

Executive Summary

The arts integration project is an initiative of the Perpich Center for Arts Education in Golden Valley, MN, in collaboration with multiple schools in the Southeast and West Central regions of the state (to be expanded over the next two years). Special Legacy funding allocated by the state legislature has allowed the Center's staff to work with interested educators to improve student learning and enhance teacher capacity through the use of arts-integrated curricular units closely aligned with the state's academic standards. Perpich professionals support and reinforce teacher teams in participating sites through providing professional development opportunities; promoting educator networks that bridge participants' various disciplines; encouraging documentation of their efforts and the use of technology; and by positioning the ideas of standards, alignment, and assessments front and center in the teachers' deliberations. This annual evaluation report reflects the first year of progress for the Southeast network and the third year of progress in the West Central network.

Evaluation activities which generated data that addressed student learning and teachers' capacity to integrate the arts included holding regular conversations with Perpich staff, attending training sessions, surveying teachers and students, observing teachers' classes, conducting face-to-face interviews with participants, reviewing project-related documents (including curricular plans, student work and grades, teacher reflections, and Perpich staff member's reports and memos), and eliciting feedback on evaluation draft reports.

For their part, students indicated that they very much liked learning through the arts, based on "Quickwrites" that 850 of them completed. These brief written surveys asked students to indicate what they had learned about the art form, the non-art subject area, and integrating the two -- as well as their willingness to participate in similar types of instruction in the future. This last question gave an estimate of how positively students responded to the units. Of the 824 who provided an opinion, 607 (about 75 percent) affirmed that they would.

Teachers provided an explanation as to why students appeared to enjoy the units so much. In fact, at least half of a group of 36 teachers who answered a survey about the Quickwrite data reported greater student participation in key learning behaviors (like using the arts, making choices about how to do a task, choosing how to demonstrate learning, getting to do hands-on activities, and being thoughtful) during the units than were typically evidenced in non-unit classes. In no instance did a teacher suggest that such behaviors were more prevalent in the non-unit lessons.

Evaluators' observations of 55 classroom lessons confirmed that students were more engaged and thoughtful in unit-related lessons and tended to more participatory in lessons that incorporated the arts regardless of whether they pertained to the project-related units. Students in 60 percent of the unit-related observed lessons that also included the art form were deemed to

be interestedly active and rigorous in their behavior (22 lessons). Fifty percent of the non-unit related lessons that nevertheless drew on the arts evidenced students acting in these ways (14 lessons). Forty-four percent of the unit-related classes that did not happen to include an art form found students to be engaged and thoughtful (nine lessons). And only 20 percent of the lessons that neither were a part of the unit nor included an art form contained a predominance of students who acted in these ways (10 lessons).

The teachers who responded to the above-mentioned survey also reviewed students' answers about what they learned and judged how well these responses captured what the teachers wanted them to learn. Thirty-three of the 36 indicated that they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" their students clearly understood the main points related to the non-arts subject area; 31 used "agree" or "strongly agree" with respect to the art form; and 32 opted for the same two answers for students' grasp of how to integrate the two.

The distribution of students' grades received on integrated unit activities reinforced the idea that considerable learning had taken place. Understandably there was no uniform system of grading the units across the schools. But regardless of the type of grade used (e.g., letters or numbers), across all the schools the bias was for them to be more concentrated in the higher end of the grading scale. Thus, the majority of scores were As or 4s or whatever the highest possible score was. In fact, three schools reported all the students to be at the highest level.

Finally, teachers anecdotally noted positive impacts on students when the arts were injected into lessons. They mentioned more prevalence of "on-task" behavior, students taking great pride in their work, applying arts and non-arts content accurately, and actually helping each other. Students who historically had struggled in school appeared to flourish, according to some teachers, so much so that one reported that several other teachers in the building exclaimed about one particular young person, "Oh my god, I've never seen that student do this."

Teachers reported that their professional skills had been enhanced through involvement in the project. They repeatedly mentioned four key capacities in interviews, Perpich-guided reflections about their efforts, and surveys. Each represented an aspect of teaching that they rarely engaged in and yet they quickly recognized the value the skills added to their work as educators. One was collaborating with colleagues, as one teacher noted: "We have been looking for a long time for ways to collaborate. We have to change the fear from isolation. This [project] is a great vehicle – it shows exactly what you can do if you share expertise." A second capacity that typically lurked outside teachers' normal professional repertoire of activities was gaining knowledge about and facility with incorporating standards and assessments into their plans. A teacher explained more about this endeavor: "We had to start with the standards. That is very different from anything we have ever done before. It is one of the most solid pieces of work I have done. The key was to start with the standards and figure out what kids need to learn and

then scaffold from there.” While educators participate in a myriad of professional development events, in-depth involvement with external experts and facilitators is usually missing from those sessions. Not so in this project and thus a third capacity entailed the teachers becoming more adept at taking advantage of their interactions with Perpich staff. According to a participant, “They [Perpich staff] look at things in ways I’ve never done before and they express it in ways I’ve never done. My best thinking and learning has come from my time with Perpich staff.” Finally, teachers increased their confidence with the complexities of weaving the arts and non-arts subjects together. One teacher echoed the opinions of many participants in saying “I have become enamored of units as a long-term learning strategy – the analytic thing is most important, looking deeper and longer at a topic.”

The enhancement of student learning and teacher capacity was brought about through an intricate interplay of (1) available resources (both those that Perpich provided and the schools had access to), (2) Perpich and participant actions, (3) student/teacher instruction-related interactions, and (4) school and district organizational influences. The report portrays these developments in the form of an iterative and recursive “logic model” that attempts to capture how the strengths and challenges of the project evolved over time.