

Dr. Christine Davis, Editor

POLICY AND ARTS EDUCATION

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An experienced visual art specialist told me recently “Now I understand how policies have shaped what, who, and how I’ve been teaching all these years.” Policies impact art education, to be sure. Enrollments in art classes appear to increase when arts credits are included as part of high school graduation requirements. Policy frameworks help sustain strong visual arts programs in local school districts. And where would art education be without the national standards?

But, do we also need more policy? Better policy?

Many say yes, arguing that partnerships, plans, and programs, while essential, only go so far. Policy is seen by NAEA as longer lasting—because it is integrated into rules, regulations, guidelines, and legislation, which makes it more difficult to dismantle. Policy aims at changing the specific ways schools do business.

Policies are frameworks for decisions and actions. They constitute obligations on policymakers and those charged to implement policies to act consistently, in specified circumstances, in advancing agreed upon purposes. Policies often represent trade-offs among competing claims on public officials, and are necessitated by the scarcity of resources—time, finances, and personnel. Good policies are purposeful, effective in reaching goals, fair, cost-effective, and flexible enough to account for the unique qualities of school cultures. Expectations and incentives to assist implementation are clear, direct, and feasible.

Effective policymaking also involves the alignment of policies, in which policies reinforce each other. For example, state level policies on art standards and assessment measures should be aligned with: licensure/certification requirements for art specialists and classroom teachers; professional development requirements for pre-service and in-service teachers; and art requirements for high school graduation and college entrance. In turn, state art standards can shape local level policies in curriculum adoption, the hiring of art teaching and supervisory personnel, professional development, and the use of community arts resources. Ideally, individual schools, principals, and teachers will have some discretion in implementing these and other policies.

Instituting policies is always complex and is rarely holistic in nature. There is no one-size-fits-all process, and impediments to sustaining policy changes abound. However, there are success stories. Two examples follow.

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Arts Education in Maryland Schools (AEMS), a partnership of leaders in art education, the arts, education, philanthropy, business, and professional associations is dedicated to the formulation and implementation of education policies that help enable all students to meet the Maryland Fine Arts Standards. AEMS engages multiple constituencies in collaborative planning and political mobilization, communicates regularly with broadly defined stakeholders, advocates for policy change with the State Board of Education and Legislators, secures internal and external funds, and convenes University Arts and Education Deans to address teacher preparation issues. AEMS has learned that identifying policy windows and points of leverage with key decision-makers is essential¹.

An Arts Education Task Force in Sarasota, Florida, in response to the elimination of arts programs, employed a “bottom-up” strategy to achieve policy change. The task force conducted a research review in developing its vision, benchmarked the status of local and state arts education resources, and invited teachers, artists, parents, and arts community members to brainstorm policy options. It also used a shared and evolving leadership structure and made regular presentations on the impact of arts learning to members of the school board and community. Results were a new school board adopted arts education policy and the restoration of certified arts teachers to the schools. The work of the task force demonstrates that the likelihood of policy implementation increases when those charged to implement policies, teachers and administrators, are involved in policy processes from the start².

The Maryland and Florida examples are instructive, I hope. But if visual arts education as a field wants to seek more and better policies to ensure substantive learning in the art for all K-12 students, it will need to build its policymaking capacities in a more comprehensive way. How?
By:

- Making available professional development workshops in policy processes.
- Strengthening art education networks to communicate about policy ideas, and
- Publishing “real world” stories about policy change, highlighting the roles of legislators and education decision-makers.

Our field has generated “eloquent evidence” for the profound value of the visual arts in students’ lives. We now need to let legislators and education decision-makers hear from their peers and other opinion leaders about how these impacts can be extended through more effective, efficient, fair, and far-reaching policies in arts education.

¹Arts Education in Maryland Schools Consortium (AEMS), www.aems-edu.org

²Mary Ann Stankiewicz, “Community/Schools Partnerships for the Arts: Collaboration, Politics, and Policy,” *Arts Education Policy Review*, 102, no. 6 (July/August 2001): 3-10