

Students will dance, act and design with core arts standards

Updated National Core Arts Standards add media arts such as animation, film, gaming and computer design

By: Alison DeNisco



The National Core Arts Standards were released in October. They emphasize developing artistic ideas, refining them, and following projects through to completion. (Americans for the Arts/Scott Cronan Photography)

You think math and English have high standards? Try the arts.

The National Core Arts Standards were released in October. They update the initial standards released in 1994, which included instructional guidelines for dance, music, theater and visual arts.

The new standards add media arts such as animation, film, gaming and computer design. They emphasize developing artistic ideas, refining them, and following projects through to completion. They also require students to analyze artworks, including by examining societal, cultural and historical contexts.

Tight budgets and a fierce focus on standardized testing in math and English have led many district leaders to cut back on arts education in recent years. But advocates hope to help districts refocus on arts instruction that fosters innovation, creativity and collaboration.

All 50 states have some arts standards, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. However, many have not been updated in decades, and implementation varies widely.

For example, only some states provide funding for mandated art classes. Twenty-five states and the District of Columbia required arts credits for high school graduation in 2014. And 17 states assessed student learning in the arts that year. The updated standards are not connected to the Common Core, but they promote

the nation's college and career readiness goals for students, says Marcia McCaffrey, president of the State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education (SEADAE).

Low-income students benefit from arts

Low-income schools don't offer music and visual arts as frequently as high-income schools do, according to a 2010 report from the National Center for Education Statistics.

But recent a independent study released by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities found that including more arts in the school day results in better attendance and behavior, and better reading and math scores in high-poverty schools.

The committee chose eight low-performing schools and trained their teachers to incorporate the arts into all academic subjects. The schools also received free supplies, mini-grants and a mentor to work with students and promote the program in local communities. From 2011 to 2014, the study found, math proficiency rose over 22 percent across the eight schools, and reading proficiency increased by over 12 percent.

"Employers are looking for students who are creative and innovative, who can take a process or project from beginning to end and understand all of the steps of revision, refinement, completion and collaboration," says McCaffrey, who is also an arts consultant for the New Hampshire Department of Education.

The standards outline an age-appropriate progression of artistic study. They also provide a foundation for curriculum, instruction and assessment from preschool up through high school.

For example, dance standards start with preschool students improvising a routine that stops and starts on cue. By the end of high school, students should be able to design and choreograph original dances, and explain how their choices are used to intensify artistic intent.

Arkansas, Nebraska and Kansas have adopted versions of the new standards, and 10 more states may soon follow, says Jeff Poulin, arts education coordinator for the nonprofit Americans for the Arts. Many administrators want robust arts education in their schools, and these standards provide a strong foundation for creating better programs, Poulin adds.

Many organizations, including SEADAE, are willing to help districts implement arts standards and programs.

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