

FOCUS ON: THE ARTS

Schools Integrate Dance Into Core Academics**The Infusion of the Arts Appears to be Gaining a Stronger Foothold at a Time When Advocates Are Struggling to Ensure Time and Support for Their Disciplines**By [Erik W. Robelen](#)*Pikesville, Md.*

Photosynthesis may be an unlikely topic to inspire an opera or ballet, but in a 2nd grade classroom here recently, the children were asked to use dance to help them learn about that process.

“Do you think you’re ready to use your whole body?” teacher Katie Wright-Sabbatino asked near the start of the lesson, which featured learning objectives in both science and dance.

Small groups of pupils in this class at Fort Garrison Elementary School brainstormed to come up with dance movements to convey elements of photosynthesis, including water, sunlight, carbon dioxide, and chlorophyll. They leaned, they reached, they flowed, sometimes with surprising grace.

The idea of integrating the arts, including dance, into the broader curriculum is not new, but it appears to be gaining a stronger foothold in public schools, proponents say, though national data are not available.

The growth comes as arts education advocates struggle to ensure adequate time and support for the arts in schools—whether music, visual arts, theater, or dance—amid the financial straits facing many districts and other challenges, such as pressure to boost test scores in core subjects like reading and math.

“It’s a way of keeping arts in the classroom,” said Laura M. Smyth, a senior associate at the Washington-based nonprofit [Arts Education Partnership](#).

Instances of integrating dance, though apparently still quite limited, are scattered across the country, from public schools in Los Angeles and Reno, Nev., to suburban Minneapolis and the Baltimore County, Md., district, which includes Fort Garrison Elementary. And they span the curriculum, from science and math to social studies and English.

The lesson this month at Fort Garrison came out of a small, new program, dubbed Teaching Science with Dance in Mind, that provides professional development and support for several classroom teachers and dance specialists. The program was launched with the help of a \$36,000 grant from Hands On Science Outreach, a Maryland-based nonprofit organization that recently closed its doors.

“We’re addressing the science curriculum as required by the county and meeting the standards for dance education in a mutual learning experience,” said Rima Faber, a longtime dance education expert who secured the private grant and directs the program. “The more we teach through dance integration, the more we realize how dynamically it brings deep and complex learning to children.”

But Ms. Faber cautions that the growth of dance integration in schools is a long process.



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“The impact of dance integration is gradually gaining recognition,” she said, “but it has been a slow climb.”

There’s long been a concern among arts advocates about whether the disciplines that fall under their umbrella get enough time and attention in schools.

In an April speech, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan echoed the point.

“For decades, arts education has been treated as though it was the novice teacher at school—the last hired and first fired when times get tough,” he said.

The issue seems especially pronounced in dance.

“We’re the smallest of the four art forms,” said Jane Bonbright, the executive director of the **National Dance Education Organization**, a nonprofit group based in Silver Spring, Md., that promotes education in the art of dance. “We’re underfunded, and we are probably the least understood.”



Katie Wright-Sabbatino guides 2nd graders Isabella Brown, left, and Samantha Jolson during a lesson on photosynthesis. The Fort Garrison Elementary School is experimenting with combining science and dance.
—Christopher Powers/Education Week

The most recent national data on dance education, dating back a decade, suggest that it’s far less likely than music and the visual arts to be taught as an art form in schools.

A federal survey of public schools conducted in the 1999-2000 academic year found that dance instruction (not counting what takes place in physical education classes) was offered in only 14 percent of secondary schools, compared with 90 percent for music and 93 percent for visual arts. At the elementary level, dance was offered in 20 percent of public schools, according to the **study** from the National Center for Education Statistics.

New NCES data on the issue are expected out next year.

Movement for Meaning

Ms. Bonbright points to gains on the policy front for dance, especially the vast growth over the past two decades in the number of states, now 36, that offer a K-12 teaching credential in dance.

Another change, she said, is that dance, first introduced in schools mainly through P.E. programs, appears to be increasingly taught as an art form, which she argues is an important distinction.

“They are both valuable, but they must not be misunderstood one for the other,” she said.

On its website, Ms. Bonbright’s group says the “art of dance uses movement to create meaning about the human experience. It is far more than exercise or entertainment.”

Arts education proponents suggest that studying the arts provides a variety of academic and social benefits to young people and can enhance students’ ability to learn other subjects, including the development of skills in reading, language development, and math. It’s seen as a powerful way to promote creativity and critical thinking, among other skills.

That said, the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, has found the overall research base regarding the impact of arts education on student outcomes in other subjects to be “inconclusive.”

Research examining the effect specifically of arts integration on student achievement appears to show mixed results as well. For example, a 2007 research overview of studies from 2000 to 2005 suggested that while there are “many advantages” to arts integration, there was a “lack of strong empirical research” to support the notion that it boosts student achievement.

At the same time, the **study** in the *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education*, argued that focusing chiefly

on standardized-test data is “misguided” and fails to fully capture cognitive gains and other benefits, such as improved student motivation.

The study said that for arts integration to succeed, it requires a strong commitment from classroom teachers and close collaboration with arts specialists, a point made by many dance advocates.

“You really need to have a dance specialist who knows what they’re doing,” said Ms. Bonbright. Effective integration, she said, should be done with “mutual support of both disciplines.”

Ms. Bonbright points to a 2003 study of a program used in the Chicago public schools as a powerful example of integrated dance education’s promise. The program, **Basic Reading Through Dance**, used visual and kinesthetic imagery to develop 1st graders’ phonetic abilities, such as physically representing the alphabet symbols for sound combinations.

The study included a control group of pupils who did not participate, and it found “overwhelmingly positive” results for the participants’ reading abilities.

‘How Learning Should Be’

The lesson earlier this month at Fort Garrison Elementary School certainly appeared to engage pupils. The teachers involved were fired up afterwards.

“Seeing how it all jelled together, you could see the light bulbs going off,” said teacher Jodi B. Cohen.

Principal Karen Harris also was enthusiastic. “This is how learning should be,” she said. “It should be active, it should be engaging. It should use a variety of modalities. That’s how we all learn.”

Both new and long-standing examples of dance integration are also evident elsewhere.

In Minnesota, the **Perpich Center for Arts Education**, a state agency, has long promoted education in and through the arts, including dance. At a public school outside Minneapolis this month, an integrated dance program run by the center helped bring a lesson about the Underground Railroad to life.

“They’re beginning to look at the idea of obstacles, how they can be represented metaphorically with the body,” said Diane Aldis, the state dance education coordinator at the Perpich Center. “What is an obstacle [to freedom] the slaves might have encountered?”

An arts-integration initiative recently launched in Nevada’s 63,000-student Washoe County district contains a dance strand. The Arts Infusion Project is backed by a \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Arts in Education program.

The goal was to create a “model program” for professional development in which classroom teachers are trained and coached by teaching artists to integrate standards based arts into other academic areas, said Rick Southerland, a visiting dance professor at Goucher College, in Baltimore, who is involved with the Nevada project.

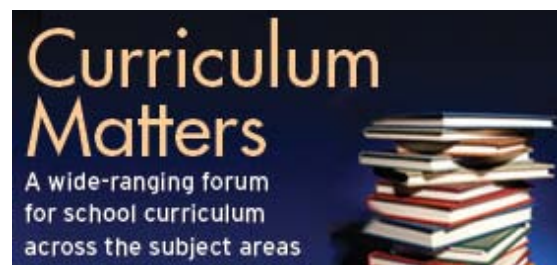
Mr. Southerland said some teachers were a bit leery at first.

“Teachers are so stressed, adding one more thing” can be troubling, he said, “but once they got in there, they were just so excited.”

The 672,000-student Los Angeles Unified School District has long offered dance both on its own and integrated across the curriculum as part of a larger arts focus, said Shana L. Habel, who works on dance programs in the district.

But dance recently took a hit as part of budget cuts.

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"Last year, we had 60 full-time dance teachers," Ms. Habel said. "This year, we cut back to 43 teachers."

Ms. Habel said she sees integrated dance education as a powerful tool, but said she worries how it's used in some places.

"My concern is that integration doesn't just mean you can use surface connections. That's not true, authentic integration," she said. As an example, she cited "doing the Mexican hat dance ... during Latino heritage month."

"I would like to see the integration with dance become so rich and so deep that administrators ... say, 'Wow, we need that; we see what it's doing,' " Ms. Habel said.

Some dance education advocates confess to having mixed feelings about integrating dance with other subjects, as opposed to simply promoting its study as a discrete discipline.

But Mr. Southerland said that, given the pressures facing schools, flexibility is vital to help dance and other art forms get in the schoolhouse door or keep them there.

"If we want support, we have to get outside our own molds," he said, "talk to other educators, show them, 'This is how the arts help,' and support them."

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