

## **Thriving Minds**

Citywide plan brings creative learning to schools and neighborhoods

*By Gina Thorsen, vice president of research and program development, Big Thought*

It was somewhat of a treasure hunt. In 2006, the Wallace Foundation, a New York-based private philanthropic agency, was searching for communities that were working to coordinate and align fine arts instruction offered in schools with work being done by community institutions. They found a number of diamonds in the rough, but few real gems.

Their search was spurred by a resurgence of interest in the role of creativity and the arts in student learning. An entire generation has missed out on the proven benefits of the arts due to several factors, including budget cuts and a focus on reading and math education. Those of us fortunate enough to enjoy weekly drama, chorus, orchestra and visual-art classes when we were in school might not be aware how rare those offerings are in today's classrooms.

But across the country there are the rumblings of an arts education renaissance. Cities are taking a fresh look at their schools, neighborhoods and cultural communities, and are considering how they might work together to bring creativity, innovation and critical thinking back to the classroom.

The Wallace Foundation ended its search when it struck gold in New York and Dallas. New York, of course is a world-renowned cultural leader. But Texas, as the birthplace of No Child Left Behind, was an unlikely site for creative education reform. However, Texas has bred some extraordinary pioneers, rebels and visionaries. And fortunately for the children of Dallas, many of them have united to change the role arts and culture play in citywide learning today.

### **A decade's work comes to fruition**

Over the past decade, Dallas has been carefully laying the foundation for this cultural shift. It has come to fruition with Thriving Minds (formerly the Dallas Arts Learning Initiative), a groundbreaking new partnership between the Dallas Independent School District (ISD), the city of Dallas and dozens of professional arts and cultural agencies. This unique alliance's agenda is social and educational change. Its roots are in another trailblazing initiative started in 1997.

That year the same partners came together to remedy longtime inequity in the distribution of cultural outreach programs among public schools. The Dallas Office of Cultural Affairs commissioned a study that revealed that the majority of cultural field trips and in-school arts programs went to students in the suburbs—inner city students took part in very few. In answer to this inequity, Dallas ArtsPartners was formed.

Dallas ArtsPartners provides every Dallas ISD elementary school student equal access to arts and cultural resources and supports the integration of those resources into the classroom in a meaningful, measurable way. Programming is diverse, ranging from in-school performances and

workshops delivered by emerging, culturally-specific agencies to field trips to the city's most venerable institutions. The common thread: Each program must incorporate state-mandated educational elements and meet a quality standard.

ArtsPartners has also created professional development opportunities for educators, provided new curriculum tools and identified funding to help offset costs of additional programming. Today, the initiative serves all 100,000 elementary students and 6,000 elementary educators in the district.

### **Three-pronged attack**

In February 2007—a decade after the genesis of ArtsPartners—the Wallace Foundation awarded Thriving Minds a grant of \$8 million over three years to expand on ArtsPartners' success and implement a plan for citywide creative learning. These funds are being matched and exceeded by public sector funds. Thriving Minds' total budget over the next three years is projected to reach \$39.9 million.

ArtsPartners is one of three connected strategies designed to boost the role of creativity in classrooms and communities. As the arts integration arm of Thriving Minds, it uses arts and culture to help teach core subjects like math and reading. The two other strategies involve reestablishing fine arts instruction in public school classrooms and coordinating and mobilizing neighborhoods to identify and develop arts programming. Together, these three strategies address the majority of creative learning opportunities for Dallas children. Thriving Minds is developing all three strategies individually while linking them to form a cohesive system.

### **Working together for sustainable change**

Research has shown that for a system to be effective, everyone is essential, and support must come from all directions. The aim of Thriving Minds is to surround a child with innovative learning experiences. To do this, it must also surround a child with circles of support, from the teachers and parents who directly influence them, to the agencies that implement the programs and on to the influencers—the high-level advocates so essential for long-term success.

Each of Thriving Minds' partners plays a pivotal role in carrying out its strategies. Dallas ISD has begun hiring 140 new music and visual arts specialists, so every elementary school will have one certified teacher in each discipline. By the 2008-2009 school year, every public elementary student in the city will receive 45 minutes of both music and visual art instruction every week.

Three City of Dallas agencies—parks and recreation, libraries and cultural affairs—are working together with local arts and cultural institutions, parent advocates and Thriving Minds staff to make creative learning an accessible, essential part of every Dallas neighborhood. Dubbed Creative Communities, this project has been established in five neighborhoods so far, with a goal of adding up to 15 more. The partner teams assess current arts and cultural resources and gaps in each

neighborhood and work with parents and service providers to develop individualized plans to boost or acquire programming.

Collaboration is the key to Dallas' success. The city is fortunate to have many strong institutions, programs and people committed to innovative learning, both in and outside the classroom. Some interact directly with children, and some implement and oversee programs or services that reach kids and their families. Others use their influence to serve as advocates for arts learning. Each has its unique place, but all are most effective when functioning as a system for change.

*Gina Thorsen is the vice president of research and program development at Big Thought. For more information about the program, visit [www.bigthought.org/](http://www.bigthought.org/).*