

The Arts in Every Classroom: A Workshop for Elementary School Teachers
Handout

Drew Model School
Arlington, Virginia

Instructional Choices

Drew Model School is a school of choice for all Arlington residents. There are 475 students in kindergarten through grade five. The school encourages cooperation and de-emphasizes competition. Originally created as a model school for innovative teaching methods, the focus of the school is now on the “Four As” — academics, accountability, appreciation, and the arts.

Students attend visual art and music classes once a week, with optional weekly instrumental lessons. Twice a week, each class goes to physical education, which usually includes movement to music and often is tied to what students are doing in social studies. In addition, at least once a week, the classroom teachers try to include an arts activity related to the general curriculum. The school has a visual art teacher, a vocal music teacher, a part-time instrumental teacher, and one part-time and one full-time physical education teacher.

Since the arts were already a priority at Drew, Learner Team members decided that their goal would be to create connections between the arts and other subjects. When team members returned from the summer workshop, they formed a study group to look more deeply at the backward design process for curriculum development. All interested members of the faculty were invited to join the group, which met on Wednesday afternoons during time already set aside by the district for staff development. In Program 5, the Learner Team had chosen “construction” as their theme because the school was about to move into a new building. That theme became the starting point for explorations among study group members that would range from ancient Egypt to the creation of an original opera.

The study group included the five Learner Team members — Jan Adkisson, principal; Angela Sned, kindergarten teacher; Stephanie Ellison, fourth-grade teacher; Connie Usova, visual art teacher; and Walter McKenzie, instructional technology coordinator — as well as a Montessori teacher of grades one through three, a second-grade teacher, a third-grade teacher, a vocal music teacher, and two physical education teachers.

As the year progressed, the group became a forum for the creation of opportunities to integrate learning in the arts with other subjects. Program 7 shows a collaboration involving the fourth-grade teacher, the visual art specialist, and the instructional technology coordinator. Program 8 includes three more collaborations involving the visual art teacher — with a third-grade science class, with the kindergarten teacher, and with the music teacher.

The collaboration in Program 7 focuses on Virginia history, a priority for fourth-grade teachers because of a statewide test on the topic. Over several months, the architecture unit explored various aspects of architecture as they related to social studies topics involving places, events, and people. Connie’s exploration of Virginia architecture, supplemented by Walter’s Web site, gave Stephanie’s students a variety of perspectives for understanding the lives of Virginians both famous and humble.

Role of the Principal

The principals at all of the Learner Team schools played important but different roles in ensuring that the teachers could experiment with the ideas from the summer workshop. Principal Jan Adkisson saw her role as a supportive facilitator — bringing people together, putting forth ideas, and offering encouragement as participants planned and implemented new approaches to instruction.

Role of the Teachers

Teachers took a proactive role at all of the schools, understanding that they had to be actively and wholeheartedly involved to make the effort work. At Drew, the classroom teachers worked with the visual art specialist and the technology coordinator to find ways visual art instruction could inform their work. These collaborations resulted in instruction that helped students feel more connected to history and science. To make this happen effectively, classroom teachers and specialists had to find common goals, a common language, and time to plan and teach together. Energy and commitment helped them find ways to overcome their challenges as they came up with new ways to engage their students.

Role of the Specialists

Team members began to recognize visual art specialist Connie Usova as a kind of hub around which work was organized. For example, in Stephanie's class, Connie engaged students in historical inquiry about the architecture of the times being studied. She helped students examine the culture of the times so they could learn why certain architectural styles were preferred. Students created artworks incorporating elements of colonial architecture and wrote about them to show what they had learned.

Connie worked at becoming a resource to the classroom teachers and demonstrating how the arts could be incorporated into their learning designs. Ultimately, she increased the comfort level of the teachers in integrating the arts into their classrooms and supported a more prominent place for the arts in the school curriculum.