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[So, what's a broadside?](#)

Reviving Arts Education through Collaboration: Community/Schools Partnership for the Arts

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This article is condensed from one that will appear in full in Vol.
102, no. 6 of [Arts Education Policy Review](#).

From 1988 through 1995, arts education in the Sarasota County [Florida] School District declined. The fine arts coordinator position was eliminated. Site-based management contributed to program and budget inequities. Art was not perceived as essential to children's well-being. An apparent lack of political support made it easy for the school board to eliminate art and music classes taught by specialists from elementary and middle schools.

In response to this crisis, the Arts Education Task Force of the County Arts Council developed an advocacy campaign to restore art and music teachers to schools. Volunteers, arts educators, and community arts organizations worked together to draft a message about the importance of the arts in education. Community art organizations demonstrated their support of curriculum-based art instruction by qualified specialist teachers, explaining that their programs could only supplement, not replace, school arts instruction. A new superintendent of schools formed a think tank of school and community representatives which became the Community/Schools Partnership for the Arts (C/SPA).

Guided by co-chairs from the school district and the arts council, C/SPA provided leadership to strengthen arts education. Art and music teachers not only returned to all schools, but their numbers increased, and some schools added dance and theatre as

well. C/SPA developed a booklet and multi-media presentation that informed principals about the value of arts education, described expectations for school art programs based on state and national standards, and provided guidelines for program evaluation. In 1997, C/SPA began brainstorming with all arts education stakeholders: arts teachers, students, parents, community artists and arts organizations. The resulting long-range plan for world class arts education was approved in concept by the School Board in April 1999. By avoiding factions and building trust, collaborating to develop a vision of arts education that could be communicated to all, and taking action to solve problems, C/SPA changed public perceptions of art education in Sarasota.

The story of Sarasota County's Community/School Partnership for the Arts illustrates three ways that National Standards and related initiatives can serve local policies and politics. First, local groups can cite these national initiatives to affirm the importance of the arts, a kind of argument from authority. Second, the National Standards offer models of broad goals for local arts education programs. Finally, the national Opportunity-to-learn Standards offer benchmarks against which local conditions can be measured.

Although the approach used in Sarasota was informed by educational theory as well as national policy initiatives, it did not follow one pure theoretical path. Unlike many approaches to educational change devised by educators, C/SPA did not treat schools in isolation but instead was grounded in a particular community with a unique arts culture. Unlike top-down policy initiatives, C/SPA actively involved a range of local stakeholders, developing partnerships between the arts community and the schools. Any single stakeholder might wear multiple hats. Artists, teachers, and community volunteers were also parents. The process was messy and discouraging at times. Trust was not easily achieved. Key participants left; however, new participants brought different strengths and insights.

A number of factors contributed to the success of C/SPA. First, from the beginning both school district personnel and representatives from community arts organizations agreed to work together for curriculum-based arts education in the schools. When Sarasota lost elementary and middle level arts teachers, the arts groups did not offer to step in and replace curriculum-based, in-school arts education with after-school enrichment. As art and music were restored, the minimum expectations for successful programs required implementation of the district curricula so that all students in all schools would have equal access to comprehensive art and music education. While the long-range plan moved forward, dance and theatre began meeting to develop curriculum guidelines for their art forms.

Second, communication and trust were built through collaboration. The process of working together was often difficult, but C/SPA members were committed to improving arts education. Members who entered the process with differing philosophies of arts education agreed to compromise for the common goal. However, these compromises tended to be inclusive rather than exclusive, combining the best from each approach. Members communicated through e-mails and phone calls between meetings. Draft documents were circulated for suggestions and edited to respond to comments. The group worked to avoid any "us vs. them" attitudes. Respect for each person's strengths and the varying needs of schools and arts organizations developed through the working process.

Third, although some participants moved, changed jobs, or left for other reasons, C/SPA retained a core of active participants. In spite of having a new or acting superintendent

almost annually, mid-level administrators maintained their commitment to C/SPA, building for the future through consistent collaboration.

Fourth, some core C/SPA members had participated in national arts education initiatives, including the planning group for the National Assessment of Educational Progress in the Arts. The music teacher who became the district's Fine Arts Coordinator was not only familiar with state and national standards but had received leadership training while president of the Florida Music Education Association. Connecting plans for arts education in Sarasota with national trends helped us feel a part of a larger endeavor and helped School Board members realize the significance of C/SPA's work. At the same time, we worked to connect C/SPA's long range plan with the school district's plans for continuous quality improvement and with the Arts Council's development of a cultural master plan.

Fifth, no one person was the instigator. Leadership was shared among Arts Council staff, key volunteers, and the school district's Arts Coordinator. The district's Assistant Superintendent provided extensive support, using her political clout to encourage principals to support arts education in their schools and providing small amounts of money or staff support when needed.

Sixth, the long-range plan was developed after data documenting the current status of arts education in each school had been collected. Knowing what was the case before envisioning what might become the case kept on-going planning specific and on target. This data will provide valuable benchmarks for evaluating the progress made in the coming years.

Seventh, although members of the Steering Committee had their own visions for world class arts education in Sarasota, the process of brainstorming toward the long-range plan was wide-ranging and inclusive. Each group of stakeholders was invited to at least one brainstorming session. All ideas were recorded and taken seriously as the long-range plan developed.

Eighth, persistence was a key virtue. In spite of discouraging set-backs, budget reductions, changes in superintendents, and public arguments over schools, C/SPA kept on running. Although progress often seemed slow, the group kept working toward long-range goals.

Finally, in a district with site-based management, principals must be not only educational leaders but also advocates for arts education. Some principals came to this position naturally, others needed some convincing. Support from the central administrators who supervised principals including holding them accountable for arts programs in their schools just as for other subjects, permitting categorical flexibility in budgets so that money could be used for the arts, and encouraging celebrations of individual school's artistic achievements.

C/SPA members offer three pieces of advice to others planning district-wide arts education. First, build a coalition between the arts community and the schools. Second, increase educators' awareness that they are part of the local arts community and can give support as well as ask for it. Third, help members of the arts community understand the nature and value of sequential, school-based arts education taught by certified arts

educators.

For More Information on C/SPA and Arts Education in Sarasota:
<<http://www.sarasota.k12.fl.us/~cspa/>>

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