



Gene Furr, Courtesy N.C. Dept. of Public Instruction

Arts Education —

The Challenge of a Holistic Approach

by Bill Finger

Anne A. Kratzer teaches 1,000 children—one thousand. Each child gets about an hour of instruction every other week. Despite such a load, Mrs. Kratzer has “the best rapport I’ve ever seen with students,” as one of her colleagues puts it. One of 171 teacher in the arts in the Wake County School system (a system with 53,800 students), Kratzer was recently named Wake County 1982 Teacher of the Year. Honoring an art teacher with this award indicates the importance of people like Anne Kratzer. But the 1982 choice also highlights the low level of resources for arts education in relation to other “basic” subjects.

“We’re so used to basic skills, we tend to forget the arts,” Kratzer said recently, after receiving the award. “Art helps perception, and if you don’t perceive, you don’t think.” Children have to be shown how to look for new ways to solve a problem. Teaching children how to express themselves helps do that, says Kratzer, by making every one of them feel important through what he or she creates. Important—and respected.

Few educators deny that the arts are a fundamental part of a child’s education. “The arts are basic in our state,” Gov. James B. Hunt, Jr. told a statewide arts and education conference in 1980. But the current fiscal pinch at the federal and state levels has forced politicians and educators to make hard choices in their budget priorities. The arts often fall near the bottom, behind the three “R’s,” behind math and the sciences, and behind athletics.

Against the current wave of fiscal pressures stands a solid base of state policies and commitments to arts education. The three articles that follow show how the state has developed a potential structure for lifelong learning in the arts—from kindergarten through the adult years.

First, educator Gloria Gillins Jackson and journalist Steve Adams review the importance of arts education in the public schools, nurturing the right side of the brain (intuitive skills) as fully as the left side (analytical skills).

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Then arts patrons Mary and James Semans explain how the N.C. School of the Arts offers a place for students with special talents. The School of the Arts stands as a kind of middle training ground—a training site for aspiring arts professionals as well as a cultural resource to all North Carolinians who see their performances. Finally, journalist Peggy Payne describes the Visiting Artist Program, which provides an opportunity for professional artists and adults in communities throughout the state to have an artistic interchange that goes beyond the performer/audience format.

While a solid structure for arts education stands firmly in place in North Carolina, financial and philosophical commitments within that structure are still evolving. As Jackson and Adams point out, for example, the state and local school systems have committed less than four percent of all teachers' salaries to the arts. Statewide, only 2,680 arts teachers—people like Anne Kratzer—work with children in the public

the talented and arts education for the many. Both types of commitments are critically important. In the School of the Arts, as the Semanses explain, North Carolina has one of the nation's most outstanding training grounds for performing artists. At the state level, Jackson and Adams show that arts education is slowly evolving into a position of power with the other basics. But the arts have not yet achieved the importance of the three "R's" in the eyes of the legislature. Until arts education attains such a rank, scarce funds will go elsewhere.

North Carolina can be proud that arts training for those with special talents continues to prosper during an economic downturn. But what about those children who will spend more time in an audience than on a stage? As Anne Kratzer said upon receiving her Teacher of the Year award, "If you don't perceive, you don't think."

The arts, perhaps more than any other discipline, can help us all learn how to perceive.

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schools; 8,000 are said to be needed. Meanwhile, the School of the Arts in Winston-Salem is flourishing—expanding its curriculum, opening a major new performing center, and broadening its reputation for excellence.

The level of the state's commitment to children with special talents—i.e., the School of the Arts—seems to be on very solid ground. But the level of support for the "artist" in all children from Manteo to Murphy seems to be on "hold," if not suffering. At a time of economic retrenchments—when students focus on job training and state policymakers concentrate on industrial growth and a balanced budget—arts education commitments seem to tilt toward the talented and away from the masses. Put another way, policymakers seem to find it easier to support arts training for the few over arts education for the many—to support that elite group of persons who can perform a flawless pirouette or play a poignant Beethoven sonata over the broad populace of students who depend primarily on the left side of the brain.

Policymakers in North Carolina must be very conscious of the choices before them in arts education, particularly between arts training for

In the long run then, committing funds to both types of arts education—for the talented and for the many—represents an investment in the future of the state that pays a high yield. □



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