

Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District

2007-2008 student enrollment: 22,092

3 high schools (grades 9-12)

7 middle schools (grades 6-8)

18 elementary (grades K-5)

1 alternative school¹⁵

DISTRICT CONTEXT

The Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District joined the *Arts for All* initiative in 2003-2004 after being encouraged to do so by the district superintendent. She wanted to look into providing students with a more comprehensive education in the arts. At the time, elementary level art instruction was available to students based on the particular motivation of school principals, the know-how of classroom teachers, or sporadic instructional partnerships with community arts providers. In six schools (33%) for instance, the Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) funded a program called *Meet the Masters*, which brought visual arts lessons into the K-5 classrooms four times a year.

While the secondary schools offered elective courses in at least three of the four major art disciplines the number and types of arts classes were not consistent across schools. The high schools offered visual arts, drama and music instruction as electives; one offered an advanced dance course. The seven middle schools each offered music as an elective taught by a music specialist. Other art classes were taught by classroom teachers with prior training in an art discipline. Hence, two middle schools offered visual arts, three offered theatre, and two offered dance during the school day. One school also offered an afterschool class in jazz and another in theatre. Two key factors that affected the size of the district arts program were a general lack of funding and the prevailing belief that the limited amount of instruction provided by Norwalk-La Mirada was not so different from other urban California districts.

“I think that after Proposition 13, a great many districts started to think that not having the arts in the elementary [schools], for instance, is the norm, and even acceptable.”

STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR ARTS EDUCATION

The original district art team was named the District Arts Council (a.k.a. CAT team) and consisted primarily of school staff—including arts specialists, classroom teachers and principals. The superintendent was also on the team, and continues to play a central role in

¹⁵ Alternative schools are addressed in the LACOE case study.

approving and modifying the plan. Working with two *Arts for All* planning coaches, the district completed the initial draft of the arts education plan in 2004.

The major elements in the plan included the commonly identified factors of a quality arts program: standards based instruction, leadership infrastructure, highly-qualified teachers, professional development for leadership and instructors, community involvement, sustaining funding, facilities and resource infrastructure and a system for oversight and revision. Curriculum development was not on this list, as it was left to schools to decide which art disciplines and curricula they proposed to teach. A school board policy for arts education was also passed. It acknowledged critical factors in delivering a standards-based education and stated the district's commitment to the development and implementation of an arts plan, based on available funding.

At the start of the 2004-2005 school year, the district was heavily focused on increasing literacy rates across all schools. The superintendent asked the CAT team to revise the district arts plan to demonstrate how instruction in the arts could be used to improve literacy. The district was also involved in an arts integration planning effort with the Galef Institute, a regional arts education non-profit, and the superintendent wanted the two arts education initiatives to work in tandem. As a result, literary coaches were asked to join the CAT team and another year of planning commenced. The revision was complete in the spring of 2005.

IMPLEMENTING THE ARTS PLAN

Although the arts plan was approved, it was put on hold during the 2005-2006 school year due to the lack of an implementation budget. The district was experiencing declining enrollment and did not have funds available to hire an arts coordinator, even when a matching grant was offered through the *Arts for All* Pooled Fund. Then, when money became available through the California state legislature block grants in the spring of 2007, the superintendent acknowledged the enormous time and energy that had already gone into planning and gave the green light for implementation to begin.

At that point, the district promoted a high school music specialist to the position of arts coordinator with the designation of Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA). Her job was to support schools in increasing student access to quality instruction. The CAT team decided to focus on the elementary level first in order to build a strong K-12 program from the ground up. It was also the level most lacking in arts instruction.

The next step was to conduct a survey of teachers' attitudes toward arts education. The results reportedly indicated that teachers believed arts instruction was important and that they were not resistant to a district-sponsored arts plan. A needs assessment was also completed and the results showed the elementary schools were at different places in terms of resources and amount of instruction offered. Rather than impose a one-size-fits-all plan, schools were allowed to write their own plan for providing standards-based arts instruction. The schools could focus on whatever art disciplines they were comfortable

adopting. To build the capacity of school and district administrators to oversee arts education programs, the arts coordinator designed and led a five-session arts leadership academy during the 2007-2008 school year. The objective was to familiarize the participants with learning experiences in the arts, the California Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) Standards, available district resources for the arts, site level planning, collaboration and advocacy.

Concurrently, the coordinator had been helping schools create their plans using a district planning template. Each plan contained objectives, strategies, evaluation methods, and a budget for how the school proposed to use its enrollment-based allotment of the one-time state legislative funding. By the spring of 2008, 40 percent of schools had completed plans and received funds, primarily for supplies and musical instruments. Other principals waited to complete the arts leadership academy before writing their plan. A few schools opted to take another year to research arts education before deciding what their entry point would be. In general, those schools that had some arts education programming prior to the *Arts for All* initiative were able to create a plan more quickly than those who were starting from scratch. In addition, secondary school arts specialists used the California VAPA Frameworks to redesign courses to reflect the state content standards and meet college entrance requirements.

The next steps for the Norwalk-La Mirada District will be to provide afterschool professional development for elementary teachers in the four major art disciplines. The arts coordinator is working with individual schools to help them choose textbooks or fashion other forms of site-specific curricula (i.e., sample standards-based lesson plans per grade level).

MECHANISMS AND CHALLENGES

An analysis of data collected during a focus group interview with representatives of the CAT team revealed a number of mechanisms that appeared to facilitate the arts education planning and implement process. Obstacles that appear to slow or confound the process were identified as well. A listing of these factors is provided below:

Mechanisms for Change

- *Arts awareness.* Through the *Arts for All* initiative, the school board and superintendent became aware of what other districts were offering in arts education in comparison to their own. The data gathered from the needs assessment process helped them realize their deficits were not necessarily shared across the spectrum of schools regionally.
- *Strategic planning.* Taking the time for planning helped create leverage with the superintendent and school board to gain approval for implementation.
- *Curriculum alignment.* Dovetailing the district arts plan with the literacy initiative and the Galef Institute's integration plan is intended to minimize conflicts in instructional objectives.

- *Hiring an arts coordinator.* The addition of a full-time arts supervisor ensured that focused time and energy was given to the planning and implementation process.
- *Teacher buy-in.* The district-wide teacher survey confirmed buy-in for the arts plan and gave the CAT team the confidence to move forward with implementation decisions.
- *State funding.* Funds from the California legislature for arts education enabled the district to begin implementation of the plan.
- *Arts leadership training.* An arts leadership academy provided district and school administrators with a better understanding of the artistic experience, the instructional content, and advocacy methods they could employ in furthering arts education.

Challenges of Change

- *Declining enrollment.* A drop in enrollment inhibits the ability of the school to hire arts specialists or in other ways dedicate more funding for arts education
- *Few fiscal partnerships.* A lack of community funding partners beyond the Norwalk La Mirada Education Foundation and the *Arts for All* Pooled Fund.
- *Local control.* A climate of school-based control means the arts coordinator must help implement and evaluate 29 unique arts plans. This also makes it difficult to provide professional development to support the objectives of the individual school plans.
- *Variations in offerings.* The decision to let schools decide which art disciplines they want to teach and which curricula they want to use could potentially extend inequities in student access to comprehensive arts instruction.
- *Sparse facilities.* The district lacks performance facilities at most schools.

OUTCOMES

By taking the time for careful planning, building leadership capacity and being responsive to teachers' input, the Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District has experienced a fundamental change in perception about the role of arts education in the district. According to the arts coordinator, the arts are now viewed as an essential part of the school curriculum. This changed was noted as critical to the continued implementation of the overall district arts plan and the individual school plans. Others areas where changes occurred are listed below, in accordance with the elements of a quality arts education program.

Content

Standards-based Curriculum. A yearlong pilot of state-approved visual arts and music textbooks was completed in spring 2008. The arts coordinator is currently assisting individual schools decide on textbook adoption or helping them develop their own

curricula. While meeting state standards was not what drove schools to join *Arts for All* originally, their chosen curricula will ultimately reflect the statewide content standards in the arts. At the secondary level, specialists have used the California State VAPA Frameworks and Content Standards to revise course syllabi. Courses have also been created to meet the state college entrance requirements.

Pedagogy. In time, all arts instruction at the high school and middle school levels is intended to be taught by credentialed specialists and at the elementary level, by classroom teachers. The district's central focus on increasing literacy rates will lead to elementary arts instruction that is integrated into language arts whenever possible, addressing content standards in both areas.

Student Assessment. At the elementary level, techniques in student assessment are considered a core part of teacher training and curriculum design in the arts. Currently, students are graded on whether they demonstrate comprehension of lesson objectives rather than the quality of what they create. Students receive a number rating on their report cards. This assessment system is currently under review. At the secondary level, students receive letter grades based on performance standards and completed visual arts projects.

Professional Development. In the Norwalk-La Mirada District, professional development started with the arts leadership academy for district and school administrators to improve their ability to provide oversight in subjects in which many have little knowledge or experience. All principals attended five sessions during the 2007-2008 year. A second after-school training academy is being organized for the 2008-2009 year to provide all elementary teachers the opportunity to learn about integrated instruction in their choice of art disciplines. A teacher survey indicated more teachers are comfortable beginning with visual arts or music rather than with dance or theatre. Attendance is expected to be voluntary and teachers will be paid, unless the ongoing legislative block grant funding is reduced.

Infrastructure

Program Administration. A district music specialist who was active on the planning team was promoted to full time arts coordinator in the spring of 2007. Currently, her work is focused on providing planning and implementation support for the elementary and middle schools. This includes coordinating professional development opportunities, helping to design plans and writing school level grants.

Personnel. Increasing the number of arts specialists in the district is not a priority at this time.

Facilities and Equipment. Currently, theatre is taught in regular classrooms and dance is taught in the school multi-purpose room. Reportedly there are no performance spaces in the schools with the exception of one high school auditorium that is in need of repair and upgrades. There is a performing arts center in the community, but the rental fee is

prohibitive at \$5,000 per event. Efforts to pursue facility upgrades have gone unrewarded to date. CAT team members view the passage of a school bond issue as a possible solution. But since a facilities bond was approved by voters within the last three years it is likely another bond issue will have to wait a while. As far as equipment is concerned, schools will be allowed to use their allotment of one-time state legislative funds for supplies, musical instruments or teacher training once they have turned in their expenditure plan for approval.

Partnerships and Collaborations. Currently, the district collaborates with four main community arts providers: Meet the Masters, which sends visual artists into schools using PTA or Title I funds; Cerritos Center for the Performing Art, which offers free dramatic and musical performances with related teacher in-service training; Music Center of Los Angeles County, which provides artist-in-residency programs; and La Mirada Symphony, which performs in its own concert hall and sends musicians to visit schools.

While external arts programs are offered to all schools, accessibility is based on instructional priorities and ability to pay. Two of the 18 elementary schools currently have externally provided music programs. At one school, the *In Harmony with Education Music Education* program developed by Boze Corporation demonstrates how music and science interrelate. Another school offers an extensive music program and is a member of the Music in Education National Consortium. The school is managed by a visionary principal who firmly believes that music instruction enhances academic performance in other subjects. Her school is currently involved in a research partnership with the New England Conservatory for Music, which provides funding for music instruction planning.

Sustainability

Policy. In 2004, a policy for arts education was approved by the school board that recognized the importance of the arts as an essential component of a quality education and as part of college preparation. The policy stipulated the development of a long-term plan that will provide for the implementation of standards-based instruction Pre-K through Grade 12 plus the ongoing review and development of arts education programs, as the district budget allows.

Funding. The district budget pays for the salaries of music and visual arts specialists at the secondary level and also funded the time for art members to meet and plan for two years. The ongoing block grant funding pays for the arts coordinator's salary and all other aspects of implementing the master arts plan. A grant from the *Arts for All* Pooled Fund covered one-third of the cost of an artist-in-residency program in five of 18 schools. The five residencies were used to explore aims of the district arts plan, including textbook adoption and language arts integration. While beneficial in providing the district with feedback on possible action steps, the residencies also forced administrators to consider the high expense of community partnerships.

Evaluation. Unique among the *Arts for All* Vanguard Districts is Norwalk-La Mirada's focus on evaluation and accountability as a fundamental piece of school-level arts education

planning and implementation. Data collection has not begun as many schools are still preparing their plans.

Communication and Advocacy. Each month, a district newsletter that includes a section written by the arts coordinator on visual and performing arts news is distributed to all school principals. She occasionally mails out other announcements, especially when there is positive news to share such as a performance event or a student award. School principals act as communication liaisons at the elementary and middle schools. Middle school music specialists are also included. The VAPA department chair is the communication contact at each high school.

District Leadership. The superintendent played an important role in the development of the district arts plan by attending planning meetings and setting guidelines for integrated instruction based on literacy goals. Another way her influence has been demonstrated is through controlling the distribution and use of the one-time state legislative funds by requiring schools to complete a standards-based arts education plan first. By attending the arts leadership academy presented by the arts coordinator, both district and school administrators are demonstrating their intention to support the implementation of the arts plan over time.

CHANGES IN EQUITABLE ACCESS TO ARTS INSTRUCTION

Since the district has spent much of the past five years in planning and waiting for funding, the CAT team had little to report in terms of increasing student access to a quality education in the arts. Regardless, the district has made important strides in creating an infrastructure that should well support an increase in student access to quality arts instruction in the next year or two.

It is worth summarizing the key elements of Norwalk-La Mirada's progress in this effort: Arts leadership training has been offered to all principals so they can share a common language and understanding of district objectives in the arts. Schools are developing instructional plans and looking at curriculum alternatives. Legislative dollars for supplies and instruments are being distributed equally according to school enrollment counts. Plans are underway for adding more electives at the middle school level. High school courses have been aligned with state content standards and college entrance requirements. Communication liaisons have been identified at every school and the arts coordinator provides regular news updates to all schools through newsletters and special announcements.

If the arts coordinator is able to hold schools accountable for turning in evaluation progress reports annually, and legislative block grant funding continues to be available to support the arts education roll out, the Norwalk-La Mirada District should be prepared to demonstrate measurable gains in providing all students with access to quality arts instruction.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE OPPORTUNITIES

Six potential areas for continued technical assistance from *Arts for All* were identified by the CAT team:

- Creating a financial plan for improving arts facilities in the district
- Student assessment practices
- Program evaluation measures
- Helping teachers who are already overwhelmed by classroom responsibilities balance arts instruction with other teaching duties
- Professional development guidance, in terms of identifying criteria for quality arts instruction
- Professional development opportunities for the arts coordinator and arts specialists with good ideas for arts integration across grade levels. It was suggested that each district could send a team for training.