

# "REFRAMING—REFORMING" ARTS EDUCATION: TAKING BOLD STEPS TOWARD RADICAL CHANGE IN THE LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

by

RICHARD W. BURROWS

I have been thinking that the time has come to be bold.

All students in public education, K-12, and especially in the second largest school district in America, Los Angeles Unified School District, deserve a high quality education that can promise a rich future. Now, more than ever, we must be clear about our goals. Arts education needs to put its moral house in order and focus on the efforts which will have the greatest impact on student success and achievement.

The legitimacy and viability of dance, music, theatre and visual arts instruction in our schools is very far from being commonly accepted among educators, administrators and parents as having the same rigor and quality as other core curriculum. Perhaps we are lucky not to be as firmly entrenched as struggling national reading, literacy and math programs whose efforts to reform have proven to be superficial, cumbersome and filled with resistance to change.

Visual and Performing Arts advocates have in the past had the moral will, courage and staying power to maintain and sustain arts education programs for the past 25-30 years—in the face of nearly insurmountable odds. But the landscape has shifted. Education on the whole is at risk, and a system which traditionally has not respected the contributions of the arts to teaching and learning will very likely eliminate arts instruction in response to the crisis in "failed" core curriculum and study.

So, it seems that we must reframe the effort, and reform our thinking in arts education and establish new paradigms of practice. Be honest with ourselves about our own failings, do not repeat the mistakes of others, and boldly go into uncharted and undiscussed territories. Failures and mistakes are not self-correcting; they must be deliberately transformed. We will need to invent a system and try it out simultaneously. To do so, I think we must focus on:

- Cultivating competence and confidence in arts teachers.
- Implementing a comprehensive learning plan in the arts for all students that allows for multiple entry points of age, skills and mastery.
- Creating an infra- and super-structure that can reasonably withstand the variegates of budget, resolve, timing, schedule and resources.

What might be some of the assessment benchmarks in this reframing and reforming of arts education in our public schools? The continuing tradition of episodic and non-sequential instruction, performance-based/non-standards-based teaching, auditioned

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THE LAUSD IS CURRENTLY IN THE EIGHTH YEAR OF DEVELOPING AN INNOVATIVE AND BOLD STANDARDS-BASED ARTS EDUCATION PROGRAM OF INSTRUCTION FOR ALL K-12 STUDENTS.

SO, IT SEEMS THAT WE MUST REFRAME THE EFFORT, AND REFORM OUR THINKING IN ARTS EDUCATION AND ESTABLISH NEW PARADIGMS OF PRACTICE. BE HONEST WITH OURSELVES ABOUT OUR OWN FAILINGS, DO NOT REPEAT THE MISTAKES OF OTHERS, AND BOLDLY GO INTO UNCHARTED AND UNDISCUSSED TERRITORIES.

arts opportunities, some arts disciplines and not all, and arts for only some students needs to be re-thought completely. These are victim-mentality instructional designs which will never reach full capacity.

In order to make substantive progress, a few agreed general principles are:

1. Arts content should be taught at all grade levels.
2. Artistic and creative teaching strategies should be imbedded in all subjects, utilized by all generalist and specialized teachers.
3. All students benefit from access to arts instruction. No research can definitively prove that participation in arts instruction causes student achievement and test scores to drop.
4. Arts programs should be deliberate, explicit, systematic and sustained.



Richard Burrows, the Director of Arts Education for the Los Angeles Unified School District, introduces Site Directors from the Music-in-Education National Consortium to an all-city orchestra—just one example of other all-city performance ensemble programs that have been resurrected in LA with the goals of real diversity in mind.

5. As a metadiscipline of sorts, arts education can have multiple emphases, features and effects, as well as critical thinking and problem solving.
6. Arts instruction recognizes the integrative nature of learning and emphasizes the creative capital that each student brings to artistic endeavors.
7. More is at stake in teaching and learning than promotion to the next academic course, or successful test-taking. Achievement is multidimensional and has multifocal indicators in assessing student accomplishment.
8. Arts instruction scaffolds meaning between school, social environment, community and family.

Some important, but rarely discussed questions come to mind as we rethink our arts education efforts. How much instruction is needed in each art form to move students from one grade level skill set to the next or from one learning

benchmark to next one? Have we determined what this competency is and looks like, and how it is repeatable by large groups of students? What might be the baseline or foundational level arts instruction that should be guaranteed to each student, K-12, in each art form? What is the dynamic relationship and educational responsibility of the generalist classroom teacher and the arts content specialist. Can visual and performing arts teachers work effectively, collaboratively, and non-competitively to secure these reform ideals? Will administrators revise their expectations of what a quality arts program at a school looks like when it is instructionally based, and not event oriented? Do superintendents or boards of education have the true grit and resolve to stand by the soft words of praise for arts as core curriculum when money becomes a factor? In what ways do the arts guarantee a creative future in the employment and economic marketability of students upon graduation or as they embark towards college? How are the arts a companion to, informed by, and a model for other educa-

tional initiatives in school systems that are moving towards closing the achievement gap for students at risk?

Weighty questions. Are we ready to explore them deeply? First on my list of endeavors is to do my homework. California Standards in the Visual and Performing Arts, K-12, set out what students should know and be able to do. They do not set out a structure for delivery, what it looks like and what incremental assessment is required. So the first step for LAUSD would be to examine in depth the learning continuum that each art form places forward in the formal atmosphere of standards. When are new ideas and concepts presented? How much emphasis is placed on continually representing yourself as a learner to the same material as you grow and expand your skill and mastery? What is the progression?

Next I would ask my district arts education experts to look carefully at the exit competencies at the 5th grade, 8th grade and Proficient level for high school graduation in the arts. Set these as Meta-performance Benchmarks that define the scale of the current structure of our district; and then backwards plan from these benchmarks for the type, amount and level of intensity over multiple years of instructional opportunities in each art form. These would be defined as the Learning Goals prior to each Meta-performance Benchmark.

Armed with this information, I would simultaneously present a policy and instructional system for effective implementation. The Board of Education must set the minimum expectations for quality arts engagement by policy. The District must present a reasonable plan for delivery of the Learning Goals and the Meta-performance Benchmarks. As a natural outcome to these two pieces of

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information, the following materials would be required:

- Pacing Plans in each artform, K-12
- Instructional Guides in Dance, Music, Theatre and Visual Arts
- Professional Development in the Arts for all teachers
- Assessment Criteria

None of this might be possible to accomplish except through a very diversified conversation locally and nationally. The expertise to have a dialogue about the possibilities and implications of these questions and their answers does not rest solely within the rubric of a school district.

LAUSD has the challenge and comfort of 5 years of implementation towards a 10-year plan to reinstate the arts into every school

of the District. Much has changed since this was initiated in 1999. I contend that some of the most important voices in arts education “reform” must be culled together for the arts education “reframing.” To that end, I have proposed in collaboration with the Music-in-Education National Consortium a national dialogue coupled with local inquiry teams to examine and explore the issues related to the conditions presented here.

Change is not easy. If it was, everyone would do it. There is more work to do than the District can do by itself. So the tapestry required for the commitment to finding these answers lies with brave individuals who will set aside their differences and preferences and understand that no one owns an idea, if it is the right idea, when placed on the table for discussion and analysis.

I started off my treatise with “I have been thinking that now is the time to be bold.” Not because we believe this is the correct strategy to take at this time, but because we have no other choice. Boldness is at the root of innovation. Our students in Los Angeles Unified School District deserve no less than our complete attention to the value of their lives. ¶

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## REPORT OF THE MIENC CONFERENCE “ANTHEM FOR CHANGE: MUSIC IN EDUCATION REFORM”

by

CATHY SMILAN AND PATRICK KEPPEL

The third annual conference of the Music-in-Education National Consortium (MIENC), “Anthem for Change: Music in Education Reform,” was hosted by the Arts Education branch of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) on March 15-17, 2004. The LAUSD, in the fifth year of a ten-year plan “to incorporate a variety of strategies for securing a sequential, comprehensive, standards-based arts education for all students in all classrooms in all arts forms” (Burrows), invited the MIENC to Los Angeles to share its successful principles and practices with local representatives from higher education, public schools, and arts organizations. “Anthem for Change” was structured as a dynamic “working conference”; brief interactive presentations by MIENC program directors were followed by lively and fruitful “breakout discussions” designed to provide a meaningful professional development opportunity for the local participants, so that they could begin to create the lasting partnerships that will foster and nurture their own unique music integration initiatives in Los Angeles.

Below is a summary of key themes and discussion points covered.

### DAY 1 FOCUS: *Schools of Music and Education*

**Host:** *Robert Cutietta, Chair of Music Education, University of Southern California*  
**Focus Participants:** *USC, UCLA, CSUN, CSUCLA, Cal Arts at Davidson Hall, USC*

Richard Burrows, LAUSD Director of Arts Education, opened the conference by highlighting several of the points he addressed in his statement of purpose “Reframing-Reforming Arts Education.” He pointed out that in LA, as in many other communities, education on the whole is in crisis, and that since traditionally the contributions of the arts to teaching and learning are not viewed as having the same rigor and quality as other core curricula, arts instruction is likely to be eliminated in response to the perceived “failure” of the core curriculum. As a result, Burrows asserted that “the time has come to be bold . . . [W]e must reframe the effort, and reform our thinking in arts education and establish new paradigms of practice, [focusing on]:

- Cultivating competence and confidence in arts teachers;
- Implementing a comprehensive learning plan in the arts for all students that allows for multiple entry points of age, skills and mastery;
- Creating an infra- and super-structure that can reasonably withstand the variegates of budget, resolve, timing, schedule and resources.

Burrows emphasized that given the L.A. Board of Education’s serious and sincere desire



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