

LEADERSHIP

in Art Education:

BY KERRY FREEDMAN

Taking Action in Schools and Communities

Fortunately, the hard work of advocacy paid off in that district. The arts were not eliminated from the schools because teachers, parents, students, and other stakeholders took the responsibility to make their educational priorities known. However, when the teachers saw the high interest in art that existed in the community, they realized that this threat to art education might have been prevented through strong leadership before the crisis.

One of the traditional privileges for teachers in the United States has been control over the curriculum. Unlike most countries in the world, the United States does not have a national curriculum *per se*, enabling teachers to make curriculum decisions that most benefit local students. However, the Elementary and Secondary Act, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act, has acted as a national curriculum policy by enabling school administrators to conceive of a curriculum that privileges reading and math, and neglects arts programming. Research has demonstrated that art teachers are being pushed into teaching reading and math skills in their classes (Chapman, 2005; Sabol, 2010) and for several years, my graduate students have reported specific administrative directives that are contrary to good art teaching, such as using multiple-choice tests in their classes to help students do better on standardized tests. High schools that do not continually improve their students' reading and math test scores run the risk of losing whole art departments. And in junior high and middle schools, many students are allowed to take only one quarter or less of art.

In contrast to these repercussions of policy, a 2005 Harris poll reported that 93% of Americans consider the arts a vital part of a well-rounded education. The report also revealed that "86% of Americans agree that an arts education encourages and assists in the improvement of a child's attitudes toward school; 83% of Americans believe that arts education helps teach children to communicate effectively with adults and peers; and 79% of Americans agree that incorporating arts into education is the first step in adding back what's missing in public education today" (Americans for the Arts, 2005).

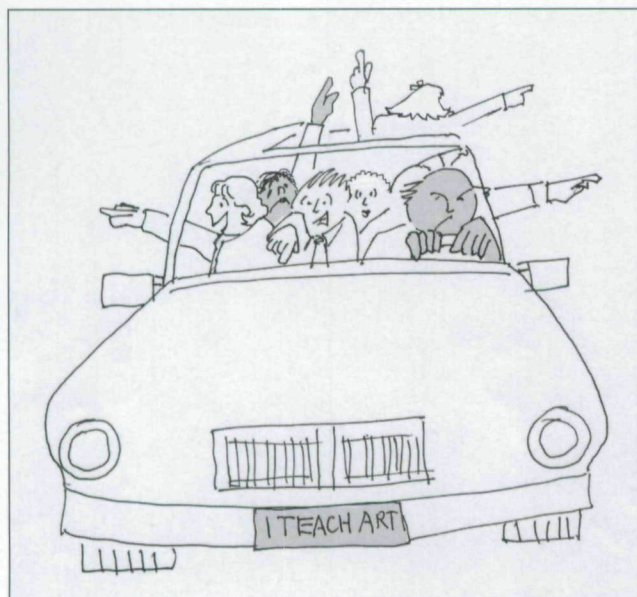


It is time to reclaim the curriculum. To do this, we need creative leadership by teachers, professors, and community educators who are willing to take action against policies and managerial decisions that diminish students' opportunities for learning through art (Freedman, 2007). For over a generation, scholars in education have been pointing to the disempowerment of teachers in the wake of public policy makers', school administrators', and other stakeholders' efforts to countermand the expertise of teachers and undermine the importance of teachers' knowledge about their students (Giroux, 1988). Now, art educators need to draw on our expertise to ensure that we are included in educational decision-making in schools and out.

Shortly before writing this article, I was asked to help the art teachers of a small school district organize support when their art programs were in jeopardy.

The superintendent had threatened to eliminate arts education in the district and replace arts teachers with reading specialists and other personnel who would, it was assumed, facilitate an increase in students' standardized test scores. Advocacy by art teachers in the town resulted in hundreds of people attending a district School Board meeting where the arts programs were discussed. When the superintendent was asked at that meeting why he planned on doing away with art, he replied simply, "Because I can." Sadly, the superintendent was within his rights; his state does not require art education.

The most important first step of art education leadership is to possess a clear vision of the future. That vision should be related to the leading edge of the field, reflect best practices, and be written in a curriculum rationale.



An effective contemporary leadership vision for art education needs several baseline characteristics. It must characterize knowledge of the visual arts as essential to human life. It must take into account the cultural and personal impact of the range of popular and fine art. It must connect the visual arts to a variety of societal aims as well as educational goals. It must renew an emphasis on creative thinking and behaviors in the face of increased standardization. And, it must guarantee learning, using appropriate student assessment as proof of achievement. Based on these criteria, the following are critical components of successful leadership.

Understanding the Difference Between Advocacy and Leadership

The breadth of art education—in school, communities, museums, and so on—is continually threatened by forces requiring that art educators advocate to maintain the opportunities for students that we currently have in place. Such advocacy is important, but it is just one part of leadership. Advocacy focuses on supporting and maintaining art education programs. But, leadership enables change, improvement, and the cultivation of new ideas. For example, as noted, leadership toward an art graduation requirement in every state would go a long way toward helping to circumvent the threat of program elimination. Although most states have an art graduation requirement, art is not required by some, or is bundled with foreign language or other unrelated school subjects.

Even more important, art education can be reinvented through leadership in ways that can help to secure its future. In many places, and by well-intentioned teachers, art is still being taught the way it has been taught for decades. Creative leadership provides a vision for the future that, for example, takes into account the increasing attention of students to sociocultural conditions, sustainable design, visual technologies, and popular visual culture, which can attract students to elective programs. Leadership can encourage school and community program transformation, promoting growth in the field and new learning opportunities for students.

Leadership may take a charismatic leader or leaders to initiate change, but it also requires a distribution of power for lasting change to occur.

Leading as a Form of Social Action

Art was one of the first school subjects, and it is the capacity of art educators to reinvent the school subject in response to changing social conditions that has kept art in public schools for over 150 years. The use of visual arts for social control instituted through advanced levels of industrial capitalism and mass media distribution has been viewed as a negative social effect of contemporary visual culture (e.g. Baudrillard, 1983; Harvey, 1990). And yet, one of the values of art is found in its variety as visual culture, which celebrates sensuality and intensifies feeling, making it a profoundly personal and social experience (Lyotard, 1984).

To teach from a social perspective is to convey the conviction that the visual arts are vital to all social groups. Art education can lead students from personal expression to cultural engagement through the capacity of art to act as a social mediator (Freedman, 2003). Because art education has such social foundations, it can engage people in the participative and communicative processes necessary in a democracy (Freedman, 2000). In this context, curriculum leadership is a social responsibility and a form of social action.

For example, many of the art teachers in our graduate program at Northern Illinois University have functioned as activists in the process of leading change in their schools and communities. They have developed visions for change, gained support from stakeholders, written grants, conducted research, created engaging curriculum, and improved their assessment of learning. In the process, they have challenged the status quo through a range of novel program changes, from the use of newer media to cultural jamming, thereby helping to protect their programs by keeping them up-to-date.

Forming and Working in Groups

Leadership requires a shared vision for change. Communicating with teachers, administrators, parents, and community leaders can help to promote essential alliances. The conscious development of distributed leadership depends on the foundation of a shared vision in which different members of a group share responsibilities for leadership (Elmore, 2000). This means that leadership in art education requires the participation of many people collaborating within, and negotiating across, social groups (Irwin, 1995; Thurber & Zimmerman, 2002). Leadership may take a charismatic leader or leaders to initiate change, but it also requires a distribution of power for lasting change to occur.

When working in leadership groups, participants might: (1) develop charges that are the main goals for the group, (2) write some guiding principles based on common interests among members of the group, (3) allocate jobs for each member based on the charge and the guiding principles, (4) ensure that plans are enacted and evaluated, and (5) organize reporting of group accomplishments. Distributed leadership can emerge and be sustained through the use of electronic social networks to communicate with friends of art programs about leadership projects.

Even administrators who support the arts tend to have a limited acquaintance with the amount and types of learning that students accrue through their experiences with visual culture and the power of art as an educational foundation.

Responding to Policy Mandates

Becoming informed about policies that influence art education can aid educational practice and work to support the field as a whole. The interest of state and national policy makers is often to control the work of teachers. However, policies are always interpreted and, through their interpretation, can lead to constructive responses that support the field and benefit students. However, this does not require agreement with those who interpret policy to mean that the purpose of art education is to support learning in other school subjects. Even when policy statements are reasonable, inappropriate directives can occur by the time that policy documents are interpreted and implemented, so it is helpful to read the original policy document or a good summary whenever possible.



Many service roles actually provide opportunities for leadership. For example, people who serve as officers in professional organizations are in excellent positions to initiate change. Taylor (2002) discusses a service project based on community leadership in which preservice art teachers cooperated with community members in participatory citizenship by helping under-served populations learn about art and other school subjects. Working in such community groups is a part of leading art education to meet broad-based, educational goals.

Student service-learning that supports art education can be seen as a way of helping students to understand the communal aspects of art and the necessity of art education. Through service projects, students can take on public roles that illustrate the many benefits of art education by, for example, organizing art experiences that help their community or protect the environment.

Maintaining a Critical Attitude

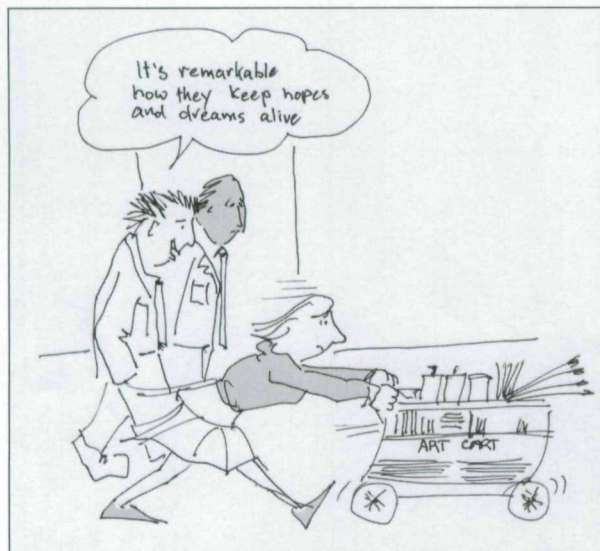
Leadership is often needed when an ability to analyze and critique programs or institutions for curricular or instructional change. Art education leadership demands a critical attitude that reveals a healthy skepticism of status-quo practices and oversimplified solutions to complex problems. This is particularly important during the first of the three phases of leadership described by Tony Wagner, Robert Kegan, and their colleagues (2006) in the Change Leadership Group at Harvard University: preparing, envisioning, and enacting. However, critique is required throughout the change process to ensure that shifts in direction can be taken when necessary in response to developing conditions.

Uncovering and challenging taken-for-granted assumptions is of crucial importance for those who lead change. This sometimes requires turning assumptions upside down to find their sources. For example, consider the assumption that art is not basic to education. This assumption is based, in part, on the idea that the visual arts are not essential to contemporary economies. However, the assumption is false. In fact, art is an increasingly important foundation of 21st-century economies, particularly as a result of the expansion of creative industries. Educational leadership should help to refute such misconceptions that diminish the basic quality of arts in human learning.

Because we do not have a tradition of national curriculum in the US, teacher education has been particularly important in representing the professional interests and directions of all school subjects. Teacher education should help to instill and support a critical attitude in professional educators. Teachers can best respond to policy expectations if prepared with a critical perspective that leads to constructive action.

Keeping Hopes and Dreams Alive

A constructive attitude is also vital for effective leadership. Leaders must balance their critical perspective with a conviction that things can change for the better and the belief that they can make change occur. Curriculum is a representation of teachers' and other curriculum designers' hopes and dreams for students (Freedman, 2003). A positive attitude can be maintained by reminding yourself of those hopes and dreams.



Through a meta-analysis of 69 studies involving 2,802 schools, 1.4 million students, and 14,000 teachers, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) demonstrated that student success, even on standardized tests, has a great deal to do with the effectiveness of school leadership. These researchers wrote for an audience of school principals, but the message is the same for teachers, community educators, and higher educators: *good leadership leads to good programming.*

Staying in Touch with the Field

Staying in touch with the field requires a good working knowledge of the most advanced thinking about art education. Consider forward-looking art education as being similar to other cutting-edge professionalism. People would certainly prefer a doctor who is well-versed in the latest professional medical practice to one whose knowledge of medicine is fixed in the past. The same is true in education; children should have the opportunity to attend art classes based on contemporary ideas and practices.

Art curriculum leadership in a school or district requires investigations into recent curriculum theory and practice such as reviewing the recent literature in the field, attending professional conferences, and staying in contact with other leaders. Keeping up with new ideas involves participation in professional development opportunities; however, school district professional development workshops often focus on general educational change or on other school subjects. School and district leadership should entail working with administrative representatives to organize professional development workshops on topics specific to art education.

General educational policy often seems to move in directions that are contrary to the forward-looking ideas of art educators, so it helps to know the work of leaders who are knowledgeable and committed to art education at the national level. National leaders have demonstrated that increasing and broadening professional experience provides an understanding of the field as a whole, which can help to facilitate change. Many of these leaders have taught at all levels, published research and theory in the field, been practicing artists, conducted professional development workshops for other professionals, and worked at the national and international levels, and as a result are able to see the big picture of art education. Their debates frame higher education practice and therefore, help to frame the field.

Making Data-Based Decisions

Data-driven decision-making is becoming an emphasis in school districts throughout the country. This type of decision-making is dependent on qualitative and quantitative data collected within districts and schools to help students in that setting. Traditional schooling was not originally intended to meet all of the needs the general population expects it to serve in the 21st century (Wagner, et al., 2006). Educators at all levels need to stay up-to-date in understanding students' needs in order to meet them. This requires data collection inside of school and community programs, as well as accountability outside of those programs. Learning how to conduct and use research enables art educators to present a new type of case that can convince stakeholders outside the arts to support art education.



Higher education courses are available on methods of classroom data collection and analysis. Also, school districts and community education programs may provide professional development opportunities to enable K-12 educators to develop research skills. Alternatively, researchers can be invited to collect the data needed to help teacher leaders make and implement decisions. A particular advantage of using outside researchers is that data collection and analyses are perceived as less biased when done by professionals who do not have a vested interest in the results.

Employing the Power of Expert "Opinion"

My experience in talking with hundreds of school and community administrators over many years is that they tend to be unaware of the larger aims and goals of art education and know little of what is actually learned through the study of the visual arts. Even administrators who support the arts tend to have a limited acquaintance with the amount and types of learning that students accrue through their experiences with visual culture and the power of art as an educational foundation.

Unlike most other areas of study, people outside the arts think of the content of the field as mainly subjective. Art is considered largely ephemeral, made up of elusive impressions and inspiration. Many people believe that the contents of art education, rather than being based on knowledge, are solely based on personal opinion, 'feelings,' and individual preferences.

However one defines art, professional opinions are not merely personal or subjective; they are based on expertise. Art educators tend to have widely differentiated experience and knowledge of our field and are able to make judgments based on expert opinion, just

as other professionals do. Similarly, a scientist might offer an interpretation of the meaning of physical evidence at a trial. These opinions are based on professional experience, and no less weight should be given to a judgment in the arts than those offered in other professions. Leaders in art education provide the carefully considered judgment of an expert.

Acting as a Role Model

Students report that close relationships with teachers as role models can motivate them to learn (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Educators teach students about problems and should tell students regularly about the actions they take in response to problems.

Accepting service and administrative positions supports the field by improving its leadership reputation and making it possible to move constructive agenda items forward. These positions include chairing a school district curriculum committee, heading a high school art department, directing a community art program, serving as an officer of a state art education association, organizing a team to protect or change art education policy, and becoming a member of a museum advisory committee.

Art education can help students become leaders to support art and art education throughout their lives. All students can reveal their potential for leadership by, for example, participating in an annual school art exhibition. To ensure students grasp the power of art education to aid in expressing ideas and convincing people, have them reflect on the exhibit and then lead audiences through it. Art exhibitions are particularly important in this context because they enable even students who may not yet write well to present the complexity of their ideas to an audience.



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Conclusion

Promoting any type of educational innovation takes courage and confidence. But effective leadership can transform a program and can help to protect it. Here are some places to start:

1. **Write a clear and timely rationale** that includes a vision for the program emphasizing the contributions of art to cultural knowledge, personal and social identity, visual literacy, and the creative economy in a manner that laypeople can understand.
2. **Publicize the program** and its rationale using traditional means, such as exhibitions, and newer means, such as a website and electronic social networking.
3. **Work with immediate supervisors** or administrators to inform them about the program and educate them in the best ways to represent the program to others.
4. **Develop a contact list** of parents and other stakeholders who can be counted on to promote art education and the specific program by, for example, writing letters to district or state officials.
5. **Establish a leadership group** of teachers, community leaders, and other supporters of art education to develop a leadership plan with critical and constructive strategies to protect the program, such as establishing a communication network using a listserv or phone tree.
6. **Document the program** by collecting evidence that demonstrates its importance to students and community, such as student work and parent comments, for example, from a blog established for this purpose.
7. **If a challenge to the program occurs, use the contact list** to garner support and the leadership group to plan a presentation to the school board or other management group based on the documented evidence.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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