

A child in a pink shirt is painting a frog on a large blue background. The background is decorated with other colorful frogs (pink, orange, purple) and green leaves. The child is using a brush to paint a pink frog. The scene is set on a wooden floor with various art supplies like paint, brushes, and a glue bottle nearby.

## ***The Well-Rounded Curriculum***

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's Remarks  
at the Arts Education Partnership National Forum

April 9, 2010 - Washington, D.C.



# The Well-Rounded Curriculum

If there is a message that I hope you will take away from today's conference it is this: The arts can no longer be treated as a frill. As First Lady Michelle Obama has said, "the arts are not just a nice thing to have or do if there is free time or if one can afford it... Paintings and poetry, music and design... they all define who we are as a people."

All of you know the history all too well. 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. But President Obama, the First Lady, and I reject the notion that the arts, history, foreign languages, geography, and civics are ornamental offerings that can or should be cut from schools during a fiscal crunch. The truth is that, in the information age, a well-rounded curriculum is not a luxury but a necessity.

I am not going to sugarcoat the tough choices that many districts are facing this year. State and local school budgets are absolutely strained across the country. Many of you are fighting lonely battles to preserve funding for arts education. There is no getting around that fact--and I applaud your commitment to fully educating America's children by engaging them in the arts.

At the same time, in challenge lies opportunity. As Rahm Emanuel has said, "you never want a serious crisis to go to waste." Now-- as we move forward with reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Educa-

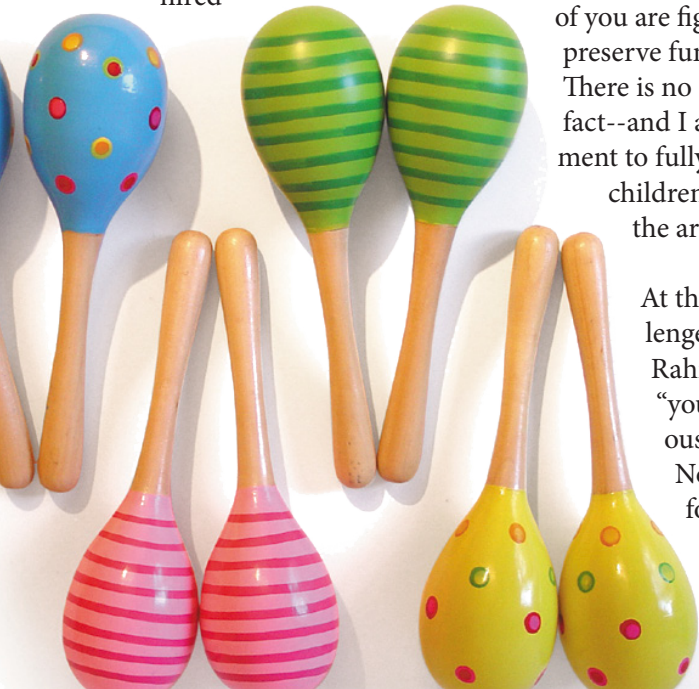
A Speech by Arne Duncan

tion Act--is the time to rethink and strengthen arts education.

And I ask you to help build the national case for the importance of a well-rounded curriculum--not just in the arts but in the humanities writ large.

The question of what constitutes an educated person has been taken up by the great thinkers in every society. Yet few of those leading lights have concluded that a well-educated person need only learn math, science, and read in their native tongue. As James Leach, the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities recently put it, a society that fails to study history, refuses to learn from literature, and denies the lessons of philosophy "imprisons [its] thoughts in the here and now." A well-educated student, in other words, is exposed to a well-rounded curriculum. It is the making of connections, conveyed by a rich core curriculum, which ultimately empowers students to develop convictions and reach their full academic and social potential.

The study of history and civics helps



provide that sense of time beyond the here and now. The study of geography and culture helps build a sense of space and place. And the study of drama, dance, music, and visual arts helps students explore realities and ideas that cannot be summarized simply or even expressed in words or numbers.

That complexity forces students to grapple with and resolve questions that will not have a single, correct, fill-in-the-bubble solution.

In America, education has long served a special role: It has been the great equalizer. From Thomas Jefferson on, America's leaders have recognized that public education and the study of the liberal arts were essential to creating an informed citizenry that could vote and participate in civil society. In 1784, years before the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia and only weeks after the war with the British had ended, George Washington sat down to write a letter to a bookseller.

But Washington did not recount the recent triumph over the British. He asked for books instead, because, he wrote, "to encourage literature and the arts is a duty which every good citizen owes to his country."

In America, we do not reserve arts education for privileged students or the elite. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, students who are English language learners, and students with disabilities often do not get the enrichment experiences of affluent students anywhere except at school. President Obama recalls that when he was a child "you always had an art teacher and a music teacher. Even in the poorest school districts, everyone had access to music and other arts."

Today, sadly, that is no longer the case. And that is one reason why I believe education is the civil rights issue of our generation--and why arts education remains so critical to leveling the playing field of opportunity. Robert Maynard Hutchins, the former president of the University of Chicago, put it well when he said that "the best education for the best is the best education for all."

I learned that lesson firsthand from my father, who was a psychology professor at the University of Chicago and a banjo player. He cared deeply about promoting student growth.

But he was even more committed to a dual mission for teachers--to not just educate students but to help prepare them for a lifetime

## Arne Duncan: About The Speaker

**Born:** 6 November 1964



**Birthplace:** Chicago, Illinois  
**Best known as:** U.S. Secretary of Education, 2009-present

Arne Duncan became the U.S. Secretary of Education in 2009. Duncan attended Harvard University, where he was co-captain of the basketball team before graduating with a sociology degree in 1987. He then traveled to Australia to play professional basketball from 1987-91 before returning to Chicago and in 1992, becoming director of the magnet school program for Chicago Public Schools in 1998. In 2001 Duncan was named chief executive officer -- the equivalent of superintendent -- of Chicago's public schools. His friend and fellow Chicagoan, Barack Obama, was elected president in 2008 and then named Duncan as Secretary of Education.



of learning. You might say he was an amateur arts educator of sorts because he worked for many years as the faculty representative for the university's annual folk music festival.

Attending the folk festival every year growing up, my brother, sister, and I listened to the blues and bluegrass, African drummers and mariachi music, Chilean, Russian, and Ukrainian bands, Celtic music and gospel. We were exposed not just to music from across the globe, but, through music, the vastness and extraordinary diversity of the world itself.

I must confess that my father--at least in my case--failed to pass on his musical talents. Even so, I did flail away for several years on the drums in the middle school band. I learned some good lessons in the

process--despite my forgettable performance.

The fact is that most students who take the arts are not going to be professional musicians, painters, dancers, or actors. Yet every student who plays in a band, acts in a play, dances in a company, or sings in the chorus can benefit from the experience in amazing ways.

Through the arts, students can learn teamwork and practice collaborative learning with their peers. They develop skills and judgment they didn't know they had--whether it is drumming in time or acquiring the knowledge to differentiate between Pavarotti and the tenor in the choir loft at the Sunday service.

No matter what the color of our skin or beliefs, "all of us can draw lessons from the works of history" says President Obama. "All of us can be moved by a symphony, all of us can be moved by a soprano's voice or a film's score." **Art, that is, has a universal appeal because it speaks, as the President points out, to a shared yearning "for truth and for beauty, for connection and the simple pleasure of a good story."**

Now, I spent much of last year on a Listening and Learning Tour that took me to more than 35 states. And

I heard quite a few stories. I spoke with thousands of students, parents, and teachers.

And almost everywhere I went, I heard people express concern that the curriculum has narrowed, especially in schools that serve disproportionate numbers of disadvantaged students.

There is no doubt that math, reading, writing, and science are vital core components of a good education in today's global economy. But so is the study of history, foreign languages, civics, and the arts. And it is precisely because a broad and deep grounding in the arts and humanities is so vital that we must be perpetually vigilant that public schools, from pre-K through twelfth grade, do not narrow the curriculum.

The case for a well-rounded curriculum begins with a disappointing reality: Many schools today are falling far short of providing an engaging, content-rich curriculum. Instead, students are often saddled with boring textbooks, dummed-down to the lowest common denominator. It is no wonder that much of today's curriculum fails to spark student curiosity or stimulate a love of learning. As Ernest Boyer pointed out years ago, "Many kids



drop out of school because no one ever noticed that they dropped in.”

Yet we know from research that access to a challenging high school curriculum has a greater impact on whether a student will earn a four-year college degree than his or her high school test scores, class rank, or grades. And we know that low-income students are less likely to have access to these accelerated learning opportunities and college-level coursework than their peers.

One impact of the content-lite curriculum is that many Americans are appallingly ignorant of our nation’s origins.

You will perhaps not be surprised

to hear that a recent public opinion survey by the American Revolution Center found that more than 80 percent of Americans know Michael Jackson sang “Beat It” and “Billie Jean.” By contrast, a majority of Americans believe the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, or the War of 1812 occurred before the Declaration of Independence.

Less than half of Americans today know that Valley Forge, the iconic

**“The arts are not just a nice thing to have... they define who we are as people.”**

**-First Lady Michelle Obama**

site of George Washington’s winter encampment with the Continental Army, is in Pennsylvania.

In the coming debate over ESEA reauthorization, I believe that arts education can help build the case for the importance of a well-rounded, content-rich curriculum in at least three ways.

First, the arts significantly boost student achievement, reduce discipline problems, and increase the odds that students will go on to graduate from college. Second, arts education is essential to stimulating the creativity and innovation that will prove critical to young Americans competing in a global economy. And last, but not least, the arts are



## The U.S. Department of Education

The United States Department of Education, also referred to as ED or the ED for (the) Education Department, is a Cabinet-level department of the U.S. government. Recreated by the Department of Education Organization Act and signed into law by President Jimmy Carter on October 17, 1979, it began operating on May 16, 1980.

The Department of Education Organization Act divided the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare into the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services. The Department of Education is administered by the United States Secretary of Education.

valuable for their own sake, and they empower students to create and appreciate aesthetic works.

As the First Lady sums up, she and the president both believe “strongly that arts education is essential for building innovative thinkers who will be our nation’s leaders for tomorrow.”

It is not surprising that visual arts instruction improves reading readiness, or that learning to play the piano or to master musical notation helps students to master math. Reading, math, and writing require students to understand and use symbols--and so does assembling shapes and colors in a portrait or using musical notes to learn fractions.

Is it any surprise then to learn of the large impact that arts education has

on student achievement and attainment, especially among disadvantaged students?

Low-income students who play in the orchestra or band are more than twice as likely to perform at the highest levels in math as peers who do not play music. In James Catterall’s well-known longitudinal study, *Doing Well and Doing Good by Doing Art*, low-income students at arts-rich high schools were more than twice as likely to earn a B.A. as low-income students at arts-poor high schools.

English language learners at arts-rich high schools were also far more likely than their peers at arts-poor high schools to go on to college.

In the annals of education research, these are big effects--and ones we would like to see more schools



replicate.

Fortunately, numerous schools are beginning to take these lessons to scale. Last year, I had the privilege of visiting an early learning facility, the Educare Center in Oklahoma City, which is home to one of the 60 schools in Oklahoma's A+ Schools network.

Oklahoma's A+ school-network nurtures creativity in every student--and a recent evaluation shows not just that the program increases student achievement but boosts attendance and decreases discipline problems as well.

When I took over as CEO of the Chicago Public Schools in 2001, a survey by the Chicago Community Trust showed that one in seven elementary schools in the city did not provide a single class of arts instruction a week. Fifteen elementary schools, with 7,300 children, provided no arts instruction at all.

Through CAPE, the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education, we brought local artists and teachers into the schools to partner up on integrating arts curriculum with academic subjects. And follow-up studies showed that students at the CAPE schools performed better on standardized assessment than stu-

dents who attended schools that did not integrate arts and academics.

I have been especially fortunate to witness the power of integrated curriculum firsthand with our son and daughter, who are now in kindergarten and second grade respectively in a Virginia public school. Their school has a science focus.

But it is an extraordinary music teacher, Joe Puzzo, who is the absolute rock star with the students. He writes and teaches songs to the kids about science. Mr. Puzzo has got third graders singing about gravity, sedimentation, rocks, and the planets. Students sing, clap, and dance about solids, liquids and gases. What a fun way to learn.

When Columbus Day or Martin Luther King Day come around, Mr. Puzzo sits down and writes songs for the students about Christopher Columbus and Martin Luther King. Years later, when students sit down to take their SATs, they report humming Mr. Puzzo's songs to recall historical and scientific content.

As a side note, I will confess that our son and daughter have instructed us, in no uncertain terms, that we are to bid high in the auction this year to win an afternoon with Mr. Puzzo.

Now, you all have heard that advanced STEM courses will be essential to workers who want to compete in the global economy.

Those claims are true. STEM courses develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills in math and science, they spur innovation, and they enhance self-direction. But as Daniel Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind*, has pointed out, good arts education accomplishes many of the same ends.

The fact is that high-quality arts and humanities instruction are almost uniquely suited to stimulate **imagination**, **creativity**, and the ability to find **adaptive solutions**. Creativity, as Sandra Ruppert, AEP's Director notes, is a "precursor to innovation and the cornerstone of entrepreneurship."

Put another way, knowledge--without imagination--is not good



enough for students in today's fluid job market. "Imagination is more important than knowledge," Albert Einstein once reminded us, because "knowledge is limited whereas imagination embraces the entire world."

It is no coincidence that Tom Friedman, the New York Times columnist and author of *The World is Flat*, predicts that "the school, the state, the country that empowers, nurtures, [and] enables imagination among its students" is going to be the winner in the rapidly-evolving global economy of the twenty-first century.

Now, what can the federal government do to support high-quality arts education and a well-rounded curriculum?

Let me answer that question by telling you first what we cannot

do. We will not endorse or sanction any specific curricula--and the Department is in fact appropriately prohibited by law from endorsing or sanctioning curricula.

**"Imagination is more important than knowledge...knowledge is limited whereas imagination embraces the entire world."  
-Albert Einstein**

The department will, however, continue to fund research studies on the effectiveness of curricula as it has in the past. And it will continue to require districts to ensure that schools receiving federal funds through Title I or in school turnarounds are using evidence-based instructional programs aligned with academic standards.

We are currently in the midst of conducting the first large-scale survey of school principals, music teachers, and visual arts specialists in ten years.

I want to underscore that our

proposal to reauthorize ESEA goes much further than existing law in supporting a well-balanced curriculum. Our ESEA proposal will allow states to incorporate assessments of subjects beyond English language arts and math in their accountability systems. And we plan to invest in the development of better assessments, so schools and teachers don't feel pressured to teach to low-quality, standardized tests.

I will be the first to tell you the department has not always been seen as a proponent of a well-balanced education.

The truth is that when I was CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, I did not welcome a call from the nice man or woman at the U.S. Department of Education. But that reluctance stemmed from the fact that the department has historically been a compliance machine, rather than an engine of innovation.

I want to flip that. And as many of you know, our budget and ESEA proposals would flip that historical relationship for arts educators.

We have proposed to take the \$40 million for arts education that now goes to directed grants and a couple of small competitions with an array of applications and requirements,







and replace it with a much bigger, competitive pool of \$265 million to strengthen the teaching of arts, foreign languages, civics and government, and other subjects.

Existing arts education programs have worthy goals. But they have resulted in fragmented funding at the federal, state, and local level.

Under our new ESEA proposal, high-need districts, and states and non-profits in partnership with

high-need districts, would be eligible to apply for the grants, which place a priority on cross-subject learning but don't mandate it. At the same time, we would increase access and funding for college-level, dual credit, and other accelerated courses in high-need schools to support not only a well-rounded, but a rigorous curriculum.

Two of our new and most innovative programs--Investing in Innovation or i3, and Promise Neighbor-

hoods, loosely modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone's comprehensive community-based organization—have the potential to support effective arts education programs and partnerships as well.

I don't think arts education should ever be relegated to taking place only in after-school hours. But arts educators can provide high-quality instruction in after-school and extended day programs that is especially critical for low-income students.

In fact, we anticipate that place-based Promise Neighborhood programs in low-income communities may include high-quality arts instruction. Research suggests that arts education not only boosts academic outcomes, but that neighborhood-based arts and cultural activities can build stronger cities and communities.

I recognize that our plans to shift to competitive funding for arts education may make some arts providers nervous, even if they can potentially compete for significantly more funding than in the past. Change can be unsettling.

But I urge arts educators to have the confidence of their convictions to compete and demonstrate the

***“Arts education plays an essential part in children’s education. It enriches their learning experience and builds skills that they can apply across the curriculum. The arts can play a significant role in programs that extend the school day and the school year.”***

**-Arne Duncan**

value of their disciplines on student outcomes.

The operative phrases here are “outcomes” and “high-quality” arts instruction. Just as in every other core subject, some arts instruction is top-rate, some is mediocre.

I am pleased that the arts community, for more than 15 years, has pioneered the development of voluntary standards in dance, drama, music, and the visual arts.

Forty-nine states now have established content and/or performance standards outlining what students should know and be able to do in one or more art form. Many districts, including Chicago, now not only articulate arts standards, but also spell out a sequential series of courses aligned with state standards.

So, arts education is making real progress toward defining quality and demonstrating outcomes, but challenges remain. A number of states have taken steps to develop rigorous arts assessments. Unfortunately, those assessments have faced setbacks and funding cutbacks in recent years.

Too many schools still fail to offer a standards-based course of study in all four arts disciplines. We all know

that unacceptable disparities in arts education between low-income and affluent districts continue to persist.

Despite these challenges, and the tough budgetary climate, arts education must not just survive but thrive. A well-balanced curriculum is simply too vital to our students and our national character to let the teaching of the arts and humanities erode.

In 1963, shortly before he was assassinated, President Kennedy spoke about the importance of poetry at the groundbreaking for the Robert Frost Library at Amherst College where Frost had taught. And here is what Kennedy said: “Our national strength matters,” he declared, “but the spirit which informs and controls our strength matters just as much.”

Robert Frost’s poetry, in Kennedy’s eyes, reminded us of the limitations of power. Power might lead man toward arrogance, but “poetry reminds him of his limitations.” When power narrows the areas of man’s concern, Kennedy said, “poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.”

It was art, Kennedy concluded, that “establishes the basic human truths

which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment.”

I thank all of you for your tireless commitment to supporting arts education. And I urge you to continue the fight to provide all of our children with a well-rounded and rigorous education. Let the arts, as President Kennedy said, establish the basic human truths which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment.





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by Arne Duncan  
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