

## CREATIVITY, COMMUNITY AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT: POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF THE PRE-K 4 SA ARTS EDUCATION RESOURCE GUIDE

*By Moira Allen*

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) asserts that more attention needs to be given to early education program development to “better support the learning and development of children with widely varying strengths and weaknesses.”<sup>1</sup> Incorporation of the arts often serves as a method of reaching all children within a classroom, no matter their individual abilities. Arts education has socio-behavioral benefits which help facilitate learning<sup>2</sup>; artistic play and creation also contribute to achievement in other areas of learning<sup>3</sup>. A 2008 neurological study of the effect of arts exposure on children’s minds found a significant relationship between participation in artistic activities and improved cognitive skills.<sup>4</sup> A separate study on the effect of dramatic play on literacy skill development observed that participating pre-kindergartners demonstrated both enhanced development as well as the motivation to learn.<sup>5</sup> This motivation is imperative for children’s academic and future successes. Embracing the arts in education at a young age is one way to help ensure continued enthusiasm in students.

### SAN ANTONIO ARTS EDUCATION, PRE-K 4 SA, AND COMMUNITY

Lack of kindergarten readiness skills is currently a national educational concern as kindergarten “entry skills alone are among the best predictors of later academic performance”.<sup>6</sup> Last year, approximately 51% of four year-old children in Texas were enrolled in either half- or full-day pre-kindergarten<sup>7</sup> in order to gain these important “entry skills”. To address the importance of engaging in early learning, San Antonio has implemented the “Pre-K 4 SA” which hopes to provide “quality and quantity pre-kindergarten education to four-year olds citywide.”<sup>8</sup> The program incorporates the most promising strategy for supporting kindergarten readiness, providing “high-quality center-based early childhood education” for all students and increased access for low-income families.<sup>9</sup> The P16 Plus Council of Greater Bexar County (the SA2020 Lead Partner for Education) delineates “readiness” as a set of skills and abilities that are beneficial and essential for an early learner’s success in kindergarten. The “Kindergarten Readiness Checklist” is available for parental reference on the P16 Plus Council website, to help gauge how “ready” a child is. Before entering kindergarten, s/he should exhibit proficiency in most (if not all) of the following:

1. Know first name, last name, caregiver’s name and address.
2. Recognize letters and numbers up to 10.
3. Know basic colors and shapes (triangle, square, circle, rectangle).
4. Use the bathroom independently and wash hands.
5. Solve problems with words.
6. Follow instructions from teachers, parents and caregivers.
7. Communicate wants and needs (like hunger, pain, happiness) with words.
8. Feel comfortable being apart from a caregiver during the school day.
9. Sit quietly for short periods of time.
10. Show curiosity for activities like story time.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ackerman, D., Barnett, W.S. (2005), p.1

<sup>2</sup> Fiske (1999), p. 52

<sup>3</sup> Epstein (2007), as cited in Teaching Strategies (2010), p. 11

<sup>4</sup> The Dana Foundation (2008), p. 8

<sup>5</sup> Catterall (2002) pp. 26-27

<sup>6</sup> Kurdek, L. A., & Sinclair, R. J. (2001), p. 1

<sup>7</sup> Barnett, W.S. et al. (2012), p. 131

<sup>8</sup> Pre-K 4 SA. (2013), p.1

<sup>9</sup> Ackerman, D., Barnett, W.S. (2005), p. 12

<sup>10</sup> P16 Plus Council of Greater Bexar County. (2013), p. 1

Notably, the checklist also cites going to local arts and cultural institutions as part of *10 Recommended experiences for children in San Antonio*.<sup>11</sup> On the same document, in a section titled *Help your child*, most of the activities suggested as methods of developing communication skills are artistic in nature.

Another important voice highlighting early arts education is the SA2020 Brainpower Initiative Task Force. The task force concluded that having “shared expertise” between the two teachers present in each classroom would contribute to a more diverse and enriched education. An engaging learning environment is defined as an environment with “at least one teacher should have an interest in each of the following: drama, mathematics learning, dance, science education, the visual arts, the environment, parental engagement, children’s literature, and music.”<sup>12</sup>

There is also demonstrated concern for the incorporation of arts on the state level, as the 2008 Texas Education Agency (TEA) Pre-K guidelines outline in Part VIII: “Fine Arts Domain” of the document. The section delineates recommended instructional strategies which include “[taking] children to art museums or [inviting] local artists to the classroom” as well as exposing “children to musical experiences through concerts...[and] to dramatic presentations by community theater groups or student groups”.<sup>13</sup> However, all other provided domains (e.g. “Science” or “Emergent Literacy”) necessitate artistic activities and call on teachers to sing songs to help students with counting or use puppets to excite interest and success in reading.<sup>14</sup>

A 2008 study found that pre-kindergarteners “from low socioeconomic status (SES) families demonstrated significant gains in nonverbal IQ, numeracy, and spatial cognition after they had received music training and attention training in a small-class setting”.<sup>15</sup> As “Pre-K 4 SA” is dedicated to the increased literacy and numeracy of young children in San Antonio, specifically addressing students from low income families, it seems that incorporating the arts would be the most prudent method of accomplishing that objective. If Pre-K 4 SA chooses to use the Early Development Instrument (EDI) to assess students’ progress, the implementation of the arts would contribute to student success in all areas of assessment (i.e. from physical well-being to language development) as well as reduce the amount of problems with each area.<sup>16</sup>

Pre-K 4 SA’s chosen curriculum provider is Frog Street Press. Frog Street Press has curricular components which incorporate drama, poetry (rhyming), and music<sup>17</sup>, with use of Teaching Strategies (Gold) as a supplement. Despite this display of artistic components, Pre-K 4 SA does not currently have *explicit artistic* programming or publicized plans to utilize community organizations for artistic enrichment. This current lack of a defined community component is important, as not only does Pre-K 4 SA pride itself on being communally focused but, educators also consider it essential for student success. The Task Force on Children’s Learning and the Arts deemed positive adult interaction as elemental to children’s success, and affirmed that the process of early childhood arts activity development “should connect with community resources”.<sup>18</sup> The *Pre-Kindergarten Prepares* (TEA sponsored website) also supports an integral role of the community and lists the development of such partnerships as a “best practice”.<sup>19</sup> However, many San Antonio arts organizations do not currently offer programming specifically for the pre-kindergarten age group or pre-kindergarten educators because there has yet to be a significantly demonstrated audience for such programmatic changes.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2

<sup>12</sup> Williams (2012), Appendix A: Program Elements “d”, p. 22

<sup>13</sup> Texas Education Agency (2008), pp.106-109

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p.84, 76

<sup>15</sup> Neville, et al. (2008) as cited in National Endowment for the Arts (2011) *Early Childhood*, pg. 8

<sup>16</sup> Wright et al. (2006), p. 651

<sup>17</sup> Frog Street Press (2013)

<sup>18</sup> Goldhawk et al. (1998), p. 2

<sup>19</sup> Pre-Kindergarten Prepares (2013)

## **BEST PRACTICES**

There are many arts education programs around the country which are successful in their endeavors of incorporating the arts into educational programming (either as a main instructional strategy or supplement) and utilizing the community to do so. STEAM (STEM + Arts) is an effort developed by the Wolf Trap Education Institute for Early Learning Through the Arts, located in the Washington D.C. area. STEAM incorporates teaching strategies which address science, technology, engineering, and mechanics content through artistically based lessons in order to establish student interest in the subjects at an early age.<sup>20</sup> STEAM functions using local teaching artists who are positioned in classroom residencies for substantial periods of time to help children make connections to STEM subjects through artistic mediums. These teaching artists also lead teacher and parent training workshops to help reinforce student knowledge far beyond the initial lesson.<sup>21</sup>

In regards to community utilization, the Chicago Arts Partnership in Education (CAPE) lists “Community Involvement” as a “contributing factor” to student success (increased test scores in comparison to other Chicago public schools)<sup>22</sup>. The CAPE kindergarten programs clearly outline the benefits of arts based learning regarding student cognitive development as students gained notable skills including differentiating shapes and line types through observation and drawing, understanding “dynamic changes in water” through original poetry, and learning about meteorology through dance (i.e. acting like tornadoes).

Closer to San Antonio, Big Thought, a Dallas non-profit, acts as a liaison between arts organizations and school districts in the metropolitan area. The partnerships created provide resources for teachers that are otherwise unavailable and increases student accessibility to community institutions. Specifically, Big Thought’s “Thriving Minds” program is successful due to its implementation in and out of the classroom. It partners with over 120 local organizations to work with non-arts integrated schools in order to increase the influence of the arts in education.<sup>23</sup> “A longitudinal study of Thriving Minds students showed that those who participated in the program consistently (76%-100% of the term) met or exceeded their peers on [TAKS reading and math] standardized tests”<sup>24</sup>, which demonstrates the potential influence of neighborhood and community integration in combination with creative learning on contributing to higher test scores.

Many San Antonio organizations offer a similar style of programming which takes arts educators inside the classroom in hopes of achieving the same outcomes. However, San Antonio currently doesn’t have a demonstrated partnership which connects schools to arts organizations. In lieu of generating an entirely new organization, part of the New York City Department of Education’s approach to the issue is more easily implemented within a shorter time frame which still advocates arts in the classroom. The Arts and Cultural Education Services Guide (ACES)<sup>25</sup> is a compilation of arts organizations and programs available for children and families in New York City. The ACES guide does not provide specific program availability or descriptions as it has roughly 200 participating organizations, but is an easily maneuverable online PDF with conveniently displayed contact information and links to organization websites and is updated three times annually. It is compiled by the NYC Department of Education, but all information is provided by each organization after completing an application process online, during which time they are informed that they have the ability to update their own profile during the three 1 month periods of transition if so desired.

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<sup>20</sup> Americans for the Arts (2013), p. 8

<sup>21</sup> Wolftrap Institute (2013)

<sup>22</sup> James, D.W. et al., p. 71, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Big Thought (2012)

<sup>24</sup> Big Thought (2013), slide 27

<sup>25</sup> NYC Department of Education (2013)

## **PRE-K 4 SA ARTS EDUCATION RESOURCE GUIDE**

The Pre-K 4 SA Arts Education Resource Guide acts as a step towards engaging the San Antonio community in a collective effort to improve and support early childhood education as well as the artistic community. The guide is the first comprehensive San Antonio arts resource to be dedicated entirely to the four year old, and aligns with the aforementioned Pre-K 4 SA and TEA pre-kindergarten guidelines. The guide would simply provide an inclusive resource to reinforce the curriculum already in use by means of community involvement. It is intended to act as a reference for educators and administrators of all available options in one simple publication as a collection of information on artistic programs, activities, workshops, and opportunities offered by San Antonio arts organizations and institutions.

There is a substantial amount of local organizations which *do* cater to four year old students. However, due to the aforementioned lack of a demonstrated audience to necessitate pre-kindergarten programming, the guide will, in its first 'edition', represent a modest number of organizations in San Antonio. Most existing events/programs are free of charge, and for some, school bus transportation fees are reimbursed. The guide merely expedites the process of creating community partnerships and would be relatively simple to create/distribute using the same approach as the aforementioned ACES guide. Expediting the process as the ACES guide has done would reduce costs (as an alternative to printing) and allow for consistent and accurate update for the most current information in San Antonio.

The first Pre-K 4 SA Arts Education Resource Guide is in the beginning stages. Each listing provides the name of the event/workshop, date, pricing, and a short description. The guide calls attention to specific and *age-targeted* opportunities and conveniently includes logistical and contact information. If successful, the guide could contribute to an increased number of participating arts organizations over time, as an audience for programming will have developed. The implementation of this guide would merely make the process of establishing relationships with local arts and cultural institutions more manageable for Pre-K 4 SA teachers.

This community component of the guide is key, as student achievement is intertwined with high levels of community and parent participation. Consistent interaction with local arts organizations equips students with an "awareness of how their collective talents can add to the larger community [which] comes along with individual confidence and building of expertise".<sup>26</sup> Community (defined as parents, teachers, and arts organizations) is also the first listed "Critical Success Factor"<sup>27</sup> by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities for creating successful arts education programming for children.

To encourage the parent-teacher-arts organization relationship, each of the organization pages will include a section devoted to parental engagement at home or in the community. This gives educators an opportunity to inform parents of arts and cultural events for afterschool and weekend familial activity, which builds a relationship between the teacher, the parent, the child, and the greater San Antonio community. Regarding the families themselves, socializing children at arts and cultural events encourages both parent and child to participate in a variety of community activities and in other habits of civic engagement such as volunteerism.<sup>28</sup> The result would be an expansion of arts opportunities for Pre-K students as well as a potential increase in arts event attendance and other benefits for arts and cultural organizations.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Fiske (1999), p. 30

<sup>27</sup> President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities and Arts Education Partnership (1999), p.11

<sup>28</sup> Walker et al. (2003), p. 4

<sup>29</sup> Werner, L. (2002), pp. 7-13

The Arts for Academic Achievement project (conducted over a period of four years in Minneapolis, MN) interviewed participating artists/arts organizations about their perceived benefits of having participated in the project. The most commonly cited benefits were expanded networks, deepened sense of mission, ideas of partnership, assessment skills, and community involvement.

## INDICATOR ALIGNMENT

The implementation of the Pre-K 4 SA may contribute to and support a potential alignment between the SA2020 Education indicator to improve San Antonio’s Kindergarten Readiness and the Arts & Culture indicator to raise the level of attendance at arts and cultural programming.

A review of the 2008 National Endowment for the Arts’ Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) reported that there is a relationship between childhood arts education and adult arts participation. The report focused on adult “benchmark” event/performance attendance (i.e. theatre, symphony, ballet etc.) Though further and more specified research is required for proving a *direct* correlation<sup>30</sup> the report shows a very *strong* correlation between increased exposure to an arts education as a child and increased arts attendance (specifically to events considered “benchmark”) as an adult, and is in fact the most influential factor<sup>31</sup>. Thus, exposing students to the arts at an early age increases the likelihood that they will continue to participate in the arts throughout their life. Understandably, making this change now will not exactly affect the SA2020 timeline goal (as children entering the Pre-K 4 SA program this fall will only be eleven years old by the deadline), but will potentially affect future arts attendance and participation nonetheless as “arts education is the most promising pathway to the development of [understanding/appreciating artistic practices] for many people, suggesting that arts education should be the cornerstone of a strategy to reverse the long-term decline in arts participation”<sup>32</sup>.

Regarding immediate change, a survey for the P16 Plus community partnership program, *SA is Our Classroom*, found that 93% of parent participants who attended family day at the San Antonio Museum of Art (SAMA) said they were “Very Likely” to return to SAMA or visit another museum with their children.<sup>33</sup> Though a rather small sample size (27), this survey displays to the existing potential for increasing arts attendance via parent engagement in arts education. Thus, it seems the most effective way to catalyze change within the next seven years is to increase parental engagement with the child *at* community organizations and events. A potential method of doing so would be to add a stipulation about attending a community arts and/or cultural event each semester within the existing Pre-K 4 SA parent-teacher commitment contract.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Rabkin (2011), p. 20

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 24

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20

<sup>33</sup> P16 Plus of Greater Bexar County (2013), slide 12

<sup>34</sup> Pre-K 4 SA (2012), p. 3

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