

## *Culver City Unified School District*

2007-2008 student enrollment: 6,656

1 high school (grades 9-12)

1 middle school (grades 6-8)

5 elementary schools (grades K-5)

2 alternative schools<sup>12</sup>

### DISTRICT CONTEXT

Culver City Unified School District has enjoyed a rich history of community partnership and planning for the arts prior to joining the *Arts for All* initiative. The City itself is an arts-rich community housing a number of entertainment industry corporations. This includes Sony Pictures Entertainment, which has provided financial and facilities support for the district for the past 14 years. One of the early programs funded by Sony was an afterschool high school arts academy that is still running strong today, with over 200 students attending courses in dance, digital media, various musical genres, theatre and visual arts.

Prior to 2003, all students in the district enjoyed some exposure to arts education, though it was not a sequential K-12 program. In addition to the Arts Academy, the high school offered classes in music and visual arts, with one Advanced Placement course in visual arts. Middle school electives were offered in music and visual arts. At the elementary level, an itinerant music specialist provided instruction for grades three through five at the five elementary schools. However, other art disciplines were left to the classroom teachers to cover at will, meaning instruction was sporadic and highly dependent on community arts programs brought to sites through PTA donations plus private foundation and government grant opportunities. Performing Tree, a regional broker of teaching artists, had also provided periodic artist-in-residency programs. A parent volunteer with a background in communication and lesson plan writing trained 25 other parent docents to deliver visual arts lessons in one elementary school. After two years of the docent program, the Music Center of Los Angeles County and Sony partnered with the school's PTA to develop a plan to transform it into an arts-centered campus.

When the *Arts for All* initiative was announced in 2003, Culver City was simultaneously experiencing a renaissance in arts and cultural appreciation and was highly motivated to partner with the district to enhance the artistic education of its next generation of citizens and workers. In addition, district administrators and arts partners recognized that the *Arts for All* initiative afforded a unique opportunity to bring systematic arts education to every elementary student in every school. On this basis, the district joined the first group of Vanguard Districts and commenced planning in the 2003-2004 school year.

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<sup>12</sup> Alternative schools are addressed in the LACOE case study.

## STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR ARTS EDUCATION

A 21-member Community Art Team (CAT team) was formed to develop the district arts plan. The CAT team contained broad representation by teachers, the assistant superintendent of education services, a school board member, PTA parents, the Culver City Education Foundation, community arts providers, municipal staff, corporate partners and *Arts for All* planning coach. The team later reported that the variety of stakeholder perspectives challenged the group's thinking and generated a more inclusive plan that might not have happened if it had been created exclusively by district personnel. Five years later, the CAT team has retained a high percentage of its original members, reportedly because they appreciate the opportunity to be included in the district's decision-making process regarding arts education. The district currently pays teachers an incentive stipend for their participation, although that policy has not been entirely effective in ensuring attendance at meetings. More typically, members attend because they are passionate about the arts and are committed to the implementation of the arts plan.

During the planning year, the CAT team was successful in gaining school board approval for a district arts education policy and three-year arts plan. In an effort to ensure success, a parent volunteer who co-chaired the CAT team created a short video capturing supportive

comments from various stakeholders around the district. There was strong attendance by advocates at the school board meeting when the video was shown and a brief speech was given by the other CAT team co-chair, the assistant superintendent of education services. Despite some initial concern over committing to a course of action the district might not be able to uphold, the plan was passed.

*“In order for the District to truly embrace a fully integrated arts curriculum, it will take a deeper commitment on all levels.”*

The three-year Culver City District arts plan consisted of three strategic directions that combined key elements of a quality arts program: 1) curriculum, instruction and professional development, 2) fundraising, resources and facilities, and 3) communication, partnerships and advocacy. The district wanted to strengthen the feeder system into high school and college, so chose to improve arts instruction from the ground up, starting with the K-5 elementary schools.

## IMPLEMENTING THE ARTS PLAN

Culver City USD began rolling out their plan during the 2004-2005 school year with a focus on visual arts. The teachers' edition of a state-approved visual arts textbook (SRA) was first piloted and then purchased for all K-5 teachers in the five elementary schools. The intent was that teachers would use the books to plan ways to integrate visual arts with other curricula being taught.

In the spring of 2005, the district hired a parent volunteer as a part-time arts consultant, (a.k.a. coordinator) to oversee the implementation of the arts plan. She was the acting co-chair of the CAT team and had organized the earlier elementary school docent program. When the visual arts textbooks were distributed, the new arts coordinator organized and delivered professional development for all teachers in using the new resources for integrated instruction.

In an effort to integrate visual arts instruction with digital technology learning, the middle school had been adopting pieces of an on-line animation curriculum over several years. To date, Sony and the Culver City Education Foundation have paid all the costs, including professional development for the teachers. Plans have now been made to extend the program into the high school in 2008-2009. Two other externally funded programs have increased student access to visual arts instruction. As the arts-centered elementary school had already created a vision of arts instruction that suited their needs prior to the *Arts for All* initiative, the school booster club moved forward on plans to hire an independent, non-credentialed artist teacher to work with all grades. Steps are currently being taken by the arts coordinator to strengthen communication with the school's PTA to ensure the school's actions are supported and remain aligned with district-wide goals in arts education. In the spring of 2007, teaching artists were contracted to initiate a visual arts program at the continuation high school. Partially funded by Sony, the program provides continuation students the opportunity to link with professional artists, cultural centers, and communities to imagine, produce and present new work.

In terms of music education, the high school music specialists had reported during the *Arts for All* planning stage that incoming freshmen were under-prepared for high school music courses. This created a challenge in preparing the band and orchestra to perform well in public or in interschool festivals and contests. They also pointed out that enabling students to perform in public—whether for civic events or private functions—could provide additional funding for the music program. To improve the quality and content of instruction, the district arts coordinator, music specialists and five classroom teachers who are also school choir directors have since begun to meet and develop a rigorous, standards-based K-12 music curriculum. Community arts providers have brought programs into the K-3 grades. The itinerant specialist continues to teach the recorder to all third graders and maintains the pullout instrumental program for fourth and fifth graders. In addition, new musical instruments were purchased for all district schools through private grants.

With Culver City USD's need to raise funds to implement the arts plan and its emphasis on building strong community partnerships, the arts coordinator has worked hard to secure program grants that provide for direct instruction opportunities for students. These grants have been used to pay for teaching artist residencies and art field trips to supplement the music and visual arts instruction received from their teachers and the itinerant music specialist. Some examples of the district's instructional arts partners include Wolf Trap, Los Angeles Symphonic Jazz Orchestra, American Ballet Theatre, and the Music Center of Los Angeles County.

The district also began hosting a professional development program for teaching artists through a partnership with the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, the Music Center

Los Angeles of Los Angeles County and the Pasadena Armory for the Arts. In this program, working artists train in live classrooms to become teaching artists and learn to develop and implement standards-based, integrated arts lessons. The program brings residencies to four of the elementary schools and the middle school. A new component is currently being designed to train classroom teachers how to collaborate more effectively with the teaching artists to ensure rich artistic and educational learning experiences are provided for students.

In an effort to improve student access to theatre education, during the 2007-2008 school year elementary teachers attended an 80-minute training in theatre education integrated with the language arts curriculum.

Somewhat unusual among the Vanguard Districts, Culver City has a strong focus on job and college preparedness through the afterschool High School Arts Academy. In addition to the ongoing partnership with Santa Monica College and Sony, a stronger alliance has developed with West Los Angeles Community College, which provides pay for interested high school arts specialists and college faculties to expand the course offerings. Students who take dual enrollment courses can transfer credits to the colleges. This has created a win-win partnership that benefits the afterschool program, the two colleges and the students interested in enrolling. Recently, the district approved an official transcript for Academy students that acknowledges their afterschool efforts and facilitates the transfer of credits.

The strategic emphasis in the district arts plan changes after three years of elementary level adoption to the broader recognition of the need to reinforce the entire K-12 arts curriculum, to advocate more strongly for parent and PTA support, and to collaborate more effectively across all school levels in sharing instructional ideas and developing new ways of attracting funding and student learning opportunities. Plans are currently in the works for a district-wide arts festival and a website for the visual and performing arts. In addition, the coordinator's position has been upgraded to full-time consultant.

## MECHANISMS AND CHALLENGES

Culver City USD has made considerable strides in improving the visual arts and music education programs offered to elementary students during the school day. It has also succeeded in leveraging its community partnerships to offer numerous supplemental learning experiences for students that both reinforce and expand upon classroom lessons in the arts. However, the district's past policies and practices in arts education delivery have presented some challenges. With such strong and reliable support from community partners, the district has been able to sustain at least a modicum of arts instruction without a designated arts budget, which counters the goal of the *Arts for All* initiative to encourage a five percent arts budget commitment in every participating district. A list of other mechanisms and challenges that have affected the implementation rate are as follows:

## Mechanisms of Change

- *Sustained commitment.* The majority of the original 21 CAT team members are still involved in the effort to bring more arts education to students.
- *Locally known arts coordinator.* The former parent volunteer has been creating arts programming for the district for over seven years.
- *Enduring community partnerships.* The district has benefited from the long-term material support of Sony and has a new fully committed partner in the civic administration.
- *Arts-centered community.* The district is situated in a city that highly values and promotes the arts as part of its identity.
- *Self-sustaining Arts Academy.* While the district may not be currently able to hire enough secondary arts specialists to teach all four art disciplines during the school day, a range of arts learning opportunities is available afterschool to all students, with numerous classes that qualify as college credits.

## Challenges to Change

- *Teacher buy-in.* Teachers are busy and need to be convinced to attend professional development sessions for arts education, apply for available arts grants and take instructional risks in the classroom by teaching in and through the arts.
- *Fundraising competitiveness.* An old pattern of leaving it up to each school to raise its own funding for arts education has inadvertently created conflicts and potential inequities when more than one school has competed for the same large grant opportunities.
- *Lack of accountability.* Currently, there is no accountability for teaching the visual and performing arts standards at each grade level, which contradicts efforts to strengthen the K-12 learning continuum.
- *Limited time.* While teachers may be interested in teaching the arts, finding sufficient time in the school day to plan and provide instruction is reported as an ongoing challenge.
- *Adoption timelines.* As in other districts, the time it takes to train teachers to provide quality instruction in a given art discipline was underestimated, slowing the entire implementation process.
- *Facility maintenance.* The district eliminated a facilities manager position and the high school auditorium has since fallen into a state of disrepair that makes it unusable as a performance space.
- *Parent skepticism.* One principal reported that not all parents have fully understood the value of arts education for their students, leading to the need for a larger advocacy effort.

## OUTCOMES

One of the notable results of the *Arts for All* initiative at Culver City is the deepening of its collaborative relationship with local arts partners who also bought into the vision of making

sequential instruction available to all students. This was a change in course from focusing on building afterschool programming and a single arts-focused elementary school, although those programs continue to serve a purpose and have been strengthened during the implementation process as well. Other results are listed in the following paragraphs.

## **Content**

**Standards-based Curriculum.** Culver City USD purchased the teacher’s edition of SRA visual arts textbooks for all K-5 schools in 2004-2005. A committee of teachers and specialists developed a basic K-12, sequential teaching curriculum consisting of several textbook lessons per grade level containing authentic cross-curricular connections. An instrumental music curriculum for grades 4-12 had been in place for a number of years but did not reflect the new California Music Standards, nor was it well sequenced from one school level to the next. Five music-oriented elementary teachers and secondary music specialists began meeting for the first time in 2007-2008 to discuss updating and strengthening the K-12 curriculum. The group made progress in aligning their instruction and identifying important gaps in student learning. K-12 dance, theatre, and digital media curricula and instruction are considered important elements of the district arts program but have not been fully developed.

**Pedagogy.** As is true of other districts, the approach to arts instruction varies according to who is doing the teaching. Arts specialists at all three school levels primarily focus on teaching their respective art disciplines as discrete subjects, although integration techniques are increasingly being used at the middle and elementary levels. Classroom teachers at the elementary school are expected to integrate visual arts and theatre-based lessons with other subject areas—primarily language arts—and have received training for this. Arts providers, such as Wolf Trap artists, teach both an art discipline and work with primary classroom teachers on integration. At the high school level, arts specialists teach art courses as discrete subjects. Dance programs have not been established at any school level during the school day, though dance classes do take place after school. The Art Academy courses are primarily taught by the credentialed high school arts specialists or by community college faculty in a dual course enrollment agreement.

**Student Assessment.** Accountability is a recognized area of weakness in arts instruction. The committee intends to address the topic as teachers grow increasingly accustomed to providing arts experiences.

**Professional Development.** In past years, many of the elementary teachers have had access to professional development opportunities offered by community arts providers, but they were never tied to a curriculum. Since joining *Arts for All*, all elementary teachers have received training in the use of SRA visual arts textbooks. All kindergarten teachers have also received training in integrating music instruction through Wolf Trap. In 2008-2009, first through third grade teachers will receive training in integrating music into their curriculum. In addition, some elementary and middle school teachers are also scheduled to receive training on integration and teaching artists collaborations through the Los Angeles County Arts Commission’s Artist Training Program.

The arts coordinator noted that an increase in arts instruction was observable immediately following a training session; however, it tended to dissipate over time. She is currently leading an effort to develop a new training regimen for the elementary teachers to reinforce their use of the new materials and to find more ways to integrate visual arts and music instruction into their teaching regimen. The main idea is to help teachers feel more comfortable with arts instruction through exploring the natural links between art teaching and good, theory-based teaching in general.

### ***Infrastructure***

**Program Administration.** A full time arts coordinator was hired in 2005 to direct the CAT team and lead implementation efforts. While the coordinator handles much of the planning and implementation work alone, other CAT team members have worked together on large projects, such as curriculum adoption. Arts specialists—especially at the high school level—fulfill other administrative duties in the arts, particularly in conjunction with the afterschool Arts Academy. A former marketing and communications professional with long experience in writing visual arts lesson plans, the arts coordinator is currently working towards a master’s degree in education with an emphasis on leadership in restoring arts education.

**Personnel.** Hiring additional arts personnel has not been a priority in the district arts plan to date.

**Facilities and Equipment.** Equipment, instruments and supplies have been purchased to support the improvements in visual arts and music instruction and distributed to schools on an equitable basis. The CAT team is currently gathering data on facilities and other material needs, and has set aside state legislative block grant money to be used once priorities for spending have been determined. Currently, all elementary schools use their cafeterias for performance instruction – whether in music or theatre. Two of the elementary schools have designated visual arts rooms, but the others do not have them. The district has one performance hall, but it is currently in a state of disrepair. It is centrally located between several campuses and could become a tremendous resource for the performing arts if it were remodeled.

**Partnerships and Collaborations.** Pursuing and extending existing community partnerships has been a cornerstone of the district arts plan. The Culver City USD is situated in a community with numerous potential arts partners and has taken advantage of those resources over the years to secure programs for students as well as for training teachers. Since joining *Arts for All* the number of instructional partnerships has increased due to the efforts of the arts coordinator and other CAT team members that either represent a community arts provider or have access to one. Some examples of arts partners include the Culver City Education Foundation, Culver City municipality, Sony Entertainment, Wolf Trap, LA Symphonic Jazz Orchestra, American Ballet Theatre, Center Theater Group, the Actor’s Gang and the Music Center of Los Angeles County.

## *Sustainability*

**Policy.** A school board policy for the visual and performing arts was passed in 2004. The policy is exemplary in its stated intention to ensure all students have access to sufficient resources for a balanced arts program and is adaptable to the needs at each site. It also acknowledges the need for consistent instruction time, credentialed staff, community artists, and ongoing professional development. Unique among the Vanguard art education policies, it states that professional development could be offered by credentialed staff, paraprofessionals, community artists, parents and others who might increase the quality of arts instruction. This statement recognizes the breadth of resources the district has used over the years to provide training for teachers.

**Funding.** Culver City USD currently pays the salaries of arts specialists at the secondary level. Without an arts education budget, per se, all other funding has been raised from external sources such as the legislative block grants, Art for All funding, grant awards from state and local sources, and PTAs and booster clubs. The arts coordinator worked with a grant writer in 2005 and successfully raised funds for musical instruments and digital equipment. Some of the state legislative money was used for K-3 music professional development and art supplies. Plans are still in development for the best use of some of the funding, while the ongoing arts education block grant was partly used to cover the coordinator's salary and administrative costs. In 2008-2009, the CAT team plans to meet with stakeholders both inside and outside the district to brainstorm new fundraising ideas.

**Evaluation.** According to the CAT team, one important element missing from their district arts plan is accountability. While they can provide training and materials for teachers to use, they have yet to set up a system to track the quality or consistency of instruction. Currently, it is perceived that program evaluation will eventually be tied to teacher training, as the arts coordinator is tracking attendance.

**Communication and Advocacy.** The CAT team has met monthly in an effort to keep members informed of the status of implementation activities. Teacher members then passed on information to other staff they worked with. However, this system did not ensure that every teacher in the school system was learning about opportunities in the arts nor did it provide a way to keep parents informed. To broaden communication and to encourage more cross-site collaboration, the district is currently creating a visual and performing arts website and is planning a district-wide festival to show parents the results of the arts program. The district has also been successful in getting articles and press releases about the arts program into the local papers, which helps to keep parents informed.

**District Leadership.** While district administrators and school board members have been supportive in passing an arts education policy and approving teacher stipends for those attending the bimonthly CAT team meetings, their decisions and directives do not always align with the implementation strategies proposed in the arts plan. The primary reasons appear to be shortfalls in the annual budget, the need to invest in meeting yearly academic targets in literacy and mathematics, and a lack of full awareness about how decisions that

involve relatively small program cuts impede the progress of the arts plan overall. For example, a preliminary proposal to save money by deleting one planning hour of a high school specialist threatened to shut down the student transcripts record system for the afterschool arts academy.

## CHANGES IN EQUITABLE ACCESS TO ARTS EDUCATION

In terms of increasing student access to arts education, the CAT team has made its most evident gains through increasing visual arts and music learning opportunities at the elementary school level. Due to the fact that all teachers have received state-approved textbooks, supplies and training in visual arts, all students are presumed to have an increased amount of arts instruction, although it has yet to be documented. In fact, with visual arts at the elementary schools, visual arts and animation at the middle school, and visual arts/Advance Placement classes offered at the high school level, it would be possible to claim most students now have some access to standards-based visual arts training during the school day.

Student access to music education has doubled with the community arts providers bringing in learning experiences for K-3 students. The music specialist continues to teach third graders basic instrumentation training (recorder) and offer optional instrumental music in grades 4 and 5. Each school continues to offer optional choir as well. All elementary students K-5 now have the opportunity to receive music education on a weekly basis. In addition, musical instruments were purchased for use by all schools through private grants, benefiting the music programs at the secondary level as well.

Due in large part to the tenacity of the CAT team in pursuing community support and utilizing State funding, all elementary and secondary schools have also enlarged their afterschool programs, in terms of art clubs and performance groups (dance or theatre), all have acquired more digital media equipment (i.e., cameras, LCD projectors, animation resources and training), and all have noted an increase in field trips or artist residency opportunities. At the high school level, an increase in the number of afterschool arts academy courses offered through the West LA Community College partnership led to more student productions and exhibitions, arts-based assemblies and a new dance room.

## TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE OPPORTUNITIES

The arts coordinator verified eight areas in which the district could potentially benefit from technical assistance efforts:

- District and principal arts leadership training
- Lobbying for a district arts education budget
- Creating learning communities within schools to sustain arts instruction
- Writing a school bond initiative to upgrade performance facilities

- Program evaluation
- Student assessment
- Developing a long-range professional development plan
- Transitioning the arts coordinator job from consultant to full time employee