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Americans for the Arts

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THE SOURCE FOR ARTS PROFESSIONALS IN THE KNOW



A+ Students enjoy
A+ on Wheels
Theater materials.

In 160+ schools across the country, school leaders are using the A+ Schools arts integration model to improve schools—and the students, teachers, and communities they serve.

TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS THROUGH SCHOOLS

By Jeff Poulin, Arts Education Program Coordinator

For more than 20 years, the A+ Schools model has been changing the lives of young people through the arts. As a result of work at the local, state, and federal levels, we know that the A+ Schools model is good for schools, communities, the workforce, and our greater society. Brooke, a 5th grader from Bugg Creative Arts & Science Magnet School, said it best: “I love our A+ School!”

So what is an A+ School and why does that model work?



▶ **A+ Teachers in workshops collaborate on sample projects, connections within their curricula, and planning future lessons.**

From its inception in the 1990s, the A+ Schools model has been about growing the understanding of the value and need for comprehensive arts education for every student, in every school. The A+ Schools model focuses on providing educators and school leaders with the support they need to build and maintain a creative school culture. The program itself is based around eight A+ Essentials™:

- Arts
- Curriculum
- Experiential Learning
- Multiple Learning Pathways
- Enriched Assessment
- Collaboration
- Infrastructure
- Climate

These essentials are not just indicators for success, but also a pathway for educational enhancement and change. Though slightly different in every state, the A+ Essentials™ lead the education efforts in every A+ School throughout the country. “These are truly brilliant because, not only does the model require teachers to get to know how students

learn, it also provides them with ways to teach different learners and to determine how each student is uniquely brilliant,” said Melanie Landrum, Executive Director of Arkansas A+ Schools at the Thea Foundation.

“The eight essentials work together to make school make sense! It does not just bring arts integration into a school and try to make it work, it brings arts into the school in meaningful ways and in the context of the school driving how it happens. Valuing schools in their environments and letting them work through the framework, as a whole team, to create the school that works for their children—that is an amazing model and amazing process to see unfold.” – Executive Director of Oklahoma A+ Schools Sandy Kent

The model itself is supported by the National A+ School Consortium which works to support its member organizations throughout the country.

THE HISTORY

In her essay, “Do Something For the Children: a Pre-History of the A+ Schools Model,” Jeanne Butler, who is the former executive director of the Thomas S. Kenan Institute for the Arts, tells the story of the program’s inception in North Carolina. It was in 1993 that Ms. Butler first began to ponder the work of the new institute. Through conversations with the founding family and based on her previous experience at the National Endowment for the Arts, she began an exploration into a rejected application she had once read. This application was for the expansion and replication of a successful arts integration program in Wilmington,

NC. This program was to become the A+ Schools model in North Carolina just a few years later.

Michelle Mazan Burrows was a 4th grade teacher at Bugg Elementary School in 1995 and was part of the initial cohort of schools accepted into the program. “My initial start with A+ was as an attendee at the first A+ Summer Institute,” she said. “Teachers and administrators gathered to learn the value of the arts, of collaboration, and of creative school culture and how to create classrooms and schools where students want to be, where learning is engaging, collaborative, standards-based and art-filled, and where student talents, abilities, and creativity are nurtured and validated.” Burrows went on to become an A+ Fellow and is now the director of the North Carolina A+ Schools program at the North Carolina Arts Council.

“Every time I am in a school—doing a training, working with the A+ leadership from our schools, facilitating a summer institute—there are moments of inspiration, validation, and awe. One of my favorite

moments was in one of our middle schools in rural North Carolina. We were conducting studio classrooms for this first year A+ School, with an A+ Fellow facilitating an integrated lesson with a classroom of students while teachers observed. Students were using dance standards to explore the rock cycle. All of the students were so engaged as they created movement phrases to deepen their understanding of the vocabulary and stages of the rock cycle. The class went smoothly, the students clearly gained deeper understanding, and didn't want to depart when the bell rang. In the debrief following the lesson, the observing teachers confessed that they had pulled all of their 'behavior issues' into this one class because they wanted to see how these 'difficult' students would react and work. The teachers commented over and over again about the students' engagement, creativity, critical thinking, and group work and how surprised they were that this group of students behaved and achieved as they did. It was a moment of validity and truth for us, for those students and for the observing teachers.” – Director of the North Carolina A+ Schools Program Michelle Mazan Burrows

▶ **Students are engaged by experiential learning that puts them in the shoes of artists, historical figures, and innovators.**



THE LEGACY

North Carolina A+ Schools celebrated its 20th anniversary during a conference held in August. Bringing together attendees and speakers from more than 10 states and three countries, the host organization had reason to celebrate. During the opening night celebration—shortly after a group of student performers brought down the house—Michelle Mazan Burrows, the director of North Carolina A+ Schools, began a video montage of the

key dates of this influential program. As the video continued, a small dot bounced across the screen highlighting pivotal moments over time. Beginning in 1995 at the Thomas S. Kenan Institute for the Arts, 24 schools were part of the first cohort to pilot the North Carolina A+ Schools model. The video continued by showing the expansion into several other states along with several cities across the country—and at the end it was announced that there are growing partnerships with cultural organizations in Switzerland and South Africa. The audience was left with no doubt about the transformative impact the A+ Schools model has had on the field of arts education in America and, now, abroad.

Before A+ went global, it was replicated in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana. The program has grown organically throughout the country. Sometimes it has been the investigative work from teacher leaders like in Oklahoma, and other times it has been systemic from

others in the arts education ecosystem. “I was on the first team from Oklahoma to investigate the North Carolina A+ Schools program to see if it would be a viable option to bring from one state to another,” said Jean Hendrickson, the director emeritus of Oklahoma A+. “I was a principal in a high-poverty school in Oklahoma City Public Schools when I was embedded in a North Carolina A+ School’s five-day training in 2001.” Arkansas and Louisiana currently have programs as well as a number of cities and school districts operating independently throughout the country.

The expansion through Arkansas was infinitely impacted by the work of the Wingate and Thea Foundations. “I walked in the front door of Hugh Goodwin Elementary School in El Dorado, AR in the fall of 2006 as part of Thea’s Art Across Arkansas program,” said Paul Leopoulos, executive director of the Thea Foundation. “I noticed there was an A+ sign in their sign outside the school, but didn’t much relate to it until the principal at the time, Mr. Landsdale, asked me if I had heard about the A+ program. I said no, and he gave me a tour. I was so blown away and after the tour I called my wife, Linda, co-founder of the Thea Foundation, and told her, ‘We found another critical element of Thea’s arts advocacy!’” In Arkansas, the rest is history.

“In Louisiana, A+ Schools has created a statewide dialogue about the power the arts can play in whole school transformation. Our network includes public schools, private schools; poor schools, affluent schools, rural, urban, and suburban schools; low and high performing schools; schools with new leaders and schools with leaders that have been

▶ These A+ high school students are partnering with those from a nearby university to make beautiful and functional classroom tables.



▶ **Arts integrated learning helps students make connections and strengthen important skills such as collaboration, out-of-the-box thinking, and self-discipline.**



in place 20+ years. I could go on and on! A+ is unique because it works in every type of school setting.” – Bethany France, Director, Louisiana A+ Schools at the George Rodrigue Foundation of the Arts

From participating in the National Endowment for the Arts’ Education Leaders Institute to advising the framing of the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities’ Turnaround Arts Initiative, the A+ Schools model is a proven model to impact educational systems change, school climate, and classroom practice through the arts.

Researchers and authors such as Sir Ken Robinson and Drs. George Noblit and Claudia Cornett have often cited this program as a model for national and international attention. Such sentiment has been similarly endorsed by state and federal agencies alike. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan notes that the A+ Schools model nurtures creativity in every student, boosts attendance, and decreases disciplinary action in schools. This evidence has been highlighted by the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and has influenced American education policy.

Americans for the Arts is proud to be an advocacy partner to support the A+ Schools model as an exemplar for arts education. We are pleased to have North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Arkansas teams as part of our State Policy Pilot Program to advance educational policy for the arts at the state level.

As an entire movement in educational reform, the A+ Schools model exemplifies the years of work done in the pedagogy of arts integration. The legacy is clear: “A+ Schools stands as a sustainable movement, declaring the arts as an integral part of schools that work for everyone, rather than a stand-alone experience. We show how to use the arts as a means of human expression and human education so that they are impossible to peel away from a complete learning experience,” Jean Hendrickson says eloquently. What does the A+ Schools model show about the arts? They’re essential.

QUICK LOOK

Resources

▣ Check out resources from the A+ Schools organizations:

- National Consortium:
www.nationalaplusschools.org
- Arkansas:
www.arkansasaplus.org
- Louisiana: www.aplusla.org
- North Carolina:
www.aplus-schools.ncdcr.gov
- Oklahoma: www.okaplus.org