Creative Momentum: Arts Learning in Oregon

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Young members of the audience get a hands-on drum roll lesson from artists at Portland Taiko’s Children’s Matinee, which takes place annually at the Portland Center for the Performing Arts.

Photo: Rich Iwasaki © 2008
The Arts Commission’s Creative Oregon initiative, funded by Governor Ted Kulongoski and the Oregon legislature during the 2007-2009 biennium, strengthened the Commission’s overall capacity, but hiring the Commission’s first full-time arts education staff coordinator was an important result of the added funding. With the new leadership and energy of Arts Education Coordinator Deb Vaughn, the Commission launched a series of strategic arts education efforts, kicked off by the First Annual Oregon Arts Education Congress in November, 2008. Based on sessions at the Congress attended by legislators, business leaders, educators and artists, a state-wide leadership team developed a mission statement to guide the Commission’s important work in this area: Sustainable improvement to Oregon’s K-12 systems so that the arts play a key role in the education of every child.

The work underway across Oregon and described in this monograph exemplifies this mission. The stories describe how arts organizations are responding to the education needs of their communities, how programs are adapting to meet the changing demands of schools and how educators are transforming teaching.

These stories highlight exceptional work but there is still opportunity to improve arts learning for all Oregon students. Even in these uncertain times, we can learn from shared best practices and leveraged resources.

In Oregon, we believe our students’ creative capacity and originality are skills increasingly valued by employers in the global economy. In a message to the 2008 Arts Education Congress, Oregon Superintendent of Public Instruction Susan Castillo said, “We know the arts can play a key role in creating high levels of achievement for every child. All students deserve the opportunity to connect with their innate creative and innovative talents, fully preparing them for life in the 21st century.”

Students engaged in learning through the arts enjoy learning more. But arts education is not all about brain research, test scores or 21st century skills. It’s also about joy, the thrill of playing music, acting and creating a painting or sculpture.

The arts stimulate learning and ignite passion for an art form simultaneously. Join us in envisioning an educational environment that balances left and right brain thinking, achieves and exceeds benchmarks, and has the power to light up a child’s eyes in an “ah-ha!” moment.

Christine D’Arcy
Executive Director

“...My husband and I believe strongly that arts education is essential for building innovative thinkers who will be our nation’s leaders for tomorrow. We want all children who believe in their talent to see a way to create a future for themselves in the arts community, either as a hobby or as a profession.”

— First Lady Michelle Obama speaking at American Ballet Theatre, New York City, May 2009
For the students of seventh grade science teacher Michael Geisen, textbooks are mostly just for decoration. Those lonely books gather cobwebs while the students participate in small groups debating relevant topics or acting the part of cow dung in a play demonstrating a biological principle. In other words, in this class, learning is fun.

“Learning is fun,” says Geisen from his home in Redmond where he has just finished his term as 2008 National Teacher of the Year.

“Kids inherently are curious and love learning new stuff. They want to understand how things work. But by the time they’re in 4th or 5th grade and into middle school, we’ve pretty well beat it out of them. School has become drudgery.”

Geisen is out to change all that. Winning teaching’s highest honor meant a year spent traveling across the country and the world, meeting former President G.W. Bush as well as scores of educators and policymakers. “It’s not as glamorous as you might think,” concedes Geisen who recorded his travels on his cleverly written blog where he noted his “450% increase in number of neckties since last year.”

All kidding aside, Geisen is aware of his unique position to advocate for a change in the classroom environment. “I think I’ve been able to make a case for teaching the whole child,” explains Geisen. “Kids are human, they need to have a learning environment that piques their curiosity and gets them excited about learning. [My teaching style] resonates with a lot of people.”

While educators know from experience that creativity is crucial to learning, Geisen is prepared to back his theories with science. “If we’re going to integrate art into the classroom,” he argues, “we should see measurable improvements.” Test scores in his science department at Crook County Middle School in Prineville have gone from well below 50% of students not meeting benchmarks to over 80% meeting them.

Test scores, however, do not present the whole picture. Instead of focusing solely on test scores, Geisen says, we should also ask, “How well are students collaborating? How well are students taking ideas and synthesizing them? How creative are they? There are ways to measure that. Maybe it’s not as easy to put a number on them, but there are ways to measure. In a global economy, those are not just meaningless skills, or fluff. Those are the real deal.”

As he prepares to re-enter the classroom after his year off, Geisen is – in his own words – coming into a real mess. Lower than projected enrollment in Prineville’s school district means major budget cuts including a shorter school year and staff lay-offs of up to 20%. In a twist of irony, Geisen’s seniority (he’s been at the school since 2001), not his recent accolades, will keep him in the classroom this fall. Staff cuts will also mean larger class sizes and less time to connect with individual students with less money to devote to labs and other creative teaching tools.

Nonetheless, Geisen takes the challenges of the coming year in stride. He’ll continue his award winning style of teaching to prepare his students for the changing world outside the classroom. “To be successful in this world,” he says, “you’ve gotta have the right brain and the left brain skills. There’s got to be a whole brain approach to learning.”

To Michael Geisen, that means more cow dung and less textbooks.

During a lesson on genetics, Geisen uses a storytelling exercise, in which the class makes up a story about two people and then uses a Punnett Square diagram (pictured on the floor) to predict the genetic outcome of the pairing.
In a converted church nestled in the trees surrounding Central Park in downtown Corvallis, a world of art and culture bursts open for the children attending Globetrotters camp. Immersed in the sights, sounds and arts of a different culture gives the students, aged 6-12, a unique opportunity to engage with the global community.

“It’s a good education for life,” says Sara Swanberg, Executive Director of The Arts Center, the arts organization behind Globetrotters. “You can see it on their faces, they are so excited.”

For six weeks each summer, Globetrotters explores a different culture, one week at a time. Last June, the young explorers plunged into the kaleidoscope that is India. Mornings began with yoga taught by a visiting Indian yogi, kolam painting, then lessons on creating a Mandala. Life on the subcontinent ended for one day with a performance by Sreevidhya Chandramouli, whose traditional songs played on the vina made one eight-year-old student feel as though he was “zooming across a vast expanse...on the back of a wild antelope.”

One of the keys to Globetrotter’s success and popularity is the authenticity of each cultural experience gained by reaching out to groups and the community. For the “Sojourn to India,” The Arts Center partnered with FASIS (Foundation for the Arts and Science of the Indian Sub-continent) and the Corvallis Multicultural Literacy Center for the week’s activities. Other weeks find international students from nearby Oregon State University sharing their native arts, dress, and languages, as well as interdisciplinary artists who arrive from all over Oregon to lead workshops in a specific art form. Seeing, hearing and working with local artists and community members is crucial for a sort of sensory geography lesson, or as Swanberg says, “learning where, in relation to us, are these people.”

Sometimes, the cultures are closer than the students realize. As a part of “The Pacific Northwest Native Experience,” Globetrotters’ outreach brought artists to geographically isolated schools throughout Benton County. Eager students in Monroe (population 600) learned drumming and traditional dance from members of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. When a student asked about the presenter’s costume,

“Our goal is to show kids how much arts and culture go hand in hand. You can’t have one with out the other.”

— Globetrotters Educational Director Chris Neely
"It was a perfect opportunity to explain why it wasn’t a costume," recalls Globetrotters Educational Director Chris Neely, "but, rather, a part of Native American culture and heritage."

Globetrotters began four years ago as a two-week morning program through which classes took place on-site at The Arts Center one week and at a local school the next. As its popularity grew, it became clear that the program should expand. "We all thought, this is too good an idea to just offer two weeks out of the year," explains Swanberg. Now over 400 students take part in the program each summer and they are looking for ways to expand even more.

Meanwhile, The Arts Center is sharing the Globetrotters model with other communities and hopes to build a similar program in Linn County while continuing to bring artists and cultural activities to more schools.

“Our goal is to show kids how much arts and culture go hand in hand. You can’t have one without the other,” says Neely. Moreover, exposure to the rich tapestry of the world’s cultures creates a true global citizen. “They learn to understand diversity,” she explains, “and ultimately it affects their growth as people.”

While the Globetrotters roam the earth in their imaginations, the benefits they gain come right back to their community.
As professional partnerships go, it was cooperation at first sight. Oregon Children’s Theatre’s five-year relationship with Kaiser Permanente to bring health-themed drama to Oregon schools had the potential to be a monumental power struggle. Instead, the non-profit theater and for-profit health care giant are united for one common goal: Helping children lead healthy lives.

“As partners, we are profoundly interested in reaching the kids,” says Marci Crowson, Program Director for the Children’s Theatre.

Oregon’s Educational Theatre Program (ETP) is just one of the theater-based health education programs supported by Kaiser throughout the country, but it’s the only one that employs a professional theater company. “Kaiser recognizes how uniquely equipped theater is to make connections,” explains Crowson. By emphasizing the strengths each organization brings to the project, they aim to “reach children by unconventional means,” says Nancy Stevens, Kaiser’s Director of Community Benefit. “We try to engage them rather than preach to them.”

When the Educational Theatre Program started, the emphasis was on safety-related issues. Over time, Stevens reports, the production themes shifted to healthy eating and increasing children’s activity levels. “It became apparent that we needed to address obesity early rather than treating it in a clinic,” she says.

The performances themselves are athletic events with players and children interacting and participating. High-energy productions such as “The Amazing Food Detective” manage to discuss healthy food choices (a topic that otherwise sets many a child’s eyes rolling) in a way that captivates its young audience while spreading a very important message.

“It’s not drive-by theater,” remarks Crowson. “It’s very interactive. Students get a chance to participate and feel like they have a voice in what is going on. We start the conversation that we hope will continue after we leave.”

Their most interactive program to date was a classroom-based program entitled “What Do You See” at Roosevelt High School in North Portland. With a purposefully flexible curriculum lasting an entire term, the students explored concepts related to identity and body image through theater, film, visual art, writing, movement and music. Roosevelt teachers worked alongside Oregon Children’s Theatre actors to delve into the complex topics, ultimately developing a performance piece by term’s end.
Along with lessons on specific health topics such as eating disorders, the 22 students participated in an array of theater-based activities from improvisation to creating a documentary about their school. Utilizing multiple artistic disciplines removed the students from their comfort zone. “Personally, I do not like rap,” wrote student Taylor on the class blog about the day the class experimented with the language of rap music. “When I had first learned that we would be writing our own raps, I was reluctant to do so,” she wrote. “But when I did, I found it to be quite enjoyable and ended up writing more than the required two lines.”

Expanding and confronting comfort zones is crucial to the success of the Educational Theatre Program partnership as they develop new productions each school year.

“We’re pretty young at this,” explains Crowson. “We’re still experimenting with how to best reach the students.”

“From the perspective of Community Benefit, both regionally and nationally,” says Stevens, “the Educational Theatre Program is accomplishing exactly what we wanted which is to have a presence in the community that creates dialogues around health-related issues.

“We have been quite pleased with the response and impact of the program and our partnership with Oregon Children’s Theatre.”

And what do the kids have to say about the program?

“I think it was fun to show kids how to make good choices in a musical,” wrote one middle school student in response to a performance, “because talking to them would be boring.”

“... Students get a chance to participate and feel like they have a voice in what is going on. We start the conversation that we hope will continue after we leave.”

— Marci Crowson, Oregon Children’s Theatre Program Director
Malik Hughes crouches under a tree in the courtyard of Hayhurst Elementary School in SW Portland and aims his Pentax camera at a small toy fox he’s nestled into the branches. Later, the second grader pens an ode to the color brown and his muse, the charming woodland fox.

“He really got what I was trying to teach them,” says artist Julie Keefe (along with photographer Tyler Kohlhoff) who worked with Malik’s class as a part of The Right Brain Initiative. “They learned about photography; how to hold the camera, how to photograph at different angles, and then how to write about their work and write poetry using similes.” Keefe’s infectious enthusiasm for the work of her young Ansel Adamses is shared by their teacher, Barbara Iverson and demonstrates the power behind The Right Brain Initiative.

Established in 2007, The Right Brain Initiative’s mission is to guarantee arts education for every K-8 student in the Multnomah, Clackamas, and Washington Counties. It’s a goal born of rapidly dwindling arts education for children and the inequity of such programs across the tri-county area.

“We’re attempting to address that inequity by utilizing resources in the community and setting a system that allows for the connecting of artists with classrooms and teachers around learning goals of the school site,” explains Marna Stalcup, Project Manager for The Right Brain Initiative. “The equity part is paramount: [arts education] is something that every child deserves.”

“Kids need arts experiences,” adds Carin Rosenberg of Young Audiences, The Right Brain Initiative’s implementation partner. “They are starving for it.”

In order to launch The Right Brain Initiative, the Regional Arts and Culture Council (RACC) went directly to the people. “We held a series of eight community conversations over six weeks throughout the tri-county area,” describes Stalcup of the early shaping of The Right Brain Initiative. “It was really about dreaming. What do we long for in our schools, what kind of experiences do we want for our kids, what are the qualities and characteristics of people in their community that they admire and they want their children to aspire to? And then how do we use the arts to get to that?”

Armed with an initial vision statement and strong community, government, and business support, The Right Brain Initiative along with Young Audiences implemented the program for 10,000 children in 20 pilot schools across four districts. From its inception, The Right Brain Initiative’s model takes inspiration from, and is mentored by, Dallas’ Big Thought which successfully integrates arts into the curriculum of every classroom in the Dallas Independent School District.

One of the most important aspects passed on by Big Thought is the emphasis on extensive collaboration between the schools and the artists. It is a crucial difference from other programs that bring established curricula into schools. “It’s a community partnership—it’s not just RACC coming in with a program and saying, ‘We’re going to do this,’” says Stalcup. “[The Right Brain Initiative] advocates seeing artists and educators as co-equals,” explains Stalcup. “There

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– Marna Stalcup, The Right Brain Initiative Project Manager
is a lot of collaboration between the artist and teacher and lots of personalization, that increases the value of the experience [for students, teachers, and artists] exponentially.” Teachers and Right Brain artists are already planning next year’s projects and look forward to the comprehensive evaluation of the program to be completed this summer.

Back at Hayhurst, Malik and his classmates put the final touches on their projects in preparation for a school-wide Poet-Pourri, the culmination of a year’s worth of poetry and art-infused lessons. Hayhurst’s large-scale student and school involvement in the arts is exactly what Right Brain organizers envisioned.

“The opportunities we’re bringing in connect children with their communities and families with their children,” says Stalcup. “That is what we’re advocating for.”

Malik photographed his subject from three different viewpoints: snake’s eye, dog’s eye and bird’s eye. Here, he captures a toy fox in bird’s eye view.

Malik’s final project demonstrates his successful grasp of the concept of simile in both photography and writing, taught collaboratively by artist Julie Keefe and classroom teacher Barbara Iverson.

“Brown” by Malik Hughes

Brown is like a fox hunting for food and shelter.  
It smells like a light brown tree  
A brown cut down tree with a brown fox on it  
Looks like a brown tree branch.  
That’s brown to me
Teatro Milagro: PUENTES

Bridging the Cross-Curricular Divide

Dañel Malán, actor, playwright, and Artistic Director at Portland’s Teatro Milagro never imagined she’d build a fully functioning wind turbine. But in order to build support for PUENTES among science educators, Malán researched and built a scale model of a Savonius vertical axis wind turbine using little more than magnets and a wire coat hanger.

“We tried to get science teachers to participate in PUENTES,” says Malán whose efforts were met with equal parts support and skepticism. “Some resisted the notion that theater and science could go together, so I made a wind turbine because I didn’t want them to say that. I brought it with me to all of these school district meetings and said, ‘Look, here’s my wind turbine, I made this!”’

While she’s able to laugh at herself now, her experience underlines the difficulty of connecting art and science within the classroom. PUENTES seeks to change that perception with a fully integrated program entitled “The Art of Science.”

“The word ‘puentes’ is Spanish for bridges,” explains Malán. “The name and program emerged from the idea of bridging social and cultural barriers.” The four-day residency program for high school students involves imagining and creating a utopian society through explorations of visual arts, crafts, drama, social studies, and natural sciences. Every project has a global perspective and takes inspiration from the lives of people around the world. Students learn about sustainable communities such as Gaviotas in Columbia and the roots of political theater in Latin America.

In the past year, Malán and members of Teatro Milagro brought the PUENTES program to high schools in Hillsboro, Central Point, and Crook County High School in Prineville which Maláñ hails as the most successful residency so far. “It was everything I imagined a residency could be as far as arts integration,” says Malán. Teachers across academic disciplines and over half of the student body participated in the residency. As a finale, students worked with PUENTES actors to write and perform an “Ecodrama.” It was clear that the teachers were fully invested in

Merlo Station High School students work with Dañel Malán (left), using a technique called Image Theatre to generate ideas before they begin writing dialogue.
the success of the project. “The drama teacher even brought hay bales from her farm,” says Malán.

The impact on students, according to Malán, is dramatic. “I think we change their lives in a profound and scholarly way,” she says. “Perhaps they weren’t as open before to bilingual and bicultural experiences. We definitely affect their point of view of how they look at minorities, the arts and the arts in their lives.”

As for the wind turbine experiment, it serves as a symbol of the intersection of arts and science, even if it still requires some explanation.

“Even my theater friends ask me, ‘Well, what does that have to do with theater?’ But that’s the whole point,” says Malán. “Theater doesn’t have to stay in the theater. Theater has to be integrated. In order to survive as theater artists, we need to remove our fancy ideas about theater and take it out to people. We have to compete with MTV & Facebook and have to find a little niche where we can squeeze ourselves into a student’s imagination.”

Sometimes all it takes to spark that imagination are a few magnets and wire coat hangers.

“A team of students in Devon Julien’s ESL class at Century High School in Hillsboro creates a poster to outline the students’ vision of a utopian community. The poster will be used in an oral presentation to the rest of the class.”

“Theater doesn’t have to stay in the theater. Theater has to be integrated. In order to survive as theater artists, we need to remove our fancy ideas about theater and take it out to people. We have to compete with MTV & Facebook and have to find a little niche where we can squeeze ourselves into a student’s imagination.”

— Dañel Malán, actor, playwright, and Artistic Director at Portland’s Teatro Milagro
Snapshot: ArtsWork In Education

This is Your Brain on Art

To understand why arts integration works, take a look at the human brain. Made up of two distinct hemispheres, the left brain handles rational and linear thought while the right brain is in charge of the intuitive and creative. Both sides are crucial for learning, yet most current educational processes deal only with the left brain, much to the detriment of students.

“Students are ill-prepared to work at their highest levels of creativity because our education system focuses on linear and rote learning and marginalizes the importance of creativity,” says Rick Williams, Art Division Chair at Lane Community College and Executive Director for ArtsWork In Education.

Launched in 2006, ArtsWork in Education seeks to mend that educational inequity. Its mission is based on Williams' book, "Visual Communication: Integrating Media, Art, and Science," co-written with his wife and University of Oregon professor, Julianne H. Newton. The book lays out the scientific evidence in support of arts integration and its profound ability to improve the way students think. ArtsWork in Education takes this philosophy and turns it into practice by training classroom teachers and teaching artists on integrating arts in the core K-12 curriculum. Paired together, artists and teachers identify student learning goals and develop arts projects to achieve those goals.

With such solid scientific research and committed educators behind it, ArtsWork in Education’s completed projects are, well, awe-inspiring.

Take for instance the 25’ Statue of Liberty mural constructed out of 8,100 Post-it Notes by eighth graders from Kelly Middle School in Eugene. Working with artist Kristie Johnson, students learned the math behind creating mosaic art as well as the symbolic significance of the many cultures that make up the United States. Once the mural went on display, viewers were invited to write their own, or ancestral, country of origin on one of the mural’s Post-its.

Kelly students engaged in the Lady Liberty mural with equal parts enthusiasm and pride in the finished product. The overwhelming response was “Wow!” reports Johnson. “[The project] united 45 students working together to create a work much greater than what any single one could create alone,” she wrote in her artist’s statement. Such a strong reaction is not surprising, says Williams. “When arts are integrated, students are more interested because it’s more interesting.”

“There’s nothing lollipop about arts learning,” says Williams. “It’s the most rigorous learning process that you can engage in. The purpose of teaching art is not to create artists but to create more equally balanced and functioning people.”

That’s something both sides of the brain can understand.

Left: A student at Kelly Middle School in Eugene contemplates the finished “Lady Liberty” mural, the culmination of a math, history and art-integrated residency. Community members were invited to write down their country of origin and add their own Post-it Note to the mural.

Right: Instructor Kristie Johnson holds a completed silk screen, created using a photo emulsion technique, made from strata (small non-living items) collected on field trips as mentor Michelle Swanson and Kelly Middle School students critique the finished product.
Snapshot: Redmond School District

The Value of Vision

What’s an Oregon school district to do when its vision for the schools’ future is at odds with budget realities? That’s the question facing the Redmond School District in Central Oregon as their carefully constructed blueprint, the “Redmond Education Vision,” is threatened by the district’s $5.5 million budget shortfall.

The answer: Get creative.

Creativity was the goal of the Redmond Education Vision where the emphasis on developing the “whole child” included the commitment to “Developing and supporting an ‘artist in every child.’”

“This was my vision for how we ought to be doing this work,” says Vickie Fleming, Superintendent of Redmond School District. “If we find ways to engage students, they are well served not just educationally but as human beings. That’s why we’re here.”

A commitment to arts integration into the core curriculum is not just a dream of Fleming’s, but of the community as a whole. When Fleming came to Redmond in 2006, she held a series of public conversations with parents, teachers, and community members whose ideas, dreams and goals became the Redmond Educational Vision. After passage by the school board in 2007, the district started to implement the Vision’s ideas and its recommendations.

That is until the current budget shortfall.

“Everybody is a little discouraged right now,” says Fleming who is charged with making difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions such as moving the district to a four-day week in order to make up for the large gap in the budget. “The bitter irony is that we’re having to look at cutting art specialists,” she says.

“It’s tragic that every time we get to a budget crisis we have to look at what are the core academic basics, and sometimes make a choice between small classes or a music specialist. We shouldn’t have to make those kinds of choices.”

Fleming is reaching out to the community, bringing non-profits and other groups to the table to find out what programs they can offer to the students. She also encourages classroom teachers to provide creative opportunities within their curriculum.

Yet, Fleming remains optimistic.

“Sometimes crisis creates opportunity,” she says. “We’re keeping our eye on the Vision, and saying we’re going to stay committed to the Vision even though the budget’s not going to allow us to do a lot of programmatic changes.”

While the Vision may take longer to come to fruition, that fact by no means diminishes its value for the future of Redmond schools. Instead, Fleming continues to see the Vision as a beacon for her district. “We have to keep our eye on the prize.”

Left: Students learn about the local creative economy during a job shadow program with artists in Redmond. Right: Industrial arts classes allow students to experience the practical application of imagination.
Those that do teach young babes
Do it with gentle means and easy tasks
—Desdemona (Othello IV, ii, 132-133)

Teaching Shakespeare has been a challenge since, well, Shakespeare’s time. It’s a rite of passage for high schoolers to survive stale and uninspiring recitations of Shakespeare’s plays without experiencing any of the joys inherent in studying The Bard.

“Shakespeare has always been hard—even for me when I was a student!” laughs Joan Langley, Director of Education for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival from her office in Ashland. “I remember sitting in an English class reading Julius Caesar. It was hard, and boring.”

With their education programs for teachers, the Festival aims to fix all that. “Shakespeare in the Classroom” provides educators tools for bringing Shakespeare’s works to life within a classroom setting. “Our mission is to help teachers to make Shakespeare fun and accessible for students,” explains Langley. “[Our] philosophy is get your kids up on their feet. Shakespeare didn’t write plays to be read,” she says. “They were meant to be performed.”

In her more than 20 years of working with educators, Langley acknowledges an increase in competition with technology in students’ lives and the precipitous drop in literacy, especially among high schoolers. To capture students’ attention, she says, teachers must be willing to try fresh techniques and methods. “Teachers who come here are completely willing to try new approaches—that is something that has changed in education in the last 20 years—they are willing to push the desks aside and do interactive work. This is crucial as every student learns differently.”

Participants in the Festival’s professional development classes learn strategies to increase comprehension by breaking down the dense works into segments. “Instead of slogging through the entire play in class,” says Langley, “choose key scenes and speeches and work in depth with those. Students can read the rest of the text as homework but use the class time for interactive investigation of the plays.”

“Before [Shakespeare in the Classroom] I wanted to teach Shakespeare but my students just hated it,” says teacher Susan Burnett from Glendale High School in Douglas County who has attended the class multiple times. “I never knew teaching Shakespeare could be fun until I had this training.”

“We see teachers as essential partners in connecting a new generation to Shakespeare and the theater,” says Langley. Armed with methods that work, teachers build confidence not only in their own abilities, but in the potential of their students. With that knowledge, they will most assuredly, as Malvolio says in Twelfth Night, “Be not afraid of greatness.”
Cultural opportunities are sometimes hard to come by in La Grande, a town of 12,500 in the foothills of the Blue Mountains in eastern Oregon. Nonetheless, as a result of some creative ideas and educational partnerships, a crop of 21 enthusiastic fifth-graders at Greenwood Elementary are learning to play violins, violas and cellos in a program dubbed “Greenstrings.”

Inspired by the Oregon Symphony’s Community Music Partnership residency in La Grande in 2008, Greenwood Principal Mike Gregory worked with Jane Howell of ArtsEast and Lisa Robertson, Assistant Professor of Music at Eastern Oregon University to establish Greenstrings. “The Oregon Symphony visit got a lot of kids and the community interested in string instruments,” says Robertson of the motivation that buoyed the project.

While most aspiring string players begin their training as early as kindergarten, Greenstrings organizers believed in their fifth-graders’ potential. “We thought that we owed it to our fifth-graders to offer the program to them,” says Gregory. “They have the maturity to do well — and they have done well.”

Community School of the Arts provided most of the instruments, while community members donated others. "The kids are fascinated by the music and excited by the instruments," says Robertson. "They aren’t blasé or spoiled and understand that it is a big deal to be given a violin and books for free.”

Robertson taught the classes, held after school hours two days a week, for the first half of the year with her EOU music education students taking over for the second. EOU instructors are paid for teaching the classes and gain valuable experience working with students in an area where such experience is hard to come by.

After a slightly rocky start, (“At the beginning of the year, they weren’t sure which end of the instrument to pick up,” says Gregory) the Greenstrings players now have a solid understanding of playing and reading music, reaping the benefits such an education provides. “Playing music gives a kid so much more information, confidence, and self-discipline,” says Robertson. “Involvement in music makes for good students.”

While it may not be a large program, its importance to the students cannot be minimized. “In this economy, it’s great that we still have the music,” says Gregory. “Especially in a rural area where the chance for direct exposure to the arts is less. My hope is that this program is just the beginning of a lifelong love of art and music.”

With so much momentum to keep music integral to their community, this band will most certainly play on.
Arts Learning and Brain Research: The Dana Foundation Report

“One can’t lose with training in the arts. It brings so much to life in terms of enjoyment, metaphor and preparation for the uncertainties of our existence.”
— Michael Gazzaniga, Ph.D., Dana Report project organizer and leader

In 2004, a group of leading neuroscientists from across the United States came together to study whether exposure to the arts leads to higher academic performance. What makes their findings, published as The Dana Foundation Report, stand out from previous studies is that researchers studied how the brain actually receives and processes information. With scientifically grounded and controlled data, the report represents the best science in the rapidly developing field of brain research.

The Dana report lays out findings that explore the causal relationships between the arts and learning in other subject areas in new, deeper ways than ever before. The results provide compelling data to support arts education:

• Arts training enhances a child’s ability to focus, stay on task and exclude distractions, leading to better emotional control, conflict resolution skills and efficiency in learning.
• IQ scores of children receiving training in the arts improve significantly. Specifically, music and theater training enhances memory skills. However, these benefits disappear if artists are not allowed to rehearse. This demonstrates that continual training is necessary to maintain these skills, similar to athletes who must train to stay in shape.
• Musicians learn rehearsal techniques which allow them to effectively retain information by putting it into context. The study of melodic and harmonic patterns create neural sequences through rehearsal.
• Actors are highly skilled at extracting the core meaning of verbal material.
• Intensive music training improves skills in abstract geometry, but only when the training is sustained over time. Music training also improves reading fluency.
• Experience in the visual arts correlates to improvement in math calculation skills. Early visual art training is connected to increased attention to patterns of speech sounds, a skill related to reading ability.
• Music and theater students show increased abilities to generate novel ideas, suggesting that creativity can be taught.
• Dancers demonstrate higher levels of accuracy in attention tasks, enhancing the speed at which the short-term memory processes motion stimuli
• Musicians show increased ability to learn a second language.
• Musical training for young children from under-privileged backgrounds correlates strongly with improvements in math skills for everyday living and spatial cognition.

While not conclusive, the Dana study is a systematic and extraordinarily valuable advance toward understanding why the arts are critical to learning. This science says that education in music, dance, theater — all the arts — builds better brains, and that is proof enough to encourage teachers, parents and policy makers to make arts education a core part of every child’s education.

Adapted from "Learning, Arts and the Brain: A Summary of the Dana Report for Educators and Policy Makers" by John Frohnmayer (2009), and used with permission.