

I want to first thank this committee in providing an opportunity to express ideas and thoughts into potential educational change ideas. I am passionate about school reform and I apologize for the depth of my narrative. Accepting a rationale for change is not easy. I hope you find this contribution evoking, and at a minimum, motivation to at least expand discussion in light of the following ideas. Ideas that could lead to very positive changes in Arizona's schools.

My name is Robert Benson and I have been an arts educator for 24 years. I have been involved in one of the states biggest school districts. I am currently a school principal at a K-8 arts based campus, former high school art educator, curriculum and instructional coach for the arts, director of arts education and a community advocate for arts within the City of Peoria. I have worked for many years in developing arts assessment systems, curriculum development, standards revisions, and teacher evaluation systems. I am also very knowledgeable about integrating the arts into any classroom as a means to find quality instruction in all school subjects. I have presented ideas about these concepts in many venues, for many leaders and educators in the State of Arizona. With my background in the arts and in educational leadership along with my understanding and awareness of the massive amounts of research about the presence of arts in our public schools, I would hope we all could think differently about our accountability system that rates schools on an A-F rating. I write you today to consider ideas that may add value to school success labels as it relates to the presence of quality arts programing in our Arizona public school system.

Accountability for Our Future

Governor Ducey has outlined qualities of a state he envisions. Part of that is a quality education system. Within this vision, he also pictures every student having access to a 21st Century education that readies our current students as future leaders in a rapidly changing world. As you know, the State's future is only as strong as its nearly two thousand public schools, which serve over one-million students. A quality 21st Century education needs many characteristics that have and will challenge our

assumptions about the education system. Teachers now know, for example, they will have to teach differently in order to prepare kids for the expectations of learning standards. They also know that the ways students demonstrate understanding in their learning has to be different as well. With this, policy makers and educational leaders also have to challenge their assumptions about how we assess the success of a school as it relates to the school's commitment to their local community and to meet the needs of all students. A creative and bold approach to an ongoing, nationwide conversation about school rating accountability systems may bring to light the interest and respect of many entities that see the potential innovative changes in a very important public system.

Accountability can be defined in many ways. In essence, educators should be obligated to find success in relation to the activities and related results we come to in our schools. It is needed. Schools are a servant to the community and should hold a great deal of focus on the success of our students. By outlining "success" and "results", we have to go beyond the typical and narrow metric of mathematics and reading. Not to say these studies are not important, they are and always will be, however, we must dig deeper into what brings quality education to life and find ways for school leaders to be accountable and eventually motivated, to provide quality learning, in a variety of contexts, in all of our schools.

The Arts

The arts are important. Not only have they been a pulse of humanity, they are a highly researched factor in the work of K-12 education. Numerous studies make correlations to the participation of the arts and higher student achievement. There are many questions to these basic correlations and assertions. Research suggests that involvement in a quality arts education system helps many student factors such as positive emotional development, self-regulation, deeper engagement in learning, motivation, and self-efficacy.¹ However, again, is there something deeper for kids invested into quality arts education programs – something else that attributes to the touted student success in math, language arts, science, social studies - or school in

general? Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland’s research with Harvard’s Project Zero challenged the idea that simply being involved in the arts was a case for higher state test scores. Erasing the idea that the arts was a silver bullet to testing success, her research looked at the qualities of studio artists and the connections to students in arts classrooms. This research showed a comparison to the “habits” of successful studio artists and those of students involved in the arts who were successful in school. Her research brings to light that ideas such as persistence and engagement, stretching and exploring, reflecting, expressing, developing craft, observing, understanding community, and envisioning - are factors in both the successful artist and the academic success of a student involved in a high quality arts education program.²

In my work in arts integration, and working with classroom teachers in math instruction, it is interesting to observe that the mathematical practices³ educators should be incorporating into math instruction are very similar to the above mentioned studio habits. The graphic below is a comparison:

| Studio Habits of Mind |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Persistence and Engagement● Stretching an Exploring● Reflecting● Expressing● Developing Craft● Observing● Understanding Community● Envisioning |

| 8 Mathematical Practices |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them.● Reason abstractly and quantitatively.● Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others.● Model with mathematics.● Use appropriate tools strategically.● Attend to precision.● Look for and make use of structure.● Look for and express regularity in repeated reasoning. |

What this suggests, and what many school leaders know, is that demonstrations of learning are complex, opportunistic, and exciting. Accountability systems are narrow, short lived, reactive and unresponsive... and though they are an indicator of a “moment” in assessing reading and mathematics, they lead to relatively no transformation in what is supposed to be a cyclical process of change. Schools can and do offer more! They offer many things this narrow system does not recognize (like the product of a quality arts education program) and yet many see the benefit each day and can only wish these things were being accounted for.

Reforms for Accountability Systems- Authentic Measures

Accountability systems have been under review for several years. In 2013, the NEA, in conjunction with educational research findings, recommended new accountability systems with multiple measures built on, amongst many things, the consensus of both local and state ideology.⁴ In multiple communications, the Council of Chief State School Officers (which Arizona is represented) has proposed ideas that suggest all school and districts work toward a goal of preparing students for college and career readiness.⁵ The preparation of this in educational ideology has revolved around the “four C’s”; Creativity, Collaboration, Communication, and Critical thinking/problem solving. These are all embedded in Arizona College and Career Ready Standards.

In my own studying of the Common Core standards, there is a deeper connection to highly valuable 21st Century skills that are embedded in the written content. For example, the verb “Analyze” is used 73 times (one of the highest frequency related verbs) in the standards. This verb, and other related ones, would fall under a bigger concept of *critical thinking*. The verbs “Associate”, “Hypothesize”, “Generate”, “Demonstrate” (present 35 times); “Create” (26 times); “Produce” (17 times) “Develop” (41 times) and “Form”(12 times), would all fall under the concept of *creative thinking*.⁶ Though there have been improvements in state student assessment

ideas, in reality, both of these very important 21st Century skills only reflect about 17% of a state standardized test in language arts and 16% in mathematics. In fact, there is no level of “creation” in mathematics or reading in Arizona’s AZMERIT assessment - it only lies in the writing portion of the state assessment (the “C” of communication) and that part does not count in our accountability measures.⁷ In the arts, creative and critical thinking as well as collaboration and communication are a common characteristics. Authentic versions of these types of thinking would be hard to assess in current state testing methods, yet they are a vital part to teaching the K-12 standards in the State of Arizona and subsequently their weak presence does not meet the vision of our State’s education system.

Adding the Arts via “Presence” and “High Quality”.

Evidence of a presence of arts programing in schools can be a base of positive metrics for school labeling, however, their presence is not enough. An additional assessment of the quality characteristics of arts programing can increase the base value (for labeling purposes) as a means to foster the positive attributes of arts in our schools. Ideas like:

- The presence of highly qualified arts educators who provide quality pedagogical views on the learning in arts classrooms.
- Quality scheduling of arts instruction time (rather than a “squeezing in” mentality).
- Arts as part of measures of student success in school. Specifically, the inclusion of arts grades in the students overall GPA (typically in higher grades 5th -12th grade).
- Provide quality-grading systems in the arts.
- Intentional and effective collaborations with local and national arts and cultural agencies.
- Local, state, and national awards for arts programing.

- Numbers of arts programs offered.
- Quality curriculum design in arts courses.
- Student, school staff, and parental perceptions (via surveys) about the levels of quality in arts programming.
- Evidence of schools that utilize an arts ideology, in conjunction with a quality arts education, as a means to attempt to improve student learning.

The idea that schools can be rewarded for their arts programs is exciting, but more importantly, providing opportunities for continual improvement (with indicators suggested above) is key and could provide more positive metrics for those schools and districts that invest in and follow through with quality arts education programming. There is never an over funding of arts in our public schools. Quality programming is rarely equivalent to funding; it is equivalent to practice, local policy, and a continual improvement of the system. Perhaps this quest for “quality” could be the work of State and County educational agencies who could provide a notion of *guidance* rather than the un-nerving concept of *compliance*, again, as means to grow our states educational potential for the kinds of programming that would suggest higher levels of student achievement. Is it possible? Yes. Is it motivating? Again, yes.

In relation, the *Arizona Census of Arts Education* provides statewide data that in the 2012-13 school year:

- Eighty-nine percent of Arizona’s K-12 students have access to arts education (up from 87% in 2009).
- A greater percentage of schools and students have access to both music AND visual arts compared to a similar census in 2009.
- The numbers of students without access to any arts education has declined since 2009, but 115,487 students (11%) still attend school without access to arts instruction provided by highly qualified arts teachers.

- There has been significant increase in arts education in Charter Schools with the percentage of students with access to either music or visual arts growing from 42% to 60%.
- The majority of students without access to arts education tend to be at the elementary level for District schools and spread across Elementary, High and K-8 levels for Charter Schools.
- Smaller schools, regardless of school configuration, are less likely to offer arts education. ⁸

Currently, in Arizona, there would be a positive impact on school success labels for entities who have a presence of arts education. Interestingly, in the 2012-13 school year, 11% of students are not being served even though there is strong Arizona state administrative code (R7-2-301) that states the common schools (grades K-8) must offer music and visual arts (other performing arts may be voluntarily offered). The Nation's *Every Student Succeeds Act*, the recent iteration of the 50 year old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), defines music and arts education as part of a "well-rounded education." Music and arts are also a part of the "core" academic studies. The presence of the arts in Arizona schools comes down to local priority, not policy. Connecting quality arts programming to school and district achievement is not a mistake. My district has a 95% graduation rate, a district rating of "A", and we educate close to 30,000 students in the arts annually with quality school programming. Our community values the arts and it is an incessant expectation that we continually improve.

Disruption is Good

I have presented many times that the arts can be a "disruptive" practice in the field of K-12 education reform. When we talk about disruptive ideology or innovations, we speak to the idea that the typical outcomes change in some sort of designated practice. In this case, the change requires educational and state leadership to shift their hearts and minds toward the idea that a better school labeling system (and its interwoven success factors) can develop a much better perspective on the State's

vision of an education system that prepares children for the creative, innovative, entrepreneurial, and global workforce of the 21st Century. We should help schools celebrate their contribution to this vision. Educational researcher Michael Fullan touts the importance of a focus on the “literacy, numeracy, and the well-being of the child.” This core should be the focus of every school and for every teacher and school administrator. These broad goals can be accomplished in numerous ways. Unfortunately, we find efficient ways to accomplish them in our education system. Efficiency is an act that equates to dislike. I am more efficient at pulling weeds in my yard than I am with having a phenomenal meal with my family. Finding the best ways to assess schools may not be efficient. With that, we should continue to be passionate about our goals for 21st Century Learning and know that our time and energy will be well worth it. Adding the presence and the quality of arts education programs into Arizona’s school labeling system would bolster these core and fundamental ideas that undoubtedly we should all hold true.

If you desire any help in the processes of this idea, I am whole-heartedly committed to assist. I appreciate your interest and commitment to improving Arizona’s public school system.

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