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Central Area of The Links, Incorporated



PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT TOOLKIT

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19th Central Area Director

INTRODUCTION

On October 18, 2015, Links from the Central Area gathered in Nashville, Tennessee at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts. The purpose was to roll out a new proposal placing priority on empowering children by engaging them creatively through the visual arts. This new signature arts initiative, “*My Community Through the Eyes of the 21st Century African-American Child-Linking Images*” is the new photography project for students in grades 5-12 centered around the theme “See My World”.

The Central Area is excited about the possibilities about this project because as one of the disciplines in the visual arts, photography can help young people in the development of their creative thinking skills as well as foster further appreciation of art. This particular project lends itself to better understanding the human experience and the world around us through the eyes of a child. The Frist Center’s vision statement captures the essence of our photography project:

“to inspire people through art to look at their world in new ways”

We want children to look at their world and determine what they find beautiful and what they would like to change. As you discuss this prospective project in your chapters, imagine the potential photographer in each child waiting to be guided in a positive direction. Imagine channeling some of that youthful energy into wonderful visual art-filled creativity!

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Central Area of The Links, Incorporated Leadership

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Background

“My Community Through the Eyes of The 21st Century African American Child, Linking Images”

The clarion call for immediate major education reform and for that reform to involve more figurative and literal creative thinking expressed by Secretary of Education Duncan has been emphasized by President Barack Obama and leaders in all business and educational areas. It is widely agreed that the U.S. public education system is not adequately serving a significant portion of our nation’s children and that public K-12 schools must make drastic changes to achieve the Administration’s goal that the United States become a global leader in postsecondary achievement by 2020. School leaders and teachers will need to address the challenge of finding new ways to engage many more students in meaningful learning to meet the goal at a time when schools are finding it difficult to reach a broadly culturally diverse student body and to discern how to connect information technologies to reshape learning.

The most obvious expression of education failure is the disturbing national high school dropout rate, which continues in the face of evidence about the detrimental consequences in earning power associated with leaving school prior to graduation. The dropout statistics are alarming, but policymakers and business leaders are also very concerned about the skills level of students who do graduate from high school. The concentrated push to only teach the basics has not had the anticipated outcome. Many high school graduates lack the skills to make them successful in post-secondary education and later in the workforce. These are sometimes referred to as 21st Century Skills, or habits of mind, and include problem solving, critical and creative thinking, dealing with uncertainty and difficulty, incorporation of multiple skill sets, and the ability to perform cross-disciplinary work.

Leaders are concerned that the United States is losing its competitive edge in creativity and innovation, and that the call for even more rigorous academic standards is insufficient without a related focus on developing creativity and imagination. Numerous and varied national task forces have produced reports about the need to reform schooling to develop those critical skills:

In *Are They Really Ready to Work*, the Conference Board, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and others noted that employers are placing value not just on basic but also applied skills, such as problem solving, collaboration and creativity, as critical for success in the workplace (Conference Board, 2006).

A July 2010 *Newsweek* cover story titled “The Creativity Crisis” drew attention to a growing creativity gap based on the significant decline in tested creativity scores of American students over the past twenty years. The report looked at almost 300,000 Torrance test scores in children and adults, and noted that downward scores are more pronounced in younger children in America, from kindergarten through eighth grade. p. 18

Leadership groups typically focus on the instrumental outcomes derived from high quality arts education in one or more of the following categories:

Student achievement, typically as represented by reading and mathematics performance on high stakes tests, including transfer of skills learning from the arts to learning in other academic areas—for example, the spatial-temporal reasoning skills developed by music instruction;

Student motivation and engagement, including improved attendance, persistence, focused attention, heightened educational aspirations, and intellectual risk taking;

Development of habits of mind including problem solving, critical and creative thinking, dealing with ambiguity and complexity, integration of multiple skill sets, and working with others; and

Development of social competencies, including collaboration and team work skills, social tolerance, and self-confidence. p.16

Conversely, lack of a solid arts program can be detrimental. In some school districts, arts are often seen as a nice-to-have, an activity associated with leisure and luxury, and this bias leaves arts programs highly susceptible to budget cuts (Rabkin and Hedberg, 2011). In fact, for more than 30 years, public schools across the country have been cutting arts programs to the bone or eliminating them altogether, and meager resources make it difficult to provide meaningful, engaging arts experiences (Bodilly, Augustine and Zakaras, 2008). The availability of alternatives outside the school, such as private lessons or arts camps, is typically limited to those families with the resources and motivation to get access to them (Bodilly and Beckett, 2005). The Links, Incorporated is dedicated to increasing student participation in the arts.

Decades of research and experience show that high quality arts education can play an important part in achieving a range of educational objectives. The arts can motivate and engage students; stimulate curiosity and foster creativity; teach 21st Century Skills such as problem solving and team work; and facilitate school-wide collaborations. While there is

certainly room for additional information in these areas, there is no doubt that research about the value of arts education is positive and consistent. The arts, when thoughtfully integrated, can be a catalyst for change at a school and success for students in many of the life skills critical for their development and eventual success in school and beyond (McCarty et al., 2005; Stevenson, 2006). The power of the arts and humanities to foster creativity in developing minds, to engage and motivate students in school and to prepare all children for productive futures is vital for the future of our nation’s cultural and economic verve.

Below is a small sampling of studies indicating the benefits of arts integration initiatives:

Source	Summary
Fiske, E. (Ed.). (1999). <i>Champions of change: the impact of the arts on learning</i> . Washington, DC: The Arts Education Partnership and the President’s Committee on Arts and Humanities	A compilation of seven studies that show correlations between high levels of arts participation and higher grades and test scores in math and reading. Studies also show engagement of students who are not otherwise interested in school and how the arts forge connections among students through project-based learning and collaborations.
Deasy, R.J. (Ed.). (2002). <i>Critical links: Learning in the arts and student achievement and social development</i> . Washington, DC: The Arts Education Partnership	A compendium of 62 studies representative of the best current examples. The collection focuses on the cognitive capacities that are developed by learning in the arts such as thinking skills and problem solving as well as transfer of arts skills to reading and mathematics. Studies also tracked changes in motivation to attend school and growth in student self-confidence. Taken together the studies demonstrate 65 core relationships between arts and other outcomes of interest to educators.
Stevenson, L.M. & Deasy, R.J.(2005). <i>Third space: When learning matters</i> . Washington, DC: Arts Education Partnership	Findings from case studies of schools that serve at-risk students and use arts-integrated instruction describe how schools motivate improvements in reading, writing, and speaking and describe the positive inclusive environment created in the school by arts integration.

It is our hope that through this photography project, we will be able to engage more African-American children in a constructive manner to delve into his/her imagination and creativity and truly capture the things that are beautiful or that he/she would like to change.

“When young people are involved with the arts, something changes in their lives”