

Arts and Afterschool and the Creative Economy

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**Arts Partnership 10th Annual Meeting
Charleston, SC
October 1-2, 2005**

Stuck in a mid-20th Century Learning Time Box

There are many trends that we need to watch in these rapidly changing times—increase internationalization of the economy, higher standards in the schools, the need for new learning skills, and rapid use of technology in most facets of life to name a few. That is why the theme of this conference is so exciting.****

One trend that has recently gotten my very serious attention is actually the lack of a serious trend or change. So I want to talk to you about this in open up our session today.

We seem to be stuck in a mid-20th Century Learning Time Box. Particularly in light of all the trends, challenges and issues facing us, it is sort of amazing that we still think of school or learning as an 8 AM to 3 PM, 180 days a year enterprise.

Clearly many students need extra time and help to meet higher academic standards and make annual yearly progress required by No Child Left Behind. Given all the other challenges our children and youth face, they need new time and partnerships to acquire 21st Century skills and abilities, too.

And by the way, knowledge and information is growing at an enormous rate. Stored information increased by 5 exabytes between 1999-2003 (Lyman and Varian, 2003). This is equivalent to a half a million libraries the size of the Library of Congress.

My old boss, Dick Riley, former United States Secretary of Education, says with this rapid increase in information, we should call this time the “education era” not the “information age.” Only with more and better education can we turn all this information into something useful.

Given these facts, one would assume that expanding learning time – in the summers and afterschool—is, as my kids would say “a no brainier.” But, it seems that we are permanently locked into a 175-180 day school year and an 8 AM to 3 PM schedule.

Yet most everything else in our society is moving to 24/7. I am not here to advocate 24/7 schooling for children. But I must tell you that keeping the schoolhouse doors locked for 80% of the time that children are awake makes no sense! It particularly makes no sense in this “information age” and “education era” and in this time of unprecedented change.

Further, it makes even less sense when we are already paying for the construction and maintenance of the school buildings and arts and sports facilities. We are already paying for the libraries, music rooms, school theatres and art rooms (if they have them), computers, and laboratories--all sitting in locked schools. And in the summers somewhere nearby, all the school buses are also sitting idle.

At the same time many arts and cultural groups, tutors, and other community groups are crying out to serve more children and youth? They need low-cost or free space and equipment. They can't provide transportation.

Also during much of this time many parents are worried sick about what their children and youth are doing in the out-of-school time before they get home. For those parents “Home Alone” is not a funny movie. And 14 million American children go home alone almost every day (Afterschool Alliance, 2004).

And almost as many parents who have a place for their children to go after school, say they would send them to an afterschool learning program if it was engaging, interesting, secure and their children would have the opportunity to learn new skills and abilities. How about developing creative and being engaged in the arts then, too?

Why not use the schools in partnership with arts and cultural groups, tutoring and mentoring programs, and groups interested in helping children learn other languages, science, technology, do service learning, get ready for college and careers, and do work-study and internships in promising fields?

Perhaps the time afterschool could include a whole set of varied arts and music experiences, from the usual band, chorus, and theatre to computer and graphic design, electronic music composition, mural design and painting, intergenerational bands, production of CD’s and short films, school-community newspapers? Perhaps this mix would reach many more types of students and better connect the arts, the schools and the community.

Also a study by a national museum group found the least time they are used is 3- 6 PM.

If keeping our schools closed 80% of the time and having our museums unused from 3-6 PM makes sense to anyone, please raise your hand? I knew you were smart, but you are even smarter than I thought. But I should have known better since you are part of the “creative professional class.”

Not all the news however is bleak. There are some very positive countervailing forces that can give you some tools, policies, funding and leadership lessons on how to expand learning time and partnerships.

Public opinion polls show strong support for afterschool even with the downturn in the economy. “Eighty-eight percent of voters believe that afterschool programs are an absolute necessity for their community (Afterschool Alliance, 2003).

Gaining more state support for afterschool programs is a growing interest. Thirty-one states have formed statewide afterschool networks. The referendum for afterschool in California offers another approach.

A promising new frontier is changing state school finance formulas to include afterschool. In a school finance trial in South Carolina, I gave evidence that the state should fund afterschool and summer learning as well as the arts, and better access to careers and colleges. You might want to get involved in these strategies too.

In some communities and states, there is the potential of constructing new schools. Why not build them differently—to house engaging, comprehensive afterschool programs and including arts and music facilities to make schools the centers of communities or community schools.

The KnowledgeWorks Foundation in Ohio is a great resource. And they found that the public support new schools construction bond issues when they are built as community learning centers.

The arts and cultural groups offer terrific resources to extend learning opportunities and make afterschool programs come alive.

The Power of Arts in Afterschool and Education

Like many of you I have spent many years trying to find ways to excite and engage children and youth in learning and keeping them on a positive track for life.

I am a late arrival in finding out the importance and value of education in the arts. My background is more in teaching the sciences, statistics, parent involvement and school reform.

As in most cases, things closest to you tend to affect your thinking the most. So watching our children grow up and watching their friends grow up demonstrated to me first hand that for many children connections to the arts, music, drama, and the arts and technology are powerful ways to engage children and youth in learning and to keep them out of trouble. And often the connection for some of my kids and their friends to the arts was through afterschool programs in and outside the schools.

Then my interest in the powerful connection in the arts and education became more apparent in the many school and community visits I made in a statewide job in the governors office and then after that in the many visits nationwide when I worked for the US Department of Education.

In these many visits, I begin to also see the potential of quality afterschool programs to be real assets in helping young people gain access to a variety of the arts and organizations and other important learning experiences. Afterschool programs in schools or linked to schools are very important to many students and families. Many children do not have transportation to arts programs afterschool or in the summer, if there are any arts programs even available in many of their immediate communities.

These afterschool programs in schools or linked to schools often are a good place for students who need access to the arts the most. Many children of low-income and many working families go home afterschool and no one else is there. The numbers are chilling. Fourteen million children in America each day go home alone. For their parents “home alone” is not a funny movie.

Because most afterschool and summer learning programs are voluntary it isn't always easy to attract young people to them in a constant way. Yet, research is beginning to show that if children don't attend afterschool and summer programs regularly they don't have as much benefit. In other words, fairly regular participation in an afterschool or summer program and for more than one year results in the greatest gains.

This research is also beginning to find that the arts attract young people in general, but also to afterschool programming, especially middle and high school students. The arts are an attraction for these young people because they are often based on a growth model rather than operating on a “deficit model of learning.” And they allow for individual expression and demonstration of their work.

In light of this “attraction” to the arts and the importance of arts education, the national Afterschool Alliance, has launched a PSA campaign focused on adolescents. I have a few posters from that campaign with me.

The Afterschool Alliance is a national network not unlike the Arts in Education Partnership. I have the honor of serving as its current chairman. The Afterschool Alliance promotes quality afterschool programming and is an advocacy group for more financial and other resources for expanding afterschool programs.

And starting this week for the next three weeks the Afterschool Alliance is inviting and encouraging “Lights on Afterschool” events all across the country. I have a little flyer here. While it is pretty late to put together a new event for this year. We invite you to put together events next year. Any information about Lights On or any other afterschool issue can be found on the Alliance website—www.afterschoolalliance.org.

The Alliance encourages increased financial support at the local, state and national level. For example, many mayors are increasing becoming interested in afterschool programs. That interest along with the mayor’s investment in cultural affairs can be a good source of both expanding afterschool programs and arts education programming in afterschool programs.

Besides delivering an important content or subject matter, the arts provide a certain excitement and vibrancy to the programming that students need. And the flexibility in most good afterschool programs is a natural complement to creative arts programming and connecting the children to the arts.

Let me give you an example of a potential of pulling together various players and the arts into a comprehensive afterschool program. About 100 miles from here is a rural, low-income community called Timmons ville. Timmons ville schools won a 21st Community Learning grant to expand their afterschool opportunities. A local Boys and Girls Club nearby operated afterschool too. The middle schools had a fledgling band program. And a local nonprofit tutoring program was operating nearby in a church meeting room.

Initially all these efforts were operating separately. Participation in all the programs was low. They diagnosed the low participation as having several causes. None of the programs were broad enough to be appealing to the children and youth.

They didn't offer transportation, and many families were working and couldn't pick up the children and many families simply didn't have transportation.

(An aside--Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, hopefully has shown America how the lack of transportation for many of our citizens is a huge problem in urban communities. It is even worse in rural communities but much more hidden. So arts and afterschool programs outside the regular school day need to take that into account.)

Back to Timmonsville--And for working parents, having an afterschool program that meets a couple times a week for an hour or two doesn't help them with their child care needs.

And they observed in Timmonsville that the middle school band program and middle school sports program were competing against the other afterschool programs for students.

A new 21st Century Community Learning coordinator came in and observed this was a "crazy situation." So the new 21st Century coordinators convened everyone and suggested that they all throw in together and offer all their programs in the schools. And she suggested they coordinate and adjust their programs to fit a more comprehensive set of offerings and offer the package from when school ended to at least 5:30 PM to fit the work schedule of many parents.

Finally, she suggested they work with the regular middle school band program and sports program not against them. After all, if the programming was operating from 3 PM to 5:30 PM there is room for lots of activities and students can participate in several in the course of an afternoon.

The net effect was that attendance went way up. When I was there about a year ago, almost 60% of the students were participating in the afterschool package of activities in the school. Band participation doubled. Because the kids had a full complement of learning opportunities, the band director split the group up into two band afterschool sessions. When the students weren't in band they might be getting help with homework, participating in other art forms, be involved in the Boys and Girls Club in the school, getting tutoring from the non-profit group but in the school or participating in special interest clubs.

Because the participating was so high the school district ran special buses at the end of the afterschool programs.

This example might help us to step way back and look at the big picture when we think of arts in education. I am doing this because I want to be very mindful of the advice of one of our great thinkers and scientists of all times: Albert Einstein.

Einstein said: "We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

The group in little Timmonsville unknowingly took Einstein's advice and we probably should too.

We all know we are in rapidly changing times. The arts and afterschool are a very interesting combination. So it might take all of us to reconsider what we do and be willing to step out of our typical boxes like the folks in Timmonsville did. They took the advice, again unknowingly, of another great philosopher who told us about how to deal with change.

Dilpert: Change is Good; you go first.

An additional bonus is that the arts also can attract family members to the programs. Finding ways to engage more families with their children’s learning in the schools and in the communities has to be a high priority for any education effort in today’s climate. Families love to attend student demonstrations of their art, drama, dance, music-technology, mural or music project. Yet we don’t often take advantage of this time or opportunity and we should.

In some research my graduate students and I are engaged in we recently heard about an interesting additional more interactive way to engage families with the arts and their children. And that is through “family arts nights” where children and families develop an art piece or performance together.

In Wausau, WI, the afterschool and summer program coordinators were searching for ways to engage families with middle school students—no easy task. They had had success with elementary students and their families with family math nights and family science nights.

The schools in Wausau are becoming increasingly diverse with many Hmong children and increasing numbers of Hispanic students. So they too needed to heed Einstein and Dilbert’s advice. So they came up with the idea of inviting parents and their middle grade students to family art night. Rather than passively watching an art program, each family become involved in developing some art product.

They were pleasantly surprised by the positive response from the middle school children and parents to “family art night.” The afterschool people said if gave the kids and families something new and different to talk about and work on together—not easy to find at that stage of development.

This and other strategies to involve families more in their children's learning in the schools, in the community and at home is the topic of my project's occasional paper—here at the College of Charleston and University of South Carolina. It is currently at the printers. Our next study and occasional paper will focus on afterschool and the arts and technology. We are looking for a few authors to write some short articles for our next occasional paper on the arts and afterschool and technology. So if any of you would be interested in becoming a contributor please give my graduate assistants or me your name.

Well-designed educations in the arts programs typically have strong partnerships. These partnerships bring students important, often missing connections to more caring adults and community groups and institutions that can build the students' repertoire of skills and linkages to people for a better future.

Recently the Afterschool Alliance developed one of their research briefs on arts and afterschool. (See www.afterschoolalliance.org)

The brief points out many reasons why they are a good fit together. And it even opens up with a quote from Big Thought—one of our co-presenters today.

In addition to giving more opportunities and time for young people to learn about the arts, when well done the integration of the arts into the school day and into afterschool programs also helps builds and reinforces important student learning.

In this increasing information age and creative economy, knowledge and skills in the arts and music and other art forms are important in their own right, but also help strengthen teamwork, responsibility, persistence, self-discipline and presenting abilities. These are the very skills that we will be hearing at this conference are part of the set of 21st Century skills.

As the Alliance brief points out, “the arts also are a vital way to promote learning in the core subjects like reading, writing and arithmetic.” A Ford Foundation report recently stated put it this way by way of an example. “...By working with half notes and quarter notes in a musical exercise for example, students get a better understanding of fractions and ratios.

Many educators who incorporate the arts in classroom instruction say it promotes interdisciplinary learning, engage students who would not otherwise excel and helps reveal students’ hidden talents.”

Finally, I now spend much of my time now working across this great country helping local, state and national leaders expand quality afterschool programs and partnerships. I have observed in my many visits in cities, small towns and rural areas that most engaging and successful afterschool programs have well-designed art and music components. So whether it’s in the school day or in out of school time arts and education make a powerful partnership.