work is under way to increase arts education in Colorado's public schools and to better position the arts as a resource for teaching math, science, reading, writing and other subjects.

A team led by Lt. Gov. Barbara O'Brien and Commissioner Jones has begun to identify early steps for strengthening arts education in Colorado schools. The group, which met in July 2008 at the National Endowment for the Arts' Education Leaders Institute, recommends:

- Ensuring the Colorado Model Content Standards and Assessments for all content areas incorporate creative learning practices
- Increasing professional development for principals and teachers who want to incorporate arts more broadly into core subject areas
- Launching a series of "creative conversations" with local and state policymakers to discuss how schools can better meet the work force's demand for creative, innovative and imaginative thinkers
- Sharing best practices of successful schools that have made the arts and creative learning major strategies for student success

For the complete report about arts education in Colorado's public schools, visit www.coloarts.org.

About the research process

Last spring, CDE and CCA invited more than 1,700 public schools to participate in the statewide arts education study. One-fourth of these schools – serving more than 200,000 children – completed the survey.

Because each school approaches arts education differently, researchers rated schools on a dozen factors – or an "arts index." The index reflects the different ways Colorado's public schools offer arts education.

Schools were evaluated against more than a dozen factors such as whether they taught the arts during the school day; whether arts classes are graded; how many arts subjects schools offer and across which grade levels; the number of students enrolled in arts education; schools' use of arts specialists for arts courses; and at the high school level, whether arts achievement is included in grade point averages.

The comprehensive study was conducted by Cypress Research Group (www.cypress-research.com) and funded by the Colorado Council on the Arts, with additional support from the Colorado Department of Education, the University of Northern Colorado Center for Integrated Arts Education, Scientific and Cultural Facilities District, Denver Office of Cultural Affairs, Colorado Business Committee for the Arts, Think360 Arts Complete Education, National Endowment for the Arts, and Arts for Colorado.

About the Colorado Council on the Arts

Colorado Council on the Arts, a division of the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade, invests in communities across the state to ensure that the cultural, educational and economic benefits of the arts are enjoyed by millions of Colorado youth, citizens and visitors every day. (www.coloarts.org)

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