

Renewed Push for the Artistic ABC's in N.Y.

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Walking around his classroom at P.S. 156 in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn the other day, Emmanuel St. Bernard, 5, stopped to point out one of a series of paintings done by his class in the style of famous artists. "That was the blue period for [Picasso](#)," he said. "His friend died, so he was sad. And when he fell in love, he made a red period."

At P.S. 156 Emmanuel's gloss on art history isn't unusual. The school — along with I.S. 392, which shares the building — is filled with art. It's on the walls, on display tables in the halls, hanging from the ceiling. On a recent day students in a music class played expert percussion, jamming on bongos and steel drums. In the dance studio, third graders paired off to do the tango, part of their study of Latin American culture.

"This is the way it really should be," said Edward Morgano, the regional arts supervisor for Region 5, which includes parts of Brooklyn and Queens, as he walked through the school, one of 113 he oversees. "This is not an arts school. This is a neighborhood school where every kid gets an integration of art."

The high quality of the teaching at schools like P.S. 156 and I.S. 392, the city's Education Department says, is a direct result of its commitment to create a uniform arts curriculum through new standards put in place over the last three years. The Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts sets out benchmarks for what students pre-K through Grade 12 should be learning in visual art, music, dance and theater.

The blueprint is perhaps the most prominent example of a larger effort under way in the city to rebuild arts education. The school year now drawing to a close was the first in which the blueprint was in place in all four arts areas. The guidelines for visual art and music were completed in June 2004; those for dance and theater in June 2005.

"There is now a standard by which people are judged and by which people judge themselves," said Sharon Dunn, the senior instructional manager for arts education at the Education Department. "We have made this a priority. Teachers know what they're supposed to teach, principals know what they need to supervise."

But there's still a long way to go. Student-teacher ratios for the arts can be staggering. According to data provided by the department to the City Council this fall, there is 1 visual arts teacher for every 943 students and 1 music teacher for every 1,200. For dance and theater the numbers are even more extreme, with 1 dance teacher for every 8,088 students, and 1 theater teacher for every 8,871. Although about 40,000 teachers have been added to the New York City school system since 1975 — bringing the current total to about 84,000 — no more than 2,000 of them are arts specialists, according to the Center for Arts Education, a nonprofit group. Experts estimate it would cost \$150 million to \$200 million to hire arts specialists for every school, and the blueprint has no funds attached.

Money and Manpower

Each of the 10 Regional Arts Supervisors oversees more than 100 schools, making it difficult to monitor each one closely. And with the recent establishment of about 300 "empowerment" schools that are largely independent of the Education Department, superintendents have been asked to cut their budgets in proportion to the number of schools leaving their jurisdiction. Regional arts supervisors could be a casualty.

Still, arts education advocates say the administration is moving in the right direction. They point to the beefed-up staff dedicated to arts education at the Education Department. In addition to Ms. Dunn there is now a full-time director in each of the four disciplines.

The very existence of qualified regional arts supervisors represents progress. In the past a district superintendent could appoint anybody for the position; now it requires supervisory certification and experience teaching the arts. Schools formerly could get away with spending their arts education money — known as Project Arts funds — on nonarts expenses, but now, for the first time, there is a budget code, which is being hailed as an accomplishment in and of itself. (Principals in the new empowerment schools will have greater budgetary autonomy, however, so the Education Department will not monitor their arts spending.) "This is probably the most exciting time in our history for arts education," said Thomas Cahill, the president

and chief executive of Studio in a School, a nonprofit organization that has been bringing professional artists into public schools since 1977. "I see it as an incredible paradigm shift."

Arts in the schools were gutted by the 1970's fiscal crisis and have never really recovered. In the years since, the city's cultural organizations have tried to fill the void, and many of them — including the [Lincoln Center Institute for the Arts in Education](#), the [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#) and the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) — provide valuable arts education programs. But it's a hodgepodge: some schools receive consistent, high-quality arts instruction from outside providers, while others occasionally take a trip to a show or a museum.

"It was like a quilt, and it just depended what patch you were in," said Hollis Headrick, the director of the Weill Music Institute, [Carnegie Hall's](#) education arm. "With the blueprint, for the first time there is a set of common benchmarks and curriculum goals to begin working from."

The increased level of optimism is mostly the result of the effort started three years ago to create a uniform citywide arts curriculum, which became the blueprint. Its guidelines were developed by educators and specialists in each discipline.

In dance, for example, Joan Finkelstein, the Education Department's director of dance programs, led the process, along with Jody Gottfried Arnhold, the founding director of the Dance Education Laboratory of the [92d Street Y](#), and Tina Ramirez, the artistic director of Ballet Hispanico. For advice they brought in professionals from companies like the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, the Trisha Brown Dance Company and [Dance Theater of Harlem](#).

The dance curriculum goals set out in the blueprint range from "move in straight, circular, curved and zigzag pathways" in second grade to "vary movement phrases by changing rhythm, tempo, dynamics and use of space" in eighth grade.

Regional arts supervisors see the blueprint at work in the schools they oversee. "It levels the field for arts teachers because it provides equity in curriculum development," said Mr. Morgano, the Region 5 supervisor.

"It's not a prescriptive curriculum," he continued. "It doesn't say on Day 3 you have to do so and so. It has benchmarks. It has standards. It's a teacher resource, and it's uniform."

In making the rounds of some of Mr. Morgano's 113 schools, it was clear that school art programs still widely vary, depending on the presence of full-time art specialists and their skills, the commitment of the principals and existing resources.

Making It Work

P.S. 156 and I.S. 392 together amount to a shining example. The school building, a former furniture factory, was recently renovated and now has gleaming new classrooms flooded with light. In Ron Kokke's middle school visual arts class the other day, students were exploring Chinese portraiture and mehendi hand designs in connection with a broader study of Asia.

Mr. Kokke said he was constantly in touch with classroom teachers, coordinating their coursework. "I look to see what they are studying, and I try to do art projects around that," he said. "It makes things so much more meaningful for the students."

In the auditorium teachers played instruments onstage for students in the audience "to get them interested and motivated in classical music," said Oswald Malave, the principal of P.S. 156.

Other schools, though, are struggling with the arts. At P.S. 345 in the East New York section of Brooklyn, Rochelle Anderson continues to maintain a top-notch brass band of third, fourth and fifth graders, even though the instruments are battered and the school cannot afford to replace them. At P.S. 100 in South Ozone Park, Queens, students are doing fairly sophisticated etchings modeled after [Edvard Munch's](#) in Antonella Natale's art class. But there is no music, dance or theater above first grade, except for a ballroom dancing class and the after-school instrumental music program. That program began only in March this year because there was not enough money to pay the teachers before then.

Only 10 children participate in orchestra and 32 in band, bringing the number of students learning music to 42 at a school with an enrollment of 1,150. "This is a school that should be doing a lot more," Mr. Morgano

said. The principal, Michelle Betancourt, said that though she viewed art as an outlet for students, "it's pretty separate because of the emphasis on the academic program."

"We used to have it before the emphasis on testing," she added. "Now everything is after school because the academics is number one in this building."

Mr. Morgano tries to encourage principals and teachers through professional development, including periodic training sessions in arts education, for which the system gives him \$2 per student each year. He also keeps an eye on each school's arts spending. When a school in his region asked to take students to see a Broadway show, for example, he said: "My initial response was, 'No, that's not O.K.' I need to know if this is a culminating experience. Have they studied theater? Do they know what downstage right and stage left means? For kids who are just going to get it as a one-shot, that's not acceptable."

Not everyone is convinced that the blueprint will mean real change. Critics point out that the document represents a recommendation from the Education Department, not a requirement. Therefore, they argue, it has no teeth, is difficult to enforce and could easily be abandoned in the future by a less arts-friendly mayoral administration. "The blueprint is not curriculum, the blueprint is only a recommendation," said Councilman Domenic M. Recchia Jr., a Democrat of Brooklyn, chairman of the council's Cultural Affairs Committee. "They're not requiring schools to have music teachers or art teachers. They're not saying, 'You have to have this much art.' " Because the blueprint is aimed at arts specialists, it does not address schools that do not have them, or those with insufficient art space or supplies. "There is such a gap between the aspiration and the resources to actually make that happen that it feels like a hoax or a P.R. document," said Eva S. Moskowitz, former chairwoman of the City Council Education Committee, who now runs a charter school, Harlem Success.

Given the intense emphasis on math and reading scores, schools remain focused on test preparation and have no comparable incentive to improve arts education. "Arts are not on the school report card," said Richard Kessler, the executive director of the Center for Arts Education.

No real change can occur until they are, arts advocates say. "The chancellor would have to issue a mandate that arts is required as part of the curriculum and schools will be assessed and held accountable," said David Shookhoff, the director of education for [Manhattan Theater Club](#), which produces plays on and off Broadway. "That would be a necessary step to ensure that we really move forward where every school has qualified arts specialists."

Not a Mandate

That mandate is not likely to come, said [Joel I. Klein](#), the schools chancellor: "I'm a little hesitant to start to say, 'I'm going to mandate an arts curriculum, and I'm going to mandate a social studies curriculum, and I'm going to mandate a language curriculum.' Sometimes a little bit of judgment and discretion goes a long way."

The department is in the process of applying for a Wallace Foundation grant that some estimate could amount to as much as \$20 million over five years — the foundation would not specify an amount — enabling the city to leverage other funds and improve its arts education resources. In January the foundation awarded the city a \$1 million planning grant; the Education Department is currently researching its proposal, to be submitted by the fall.

"We're not asking them for a typical grant proposal," said M. Christine DeVita, president of the Wallace Foundation. "We're asking for a large vision and to create a plan around it."

But with or without the Wallace money, improving arts education remains largely a process of nudging schools down the right path. "We cannot make them do it," said Ms. Dunn, the department's senior instructional manager for arts education. "There is no stick."

"In every region," she added, "I'm making the case: Do this because it's good for kids."