

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

The arts are a force that drives any and all learning

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Date: March 1, 2008 **Page:** **Section:** Columnists

Opinion

Much has been said about the role the arts play in the educational development of our young people. Some contend that music, dance, the visual arts, theater and other forms of human expression have little or no place alongside traditional book learning, that they teach no "practical" skill or trade and play a small role in the advancement of seemingly more useful subjects such as mathematics, science and economics.

We contend that the arts are the very breath of discovery, a force that drives any and all learning, and that without their influence the educational process would be nothing more than the accumulation of facts and their mindless regurgitation.

As a powerful learning tool, the synergy of art and education is a true phenomenon, one that we need to nurture, promote, and ensure that all current and future educators are able to experience.

While standardized tests certainly have a strong role to play in school accountability, alone they simply cannot detect or measure the full range of learning we want to encourage in young people. When we include the arts in classroom curricula, we can profoundly change the way our children learn and give educators a critical resource for increasing motivation, promoting higher attendance, preventing behavioral problems and academic failure, and improving academic achievement.

So why is this approach not already used today in our universities and colleges? Unfortunately, arts and education faculty in colleges and other programs traditionally prepare their teachers separately and operate completely independent of one another. This dynamic has resulted in isolated pockets of understanding, innovation and excellence.

It is clear that educational leaders, in partnership with families, the arts community and policymakers, must work together to develop innovative new strategies for instruction and for measuring student learning. In an ever-changing world where proactive thinking and pre-emptive problem solving has turned into an art form itself, the need for the arts as an integral part of public education is more critical now than ever before.

At the University of Utah, we have developed a rare and unique partnership that will change all that -- a collaborative endeavor with common goals, pooled resources and shared spaces. This arts and education partnership, which begins in fall 2008, will be unlike any other initiative in the country in design and scope.

It will prepare teachers to use an integrated curriculum model that teaches children to explore multiple subjects simultaneously; integrate traditionally distinct content subjects, such as art and science, and apply them thematically; and collaborate with arts specialists working in schools to teach fine arts content.

The U, as a premier flagship research institution, is perfectly fitted for this kind of bold endeavor, as it carries a strong national reputation in arts and education, the unique ability to attract the right resources, and the means to directly serve key individuals and organizations throughout Utah.

One of the foremost goals of this partnership is to construct a new arts and education complex, which will place arts education at the very center of what the U. as a research-intensive institution is all about.

This new facility would serve as the hub of educational innovation, where new programs, policies and technologies will be brought to light. It will stand as a place of meaningful collaboration between the arts and existing research and outreach centers and will support applied technology centers and community partnership programs.

As a vital part of this complex, we are creating a new, interdisciplinary research center for integrating arts into academic learning. All of this directly serves our children, allowing us to engage them in a comprehensive, life-changing educational experience.

At its very essence, education is artistic in nature. The inspiration that fuels learning, the drive we all feel as we uncover something new and personally profound, the joy we experience when applications for our newfound knowledge are illuminated in real and sometimes unexpected terms -- the entire educational process carries the spirit of artistic discovery.

Every day, we see that spark ignite in our children the next generation of innovators, leaders and thinkers. We need to see that same inspired attitude in the direct action of policymakers and educators to make this bright future a very real present, the fulfillment of inspired ideas into meaningful and lasting reality.

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