

# The Arts: Critical Links to Student Success

By Richard J. Deasy and Lauren Stevenson

Cutting school arts programs in an effort to boost student academic achievement will be counterproductive, a new analysis of research studies suggests, and may be particularly damaging to young children and students from economically disadvantaged circumstances.

*Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*, published by the national Arts Education Partnership (AEP), brings together for the first time 62 arts education studies and related essays interpreting their significance for educators.

"I urge education leaders throughout the country to read this compendium and pay close attention to its findings," said G. Thomas Houlihan, executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, the association of heads of state departments of education. "In the No Child Left Behind Act, Congress named the arts as one of the core subjects that all schools should teach. These studies show the wisdom of that decision and the benefits of arts learning for every child."

The studies and essays in *Critical Links* point to strong relationships between learning in the arts and fundamental cognitive skills and capacities used in mastering other school subjects, including reading, writing and mathematics.

Skills important to social interaction – including empathy, collaboration, and tolerance for others - are nurtured by the arts, the studies report.

*Critical Links* explores positive attitudes toward learning developed by studying and practicing the arts, and the relationship of these motivations to academic performance and social behavior. Engagement in learning, paying attention, and persisting at tasks are among the attitudes cited in the studies.

The report, released in Washington, D.C. in mid-May, comes as school leaders are being challenged by new federal and state laws to implement standards and accountability systems to help students reach levels of achievement deemed essential for success as students, workers, and citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Responding to these challenges, school administrators are often tempted to reduce or eliminate arts programs to concentrate classroom time on reading, writing and mathematics instruction.

In doing so, the new report suggests, they may be eliminating critical links to academic success for many of their students and denying all students the opportunity to develop crucial cognitive skills and motivations they need to achieve at high levels.

Of great importance to schools struggling to close achievement gaps are the indications that for certain populations – including students from economically disadvantaged circumstances and students needing remedial instruction – learning in the arts may be uniquely able to boost learning and achievement. For instance, studies reviewed in *Critical Links* show that students who are encouraged to dramatize reading material significantly improve their comprehension of the texts and their ability to read new and unfamiliar material. These improvements are most pronounced for young children, for those in need of remedial instruction, and for students of lower socio-economic status.

In addition to dramatic enactments, certain forms of music and dance instruction discussed in *Critical Links* enhance and complement basic reading instruction aimed at helping children "break the phonetic code" that unlocks written language. Other studies show relationships between learning in the arts and more advanced literacy skills, including interpreting challenging texts, writing, and oral expression.

*Critical Links* stresses that not all of the studies demonstrate that instruction in the arts directly causes learning in another subject, but rather that the cognitive skills and achievement motivations used and developed in the arts appear to be fundamental in other learning situations as well.

A specific instance is “spatial reasoning,” which is deployed in all of the art forms and is clearly shown to be an outcome of certain forms of music instruction in studies reviewed in *Critical Links*.

“In the vast literature on spatial reasoning,” writes Dr. James S. Catterall of the University of California at Los Angeles, who took one of the lead roles in compiling *Critical Links*, “it is clear that mathematical skills as well as language facility [reading, verbal competence, and writing ability] benefit directly from spatial reasoning skills.”

Other reasoning skills cited in Compendium studies include “problem solving”, “conditional thinking” (the ability to generate and test theories) and the components of “creative thinking”: originality, elaboration, fluency and flexibility. The latter skills are used when we imagine and act on new ideas and possibilities.

Students in the arts also develop what psychologists call “achievement motivations” that are fundamental to success in education and in life. For instance, improved “self concept,” “self confidence” and “ownership of learning” can lead to increased engagement in school activities and higher educational aspirations. Fostering these motivations is particularly important for those students who have not been successful in school or other settings and who doubt their own ability to learn and succeed.

*Critical Links* further suggests that the arts can have an impact on the whole school by creating a learning environment conducive to more effecting teaching. For instance, studies look at the positive effects on “teacher innovation,” “teacher awareness of student abilities,” and the “professional culture” of the school.

“Desirable processes and teaching characteristics are inherent to dynamic, multiple arts teaching environments,” write Rob Horowitz of the Center for Arts Education Research at Teachers College at Columbia University and Jaci Webb-Dempsey of the Advance Education Studies program at West Virginia University in their essay on the multi-arts studies reviewed in the Compendium.

“Administrators and policy makers can be secure in supporting arts programs based on the evidence” in those studies, they conclude. They urge educators to explore their “implications for curriculum, professional development, partnership, and learning.”

But they and the other Compendium essayists also urge education researchers to build on the studies collected in *Critical Links* to provide even deeper insight into the nature and effects of learning in the arts.

“Education researchers will find these studies a useful step on the long journey to developing more, better and more useful research,” writes Karen Bradley of the Graduates Studies Department of Dance at the University of Maryland.

*Critical Links* was published by the Arts Education Partnership (AEP), a coalition of more than 100 national education, arts, business, and philanthropic organizations. AEP is administered by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies through a cooperative agreement with the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education.

*Critical Links* was released on May 16, 2002. Copies can be ordered by calling the Council of Chief State School Officers at 202.336.7016. A PDF version is available on the Arts Education Partnership web site at [www.aep-arts.org](http://www.aep-arts.org)

(Richard J. Deasy is the director and Lauren Stevenson the research associate of the Arts Education Partnership.)