

ARTS ARE ACADEMIC

What is a small rural school system with big arts-education ideas and a limited arts-education budget to do? According to "Gaining the Arts Advantage: Lessons From School Districts That Value Art Education," a report that showcases the results of a two-year study by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities and the Arts in Public Education Partnership, money is not necessarily the determining factor in establishing and maintaining a commitment to arts education. It may be more important to have a school board with a supportive superintendent and principals, a policy framework and environment that values the arts as equal to other school subjects, a curriculum that consecutively builds on a strong arts foundation laid in the elementary grades and, especially, teachers willing to expand their arts knowledge.

Rockcastle County is among 91 schools across the country to be recognized nationally for its commitment to arts in education. The county's district school board and then-superintendent Bige W. Towery, Jr. initiated that commitment in early 1989 by hiring a basic arts coordinator and working with the Kentucky Arts Council to obtain some initial grant monies. By the time the Kentucky Education Reform Act became law in 1990, the Basic Arts Program was already in gear.

At the 10-year-mark, basic arts coordinator H. Allen Pensol, current superintendent Larry B. Hammond, and district supervisor Claudinnia B. Cash are enthusiastic about the district's accomplishments. The county's schools have multipurpose areas for displaying student work, and performance, and rehearsal space. The district has expanded its staff of arts and humanities specialists by 60% and offers numerous professional development opportunities. An estimated 90 percent or more of Rockcastle's teachers incorporate the arts and humanities into their daily instruction. Assessment scores in arts and humanities remain at or well above the state average. Elementary schools regularly hold student-parent arts nights and artist residencies are actively involved in school programs and instruction. A high school theater touring group performs for the intermediate students and middle school students stage performances for the primary students. Rockcastle County High School recently instituted the required credit in arts and humanities for graduation. School board members hold periodic meetings at the schools when student performances occur. Sometimes they even become a part of the presentation itself!

Better critical thinking skills, more advanced basic skills, an improved attitude toward school, and improved self-esteem are just a few of the benefits that teachers and administrators have noted over the past decade. And that's just in the students! Pensol says, "The goal for teachers has never been to give students just simple fun things to do. The arts are so much more than that. Our long-term goal continues to be developing exciting vehicles for learning content." He calls what the Rockcastle teachers are doing "amazing," considering their financial and time constraints.

Now, even teachers who don't feel qualified or prepared to teach the arts realize that they don't have to be "artists or performers" themselves. "I just added elements to what I was already doing," says Shelly Parkerson, a teacher at Mt. Vernon Elementary School. "A basic outline and the needed materials and they take it from there." A lesson plan about great painters combined with the opportunity to paint might branch into discussion about how colors were created and blended during that time in history; about shapes, angles, and curves; or about the customs, economics and politics reflected in the art of that time period.

All of this leads to the most important reason for the Rockcastle program's recognition: The arts are viewed as academic. A student with little or no previous skill in "the arts" is able to excel in basic and advanced skills via the incorporation of the arts and humanities into every area of study.

--Excerpts courtesy ARTS ACROSS KENTUCKY
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At left: Students analyze their own and other's artistic products and performances using accepted standards.

At right: Students have knowledge of major works of art, music, and literature and appreciate creativity and contributions of the arts and humanities.

