

## **Creativity, Imagination and Innovation in America's Schools**

A model for increasing academic achievement and social success in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

By Eileen Mackin, founder and director of SmART Schools, Education Development Center Inc.

Creativity is not a gift bestowed on a precious few, something you are either born with or not. Rather, it is a way of thinking, imagining and innovating. When creative thinking skills are cultivated, reinforced and embedded in the classroom, they produce a groundswell, igniting every student's imagination and capacity for innovative thinking.

This, in turn, creates a climate for something much more than increased academic achievement, it becomes a model for lifelong success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Dare to imagine a school where it would be common practice for fourth-grade classrooms to study Columbus by:

- Writing lyrics and composing music inspired by selected passages from *Pedro's Journal*, *Morning Girl*, *Encounter*, *Guests* and authentic journal entries written by Christopher Columbus, to better understand how it feels to inhabit a place abruptly claimed by another culture.
- Writing and performing scripts that illustrate the tensions created upon the arrival of Columbus and the impact on the Taino Indians.
- Using the internet to explore the Jose Maria Cave and the 16th century cave paintings made by the Taino Indians that record the Spanish Conquest.
- Researching, analyzing and creating new images to illustrate how each person's identity is determined by such factors as age, gender, ethnic background, culture and resources, and to initiate dialogue about themselves as individuals and as a part of society.

- Studying the history of Hispaniola in the West Indies (now the Dominican Republic and Haiti)—home of the Taino Indians, believed to be the first inhabitants of the New World to encounter Christopher Columbus.
- Applying math and science skills to graph and build a model of such an island, and to literally and metaphorically redraw boundaries to illustrate shifts in ownership and vegetation, along with devastation due to disease and competition for the island's resources.
- Collaborating in small groups to translate relevant poems into movement phrases and classroom dance performances that model respectful and positive ways to interact with and treat others or reflect on what a society based on social justice might look like.
- Merging the collage/montage and anecdotal writing process to create a self-portrait built upon an understanding that social justice begins with us.

SmART Schools classrooms are such places. The SmART Schools model awakens students' creativity, and appreciation of the arts while helping them meet high standards of performance in the arts and core academic subjects. SmART Schools believes every child has natural artistic talent and abilities and that engagement in artistic experiences every day allows individual creativity and appreciation of the arts to increase, bringing out the artist in every child. The SmART Schools model is designed to develop a sustainable arts-centered school culture in which classroom teachers, arts educators or teaching artists regularly collaborate on a regular basis to design and implement curriculum, instruction and performance assessments.

## **Two schools**

Beech Street Elementary School in Manchester, NH, a full Title I school, has more than 100 English Language Learner (ELL) students, whose reading performance is at least two years behind grade level. Many are from African immigrant families that have relocated from refugee camps in Somalia and Sudan. They now represent roughly 70% of the students in ELL classrooms. Beech Street students have tremendous needs: Many are attending formal school for the first time; they speak more than 50 languages; 48% receive English as a Second Language services; and 83% are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Our work at Beech Street has evolved into a compelling ELL model within the overall SmART Schools framework. Many of these students not only need to learn English and understand the nature of print, but they also need to be acculturated to school—learn to sit in chairs, listen to a teacher, work in groups, wear shoes and be indoors all day.

While Beech Street teachers face huge challenges, through the SmART Schools program they have discovered that the arts can transform their practice and help students who might otherwise be perceived as unsuccessful to shine and realize the joy of success. For example, Kurt Wootton, a SmART Schools master teaching artist and arts and literacy expert, asked a group of Beech Street teachers and their second and fourth-grade students—consisting of a large number of refugee children—if they remembered any songs from their native country. One Somali boy started singing, and immediately the room was filled with the voices of fellow refugee students.

To the teachers' amazement, rich and inspiring pathways to learning emerged spontaneously. In that instant, the SmART Schools approach forever altered the classroom practice of this interdisciplinary team.

Daniel Scheinman, one teacher, said, "This is the only way these kids learn ...

Kids loved what we did this year. They were excited about each project. They remembered the poems and chants in June that we learned in September. The students' English comprehension and oral skills increased dramatically with each project."

Another Beech Street teacher remarked, "SmART Schools has given our ELL students a voice, a sense of self and pride. It has made our students more aware of different cultures and made them curious to know more. It has inspired students to be more involved in the arts." These teachers will never go back to relying on the limitations of paper and pencil tasks.

When a school fully embraces the SmART Schools model, it frequently improves its overall performance to a point where students begin to exceed academic standards. For example, prior to participating in the SmART Schools program, Oakland Beach Elementary in Warwick, RI, was one of the 14 lowest performing schools in the state.

After three years of SmART Schools implementation, Oakland Beach achieved "high-performing" scores (based on state assessments), a state Senate citation, a commendation from the Board of Regents, and was named a National Title I Distinguished School, one of only 38 in the nation. Cathy Davis Hayes, Oakland Beach visual arts teacher, was named the Rhode Island Teacher of the year 2007 for being "instrumental in transforming Oakland Beach into a SmART School—a school in which all teachers receive extra training and support so as to place the arts at the center of the curriculum for all subjects taught in the school," according to Rhode Island's Governor Donald L. Carcieri.<sup>1</sup>

## **The program**

So what is SmART Schools? It is a K-12 research-based, comprehensive, whole-school reform initiative that places arts-centered professional learning communities at

the fulcrum. SmART Schools is a powerful instrument for continuous school improvement that supports participating schools in the implementation of key state and local education standards and reform practices. Specifically, the SmART Schools program has five major objectives/elements:

1. Provide daily instruction in the arts (dance, music, theater and the visual arts) for every student in every classroom, every day.
2. Teach for understanding in and through the arts by providing ongoing professional development and coaching for interdisciplinary teams, helping them to collaborate effectively in the design and implementation of high quality standards-based, arts-infused curriculum, instruction and performance assessments.
3. Cultivate arts-centered professional learning communities supported by collaborative leadership teams and ongoing professional development to cultivate an arts-centered professional learning community.
4. Foster safe, personalized and inclusive school communities where creativity, risk-taking and engagement are valued.
5. Bridge partnerships among family, schools and community, including arts and cultural organizations, professional artists and higher education.

In a recent *Educational Leadership* article, “The Arts Make a Difference,” authors Nick Rabkin and Robin Redmond state: “It’s time to stop thinking about the arts as fluff. They make schools better places to learn, and they raise student achievement.”<sup>2</sup>

SmART Schools provides evidence for their claim. SmART Schools was developed in 1997, and piloted and evaluated over a three-year period (from 1999 to 2002) in five suburban Rhode Island schools. SmART Schools has been subjected to rigorous research and evaluation from its inception.

In 2002, independent evaluator Martin Gardiner reported that students in the pilot schools significantly outperformed students in demographically similar comparison schools on statewide measures of writing and mathematical problem solving. After three years, the percentage of students at proficient or higher levels in math problem solving, writing effectiveness and writing conventions were on average 13%, 26.9% and 23.3% higher than before the program, compared to 2.8%, 14% and 10.6% in control schools.

In math concepts and reading analysis, gains of 16.8% and 11.1% are also larger than in controls, 10.5% and 5.1%. In a more recent three-year study of urban, suburban and rural public schools, Gardiner reports the SmART Schools program had an especially great impact on students coming from high poverty homes.

### **Importance of integration**

As Rabkin and Redmond so aptly state, “Arts integration is not simple or easy work.”<sup>3</sup> Many educators might ask, “Why bother?” Consistently, we have witnessed the transforming effect on teachers who participate in our program’s professional development. As they hone the skills and innovative methods for arts-integration, it forever changes their hearts and minds, producing profound changes in their classroom practices and helping them rediscover their love of teaching.

These teachers insist they can never go back to their old ways. If, in time, they transfer to other schools, they take away this informed perspective on teaching and learning, model it at their new sites, thus further increasing the impact of the SmART Schools approach to arts-integration as it ripples out.

One of the most crucial building blocks for the successful implementation of SmART Schools, or any comprehensive whole-school change program, is commitment. Above all, districts and schools must commit to providing and supporting a viable structure in which students excel. This includes sufficient money for stipends, substitute

teachers and time for teachers to participate in ongoing professional development, as well as time scheduled during the school day for interdisciplinary teams to meet on an ongoing basis to plan, design, implement and reflect on all aspects of this dynamic work. The results have proven to be worth the investment.

Imagine a school climate that inspires all students to develop and demonstrate keen creative thinking skills, use their imaginations well and grow and harness the capacity to be innovative and inventive thinkers and doers. It would be a place where all students experience increased achievement on statewide assessments. It would be a school where, administrators and teachers daily witness increased student motivation, attendance, active engagement, self-esteem, confidence, interpersonal skills, citizenship and awareness and appreciation for different cultures.

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#### References

1. Rhode Island Department of Education, "Warwick Arts Teacher Named 2007 Rhode Island Teacher of the Year," press release, Dec. 12, 2006.
2. Nick Rabkin and Robin Redmond, "The Arts Make a Difference," *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 63, No. 5, pp. 60-64.
3. Ibid.