

## **Art Education Helps Increase Test Scores, Encourage Student Involvement**

*by John Albright, public information officer, Adams County School District 14*

In 2006, at the annual convention of the American Association of School Administrators, VH1's Save the Music foundation honored Adams County School District 14 (Adams 14), in Commerce City, CO. On behalf of the citizens, the school district faculty, staff and students, superintendent John Lange received the Administrator Award for Distinguished Support of Music Education.

In a school district that lost its arts programs a decade earlier due to a budget crisis, how did Lange and Adams 14 rise to national acclaim for promoting and protecting a balanced arts education?

### **District overview**

Adams 14 serves the core area of Commerce City, an industrialized Denver suburb. The district has about 35,000 residents with 6,700 students. Over the past decade, the median income has fallen from \$18,000 to \$14,000. The Adams 14 free and reduced lunch population hovers around 80%. Since it is such a high percentage, the district has chosen to feed 100% of students through its nutrition services program. With only 38% of parents having a high school diploma and just 5% being college graduates, Adams 14 had made a commitment to extending educational opportunities to parents and the community. The district offers adult education options at the Intergenerational Learning Center, where parents can take bilingual educational courses to obtain their GEDs.

Adams 14 serves a population that is 78% Hispanic and 54% English Language Learners. Finally, the district mobility rate is 43%, with many families coming in and out of the district, as family employment situations often take them back and forth to Mexico.

### **Adams 14's story**

Lange still remembers the year Adams 14 cut music, art and other programs.

"It was just after Thanksgiving, and I had to call music and art teachers to lay them off," Lange said. "It was a rough time for our district." The following year, the district made a decision to go for a referendum to restore such programs to its schools.

In November 1996, the Adams 14 community passed the referendum to restore, among other things, arts education. This was the first successful tax increase for Adams

14 in 16 years. Through the years since this successful referendum, the board of education has remained committed to honoring the will of the people. Arts programs are a critical component of the district's education.

"In Adams 14, we emphasize excellent first-time instruction in all areas, and we work just as hard in the arts as we do in other subjects to provide highly qualified teachers, excellent resources and sound instruction," Lange said.

Each elementary school has a full-time visual art teacher and a full-time general music teacher. When students reach fifth grade, they can choose to study an instrument. The seven elementary schools offer both strings and band, and they provide the instruments and books without cost.

At the secondary level, each school is staffed with a full-time visual arts teacher and full-time vocal and band teachers. Adams 14 middle schools share a full-time strings specialist, and the Adams City High School music program includes jazz band, guitar, concert band, orchestra, two performing choirs and a mariachi group. Additionally, students can study visual arts, including painting, drawing, photography and ceramics. Students interested in theater can participate in acting, directing and technical theater.

Lange points out that a talented and committed faculty is critical to the success of the music and arts programs. "Our teachers consistently advocate for their students' interests, and they deliver quality instruction," he added.

Adams 14 students make good use of these opportunities in the arts. About 2,500 elementary students are experiencing the joy of art and music education. In the upper grades, when the arts become elective classes, 30% of students choose music classes and 19% choose visual art classes. At Adams City High School, 555 students took at least one class in music, art or theater last year.

"We support these programs at the district level through professional development and budget support for equipment and repairs, and we employ a fine and performing arts coordinator," Lange said.

In an effort to thank the community for supporting music and the arts, the district hosts four music festivals each year and one visual arts festival. The four music festivals celebrate instrumental music, vocal music, strings and the recorder. Counting the student performers and audience members, each festival creates a musical celebration for around 1,200 people.

## **Student success**

While thousands of students have benefited from quality arts programs in Adams 14, some students have received honors on the regional and national stage. In 2006, for example, Adams City High School senior Alexandra Graham was the regional Scholastic Art Gold Key winner, advancing to the national competition at Carnegie Hall and returning as the national silver winner for her art portfolio.

Each year the Adams 14 Education Foundation—a nonprofit that awards scholarships to students and grants to teachers—honors one student with the Musicians of Promise scholarship. The foundation presents this award to a graduating senior who will attend a four-year university and will major in either music performance or music education. The “musician of promise” receives a high-quality musical instrument of his or her choice.

One musician of promise, Kawika Berthelette, wishes to return to Adams 14 to teach. “It would be nice to show the kids that, hey, I’m an alumna from here, and I went somewhere and am making something of myself—you can too,” she said.

## **The future for Adams 14**

Adams 14 is committed to providing a balanced education to meet the needs of the diverse learning styles of students. To meet this goal, Adams 14 provides a wealth of opportunities for every student who walks through its doors. But how will the district continue to serve the students who yearn for more exposure to arts education?

In November 2006, the voters of Adams 14 passed a bond issue to build a state-of-the-art high school that will replace Adams City High School in August 2009. This new high school and community college campus will offer students four academies of study, including a fine and performing arts academy.

This academy will serve about 500 students with comprehensive courses in 2-D and 3-D art, photography, digital multimedia, drama and technical theater, dance, and choral and instrumental music.

“The facility itself will be phenomenal, but it’s the educational vision behind this school that is truly important,” Lange said. “We believe every child has a right to be engaged in school, and we know that our arts programs bring many of our students to school each day.” The new school will include a theater with orchestra pit, a dance studio, photography lab with a darkroom, ceramics kiln, and video production and multimedia facilities. “We just hope we build the fine and performing arts academy big

enough to accommodate the enrollment, as we expect it to generate a lot of interest both inside and outside our district attendance boundaries,” he added.

### **The case for arts education**

The Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) testing began just as Adams 14 brought the arts programs back the district. “When the scores came back in the summer of 1997, Adams 14 was the lowest in the state,” Lange said.

The solution for Adams 14 was a focus on excellent first-time instruction in classrooms, appropriate interventions, including the Lindamood-Bell learning process and support for students whose learning strengths and talents are best addressed through the sensory-rich arts environment.

The result has shocked many throughout the state and nation. In 2007, Adams 14 celebrated its seventh consecutive year of overall academic improvement, as measured by CSAP. Lange attributes part of the success to the presence of a strong arts education program. In light of the increase in test scores and the continued emphasis on a balanced education, Adams 14 was asked to visit the Colorado State Board of Education to explain how the district makes consistent academic gains while steadfastly supporting the arts.

On the national stage, the Arts Education Partnership’s publication, [\*Critical Evidence: How the Arts Benefit Student Achievement\*](#), explains that in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, “the arts share equal billing with reading, math, science and other disciplines as ‘core academic subjects’ that can contribute to improved student learning outcomes.”

Additionally, the report states, “Schools integrating the arts into the curriculum as part of a comprehensive education reform strategy are documenting positive changes in the school environment and improved student performance.” Many school districts nationwide are facing increasing costs that lead to challenging budget years.

Adams 14 will continue its search for ways to balance protection and promotion of the arts while maintaining other critical district programs. “We struggled with many difficult decisions when developing our 2008-2009 budget, but we continued to fund our arts programs and even looked at our future academy as a way to expand these programs,” Lange said.

What is clear for Adams 14 is that arts education has a bright future. The board of education and community continue to voice their support for these programs, and the students of Adams 14 will continue to benefit from a rich and well-balanced education.

*John Albright is the public information officer for Adams County School District 14 in Commerce City, CO. For more information about the school district, visit [www.acsd14.k12.co.us/index.asp](http://www.acsd14.k12.co.us/index.asp).*



Monaco Elementary School students perform their holiday production for the school community. Music and art classes collaborate to develop a theatrical experience to celebrate the holiday season.



A mask created in an elementary art class, where students learn about cultures and history while creating art projects. This mask was part of the annual Visual Arts Festival, a three-day public event to honor the students who created quality artwork throughout the year.



Fifth graders from Alsup Elementary, an IB World School, entertain the community with a recorder performance.