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Case Study

The following reflection is part of a series of publications by the DC Arts and Humanities Education Collaborative as a result of its observations working with public schools in Washington, DC, through its Arts Education Initiative (AEI) program. The program was made possible by generous support from the Ford Foundation and the DC Commission on Arts and Humanities

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Findings from The DC Arts & Humanities Education Collaborative Arts Education Initiative: A Series

Reflections of a School Taking Flight Through Arts Integration: Peabody Early Learning Center

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Introduction

Peabody Early Learning Center sits within four blocks of the U.S. Capitol. Built in 1880, the building is typical of urban school design of the era: red-brick, multiple floors, high ceilings. The building itself is inviting and welcoming; Peabody feels on the surface like a place where learning is fun.

Delving inside the building, this proves to be true. Upon entering, the vibrant learning environment is evident. The interior of the building is bright and clean, full of student artwork, and bubbly children. The staff is confident, happy, in control. The outside is surrounded by gardens, created to be a living classroom for the children. Peabody is one of the most highly sought-after schools to enroll children; it is a school where the approach to student learning, and the teaching staff are highly effective.

Peabody is the first of three campuses that make up the Capitol Hill Cluster School. Established over 20 years ago, the Capitol Hill Cluster School serves students pre-school through eighth grade, with one principal overseeing three campuses: Peabody Early Learning, Watkins Elementary, and Stuart Hobson Middle School. A dedicated assistant principal is on site at each campus. Peabody serves the early childhood grades of the Cluster, with an enrollment of 231 students¹. In addition to the traditional early childhood program, Peabody also houses a School Within School (SWS), a Reggio Emilia program, that functions separately from Peabody Early Learning, and has its own administrators. The staff at SWS interacts and shares resources with Peabody, including the librarian, visual art teacher, and the outside gardens.

¹ According to DCPS Master facilities plan, as of 2010.

For the past five years, as part of the Capitol Hill Cluster School, Peabody has participated in the Arts Education Initiative (AEI), an arts-integrated professional development program for teachers, offered by the DC Arts & Humanities Education Collaborative (DC Collaborative). The DC Collaborative is a community-based partnership organization of more than 60 cultural arts organizations. As a collective voice, members of the DC Collaborative work together to ensure that DC students and educators have more equitable access to the city's rich array of arts and cultural opportunities.

The Arts Education Initiative (AEI) began as a three-year pilot project in 2005, with 7 participating schools (6 DCPS and 1 Public Charter), adding an 8th DC Public School during the third year of the pilot (2007-2008). The pilot project was funded with support from the Ford Foundation and the DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities. The purpose of the pilot project was *to use the arts* to develop, pilot, refine and adopt a model process for collaboration in DC public and charter schools **to effect school change and enhance student learning**. The Arts Education Initiative sought to develop *abilities of educators* to effectively plan, lead and evaluate arts education programming in schools. The overarching intention of the project was to establish a structure and process for arts integration in the school that was sustainable and eventually self-supported by each participating school.

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Embedded into the overarching goal of establishing arts integration as a sustainable practice in the participating schools, were several objectives and outcomes of the three-year pilot. Many were tied to impacting overall *school culture*: Teacher planning skills and practice; strengthening principal leadership, guidance and support for arts integration in their school; documentation (with an eye towards sustainability and replication); impacting student learning skills and practices; increasing parent involvement; and increasing *community awareness and support* for arts integration into school curriculums.

Upon completion of the pilot years, and moving into the first year after the pilot, the focus of the project narrowed to specifically focus on professional development for teachers, to learn how to use arts integration as a teaching strategy in the classroom. The decision to refine the focus stemmed from the belief that to truly create lasting change in school culture, one must build the foundation around teacher practice. Recent research also supports the notion that effective teachers are the most important factor in student achievement, which then impacts school culture. The focus on supporting teacher practice and professional development had the potential to make the most lasting impact on participating schools.

While each campus of the Capitol Hill Cluster School demonstrated success with arts integration as a teaching practice, by the fifth year Peabody Early Learning Center stood out as exemplifying the overarching goal of the Arts Education Initiative the most, i.e. a sustainable and replicable model for arts integration. Why was this so? The purpose of this reflection is to explore some of the factors that led to Peabody's overall accomplishment.

Basic Elements: People And Process

Human Capital: Teachers are at the heart!

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Teamwork: Looking back into the program archives, a few things about the Peabody campus come to light. First, the Peabody staff was and is comprised of strong collaborators. They tend to plan together, and communicate well with each other. A monthly collaborative planning meeting is one element of the AEI structure, and is designed to encourage reflective practice, establish a professional learning community, and establish buy-in and ownership of the program in the building. The Peabody team was able to accomplish this with ease, as they were already doing collaborative planning, albeit less formally. The

AEI provided the structure and process to formalize their natural planning habits.

Willingness to stretch and go the extra mile: The second element about the Peabody team that stands out involves the fact that teachers were willing to embrace change and new ways of working and to think innovatively regarding their teaching practice, including questioning established methods. The staff did not view the AEI as another new requirement being placed on them. Rather, they viewed the AEI as their opportunity to push boundaries, enrich their lessons and grow through practice. According to Michelle Hoffmann, AEI Project Manager from 2005-2010, “The Peabody teachers took on Arts Integration as their identity as professionals. They looked at it as their opportunity to shine, and stretch their teaching practice to do things creatively that they had always wanted to do.” The Peabody teachers were focused on how the arts allowed them to be creative educators, and how the arts allowed their students to learn more effectively.

Retention of team members: The third element to Peabody’s success was the retention of team members. During the pilot years, the team reached a maximum of eight members; going into the sixth year, six still remain on the team, and any vacancies are due to teachers leaving due to school transfer or career transition. This has ensured continuity of the program in the school, and has enabled the team members to develop as a professional learning community, and to deeply explore their practice. The long-time team members have become invested in the AEI, as a process for professional development, and as a sustained teaching strategy and practice in the school building. New staff members are considered with an eye towards arts integration, with the assumption that they will become part of the AEI team and process.

Leadership: Building on a solid foundation

The Capitol Hill Cluster, and the Peabody campus as a result, has a long history of leadership supportive of arts integration. According to a long-time Cluster teacher, the original principal, Veola M. Jackson, considered the arts essential to learning as far back as 1986, when the Cluster was founded. In 2005, the AEI represented an opportunity to deepen that commitment, and give form and shape to this long-standing belief. Principal Brandon Eatman, and his team of assistant principals, demonstrated their support in the following ways:

1. Continued to communicate to the community that the arts are essential, not additional, to education in the Cluster.
2. Approached staff to participate in the AEI but allowed team members to self-select into the program. They knew that interest would grow as parents and teachers saw the program in action.
3. Supported time for collaborative planning.
4. Provided space for creativity, in terms of teacher practice and physical space.

This provided the Peabody team with room to take in all the AEI program had to offer, and to run with it. Coupled with their qualities as a collaborative team, willing to take creative risks, the solid support from leadership gave the team the confidence to reach high and push boundaries, without fear of failing or falling.

School Focus: Deliberate practice

The artwork was so sophisticated, and the concepts her students were learning were so complex, that it provided her rich “teachable moments”

Leveraging existing resources: For the first two years of the three-year pilot, the Peabody team focused on visual arts as their entry point for arts integration. For one original team member, Gail Murdock, her initial “hook” into arts integration, was observing the sophisticated artwork her students were producing with the art teacher. The artwork was so sophisticated, and the concepts her students were learning were so complex, that it provided her rich “teachable moments” and conversations by default. She was eager to learn more. When AEI presented itself, she was excited to have the chance to extend her mastery of integrating arts across the curriculum. The work the students had been doing with the art teacher, learning about artists such as Van Gogh and Monet, became the springboard for Gail to design lessons that integrated science and early literacy skills with visual arts. Her first-year unit integrated botany and visual arts. Her students learned about flower arranging, using the kinds of flowers they saw in Van Gogh’s and Monet’s paintings. Through the lesson, students had a tactile, three-dimensional opportunity to learn about plant needs for water and light, to understand scientific inquiry, and also to understand sequencing and process by writing non-fiction narratives to describe their findings.

Second, visual arts naturally connected to their existing learning environment. During the time of the three-year pilot, Peabody was also the beneficiary of The Garden Project, a community-led and supported project to establish a garden on Peabody's grounds, as a "living classroom" for student learning. The Peabody AEI team realized that nature was a rich arts environment, full of color, shape and movement—all concepts that were part of early childhood education for both visual arts and core content. The team decided to integrate both projects for the most effective and enriching use of their resources. This led to a well-developed, easily implemented Arts Integrated unit, titled "Art in the Garden." Rather than developing extra units or lessons on top of what was already planned, the AEI unit became their primary plan for teaching the content.

Third, as the team progressed through the third year of the pilot, and into the fourth and fifth year, they continued to build on their existing unit plan from the first year, reflecting on the effectiveness of their plan, refining, and enriching it.² In years 3-5, broadening the theme to "Art in Nature," the team built upon their successful foundation. The lesson plan blossomed beyond their own gardens, to include trips to the National Arboretum, and the Botanical Gardens, and to drawing still life pictures, and doing more scientific experiments with plants and flowers in the classroom. The arts integration also grew, to include storytelling and creative movement. Working with a Master Teaching Artist, Arianna Ross, the students created their own stories about the seasons, using words and movement to make the seasons come to life.

Fourth, and finally, the team continued to leverage partnerships and resources, and continued collaboration amongst classroom teachers and specialists (this time librarian and visual arts) moving into the years after the three-year pilot. Peabody recently received a \$20,000 Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant for their "Story of Food: Growing Healthy Readers" project. Continuing to tie learning into their garden, Peabody also plans to continue utilizing arts integration as a teaching and learning strategy as part of the project. According to a recent announcement by Ward 6 DC Council Member Tommy Wells, "The project will utilize the Louise Chapman Children's Garden, the Peabody Campus's new edible school yard, and incorporate music, storytelling, movement and art."

Supports

A primary goal of the Arts Education Initiative is sustaining the transformative power of arts integration over time. As a school reform initiative, the intention is to provide sufficient support and structure for participating schools to establish their practice, and then take flight. Ideally, AEI partner schools view their participation in AEI with a sense of ownership, not dependency. Ultimately, the AEI framework is designed to help partner schools develop the infrastructure and habits that enable them to support their arts integrated work without complete reliance on the DC Collaborative. Peabody is an example of this. By the third and final year of the pilot, taking what they had learned from DC Collaborative staff about finding and securing resources, the Peabody staff focused their sustainability efforts in three areas: Professional development, funding, and establishing additional partnerships with arts organizations in the District.

² This aligns with the DCPS Teaching and Learning Framework, which includes the elements: Plan, Teach, Increase Effectiveness

Professional Development: Teachers as Students as Teachers as Students...

The team deepened their sense of collaboration by learning from each other, and thereby reinforced their own professional learning community

In-house experts: By the second year of the pilot, members of the Peabody team offered to hold workshops for their colleagues in arts techniques in which they had expertise. By doing this the team deepened their sense of collaboration by learning from each other, and thereby reinforced their own professional learning community. They demonstrated that they weren't solely reliant upon the DC Collaborative for resources, guidance and technical assistance. According to a Peabody team member, they each took what they had learned about integrating a specific art form into content, and presented to the team, with the intention of allowing other team members to take that knowledge, and incorporate it into their own planning however it fit best. The idea was truly to allow each team member to feel creative ownership over the concepts, and to do what fit their students' needs best.

Additional Professional Development: By the spring of 2009, the first year after the pilot, the DC Collaborative also began to encourage the AEI pilot schools to seek out and participate in additional arts integrated professional development, beyond what the Collaborative continued to support. The pilot years had come to an end, and while the Collaborative remained committed to working with and supporting the pilot schools, the Collaborative was also expanding to work with new partner schools, and so the hope was that the pilot schools would feel a sense of ownership for the project and be able to serve as role models for the newer partner schools. Peabody took this to heart, and actively sought out summer and school year professional development, with a particular focus in areas of interest to their existing arts integrated unit, and their interest in visual arts. In the summer of 2009, Peabody applied to participate in a national program offered by the Phillips Collection, centered on a touring exhibition of artwork by Georgia O'Keefe. The Peabody team was accepted, and as a result, participated in a project with schools from New Mexico and New York City, the Phillips Collection staff and staff at the Whitney Museum in New York City. This opportunity is only one of many that the Peabody team has sought out since the conclusion of the pilot years.

Dollars and Sense: Identifying New Partners and Support

Throughout the pilot years, the DC Collaborative staff encouraged school teams to seek out their own support to fund their arts-integrated work in the schools. School teams always seemed to want to do more and more, the more they experienced the power of arts integration. The Collaborative staff wanted schools' teams to feel empowered to obtain news support and funding, so that all their ideas could be put into action. During the final Summer Institute of the pilot years, a workshop on how to research funding options was provided by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities. During the fourth and fifth years, after the pilot, the DC Collaborative's AEI team provided ongoing guidance and resources to school teams throughout the school year regarding how to find new partners and additional support for special arts-related projects and the scale up of new best practices.

Moving Forward

Peabody: An Arts Integrated School to Infinity and Beyond

“We take AEI very seriously. We’ve seen how rich learning becomes when we integrate the arts. We’ve always viewed AEI as a living, breathing program, and we’re committed to continuing. It’s just how we teach at Peabody!”

Moving into the sixth year of the AEI, Peabody Early Learning Center is in an excellent position for sustainability. With plans to continue their partnership with the Phillips Collection, the “Story of Food” project, and continued support from the DC Collaborative, Peabody is in a good position to deepen their knowledge and practice. The team members have built upon the infrastructure developed in conjunction with the DC Collaborative staff, to successfully sustain the AEI in the school building for many years to come. According to the Peabody team leader, Gail Murdock, “We take AEI very seriously. We’ve seen how rich learning becomes when we integrate the arts. We’ve always viewed AEI as a living, breathing program, and we’re committed to continuing. It’s just how we teach at Peabody!”

About the DC Collaborative

The DC Collaborative believes that the arts—inclusive of music, visual arts, theater, dance, and literary arts—are central to the education of every student. A community-based partnership organization, now 60 members strong, the DC Collaborative works to promote quality arts and humanities education for all DC public and chartered public schools for the growth of the whole child. Working with our partners, the DC Collaborative produces such exemplary programs as Arts for Every Student, Professional Development, and the recently launched Arts Education Initiative. The DC Collaborative’s Arts Education Initiative (AEI) was made possible by generous support from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities and the Ford Foundation.