




THE VISUAL ARTS ADVANTAGE

Elevate Student Achievement
and Outcomes with Art Education





Elevate Student Achievement and Outcomes with **Art Education**

Academic research confirms that Visual Arts Education boosts student success:

DECREASE IN ABSENTEEISM

Students engaged in art classes show increased attendance, especially among those with IEPs, lower test scores, and a history of chronic absenteeism.

LOWER SUSPENSION RATE

Exposure to art courses correlates with a decrease in school suspensions.

INCREASE ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Participation in art classes has shown higher scores in reading and math. At-risk students prefer educational experiences with math and art combined.

HIGHER GRADUATION RATE

High school students who participate in art classes are less likely to drop out and more likely to attend college. These trends increase as the number of art classes increase.

COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

Art participation at the elementary level correlates with increased engagement, decreased disciplinary issues, and higher college aspirations.

ENGLISH LEARNER PROGRESS

Art integration improves listening, writing, and speaking skills for English learners.

[Explore the supporting research ►](#)

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Students who participate in
the arts, including visual art,

**ATTEND SCHOOL
MORE OFTEN AND ARE
MORE ENGAGED**

than those who do not
participate in art classes.

At-risk students with
low GPAs enrolled in fine
arts electives showed
**SIGNIFICANTLY
LOWER ABSENTEEISM**
compared to those
not enrolled.

REVIEW OF EVIDENCE

Research Supporting the Impact of Visual Arts on Student Success

Academic research consistently shows the positive impact of art education on student outcomes, including reduced absenteeism and suspension rates, as well as enhanced college and career aspirations. This report highlights key findings from such studies, providing a wealth of insights to strengthen advocacy for visual arts instruction.

Many of the studies featured in this report were conducted in high-poverty areas, where a majority of students are eligible for subsidized meal programs. Researchers deliberately sought students from low-income households identified as low socioeconomic status (SES) because they were less likely to have opportunities to experience art outside of the school day. This type of research design allows researchers to draw conclusions specific to the impact of visual arts education within the K-12 space without outside art education variables influencing results in most cases.

Chronic Absenteeism

Key studies found that students who partake in art classes have higher attendance rates and lower instances of absenteeism. Survey data from a Boston Public School study revealed that students who participate in the arts, including visual art, attend school more often and are more engaged than those who do not participate in art classes. Increased attendance for those in art classes is most notable for students with an IEP, students with lower standardized test scores, and those with a history of chronic absenteeism. Students not enrolled in at least one fine art class had significantly higher absentee rates (Bowen, 2023).

Another large study from the University of Texas, Dallas Education Research Center, following 175,000 9th-grade students over five years, found that students who participated in art education also had higher attendance rates (Thomas et al., 2015). Similarly, according to a Houston study, a treatment group at a fine arts magnet school had a lower mean in total absences when

compared to students in a nearby public school who did not have art education as part of the school curriculum from 2016–2017 to 2017–2018 (Holmes, 2018). At-risk students with low GPAs who were not enrolled in fine arts electives had significantly higher absenteeism than students who had taken one or more art electives (Taetle, 1999).

Suspension Rate

Winsler (2020), like Bowen, studied students from Pre-K to middle school primarily from low-income homes and ethnic minorities. He found that middle school students who have taken arts electives had significantly higher GPAs and math and reading scores than those who did not. Additionally, those students with art exposure had decreased instances of school suspension compared to students not enrolled in art classes (Winsler, 2020).

Furthermore, when students attending Houston’s Arts Access Initiative (AAI) schools were compared to randomly assigned counterparts, the proportion of students receiving disciplinary infractions was reduced by 3.6% for students receiving increased art opportunities (Bowen & Gisida, 2019). This reduction in disciplinary infractions was most pronounced with students who were male, Black, eligible for free or reduced meals, and in higher poverty-level households where students within this group were disproportionately more likely to incur such infractions in school (Bowen & Gisida, 2019). Other key findings for AAI students include increased writing achievement and higher compassion for others.

A similar study in Texas revealed that when students in a treatment group at a fine arts magnet school were compared to a neighborhood public school, in-school and out-of-school suspensions saw a larger decrease for students who enrolled in art from 2016–2017 to 2017–2018 (Holmes, 2018).

English Learner Progress

Art helps students acquire English language skills. English learners who engage in school arts programs increase their listening, writing, and speaking skills by discussing their artwork and writing about art (Catterall & Pepler, 2007; Valcarcel et al., 2008). Winsler (2020) found that English learners who took art electives also experienced gains in literacy and math test scores.

Students with increased art opportunities experienced a

3.6%
DECREASE IN
DISCIPLINARY
INFRACTIONS.

Students at a fine arts magnet school had **SIGNIFICANTLY FEWER** in-school and out-of-school suspensions when compared to public school peers.

English learners who engage in school arts programs **INCREASE THEIR LISTENING, WRITING, AND SPEAKING SKILLS** by discussing their artwork and writing about art.



VISUAL ART IN AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM CAN BUILD A BRIDGE FROM THE FAMILIAR PAST TO THE PRESENT

for children immigrating to an unfamiliar country.

INCREASED SUSTAINED FOCUS AND ENGAGEMENT CAN HELP STUDENTS ACHIEVE ACADEMIC GAINS

that can lead to and include high school graduation and college graduation.



A study with English language learners in Tennessee examined how adding instructed art periods in English classes impacted students' language acquisition (Valcarcel, 2008). During the study, the researchers imposed very few limitations on the subject matter to foster a sense of community for a group of students new to the United States as they practiced their English skills. The study illustrated how visual arts can naturally integrate and build language skills through artmaking.

“An analysis of data revealed that as students were given opportunities to create drawings and illustrations, they began interacting and discussing the artwork. The use of vocabulary increased as they shared with each other. The researchers encouraged the students to use time to create and provide materials such as drawing paper, markers, paint, and related art supplies. Artwork was displayed around the classroom. This also encouraged students to continue to create as well as engage in dialogue and discussion regarding their work. The natural flow of language used when describing their art carried over to content area subject instruction and language learning. Students—with encouragement to express themselves through artwork—steadily progressed in all areas of school” (Valcarcel, 2008, p. 18).

Communication skills strengthened as students discussed their artmaking and intentions. Many art supplies were offered, yet most students used only pencil and paper as they began to create their stories and find their visual voices. Self-confidence and a sense of accomplishment increased, and the students also began experiencing success in other content areas. The researchers noted that visual art in an English language classroom can build a bridge from the familiar past to the present for children immigrating to an unfamiliar country (Valcarcel, 2008).

Increased Academic Achievement Beyond Art

In a study involving 179 elementary students from St. Louis and Los Angeles, where 97% qualified for subsidized meals, researchers observed heightened engagement and focus in the classroom (Catterall, 2007). More than half of the students with art experiences made significant gains in self-efficacy, while only one-third of students in the comparison group showed self-efficacy gains. Observations during art activities showed students had higher levels of engagement and maintained that focus

up to 30% more than in their home classrooms, and students participating in art were more focused in home classrooms than students who did not participate in art activities (Catterall, 2007). According to Catterall and Pepler (2007), “this finding has important implications for classroom learning and the distribution of classroom learning outcomes” (p. 558). Increased focus and engagement benefit student academic achievement, potentially leading to high school and college graduation. Notably, low-income students highly engaged in the arts tend to show better academic outcomes, including higher GPAs, increased high school graduation rates, and greater college attendance (Catterall et al., 2012). Students from low-income backgrounds with a high level of engagement in art showed an increase in academic achievement. They were more likely to have a higher GPA, graduate from high school, and attend college at higher rates than their peers with lower or no art credits (Catterall et al., 2012).

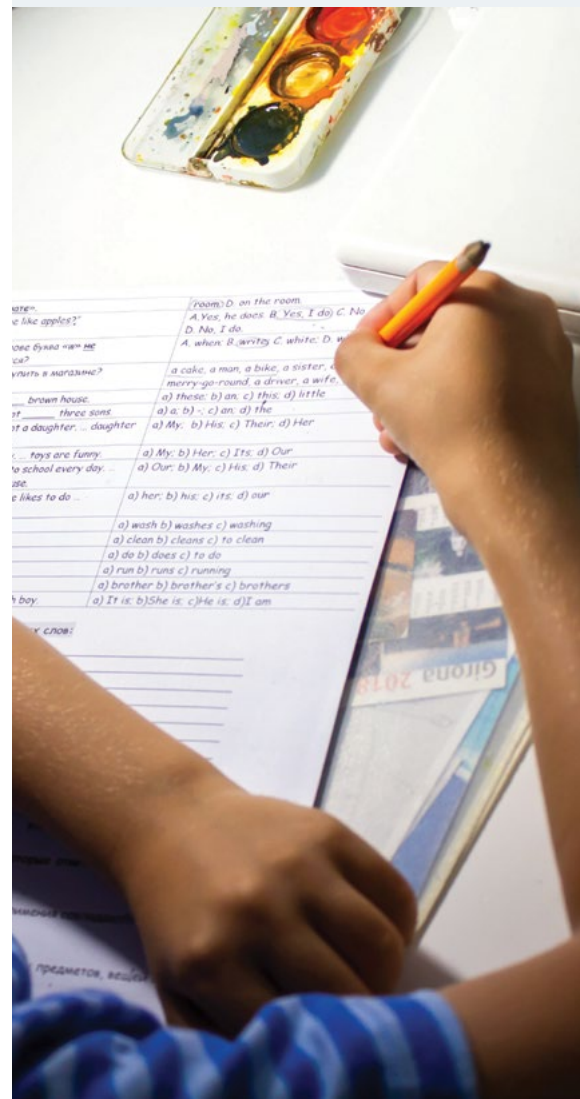
In a California study of ten Title 1 elementary schools in a large urban district, teachers pointed to nontraditional teaching methods in art classes as key for engaging students with different learning styles. Specifically, they observed increased engagement among students who struggled with traditional teaching methods (Graham, 2016). One teacher from the study noted that a student with behavior issues showed more engagement and demonstrated progress when completing art lessons because he felt less academic pressure and was more confident about his potential for success in art (Graham, 2016).

English Language Arts

Art integrates well with English. Students with more art experience had higher scores on the 2018 English I End of Course (EOC) exam than their peers with little art exposure (Holmes, 2018). Middle school students who participated in art electives had significantly higher GPAs and reading scores (Winsler et al., 2019). In addition to increased language skills through art-based discussions, drawing before writing can help students form ideas, build storytelling skills, and improve writing quality (Moore et al., 1993; Wandell et al., 2008). Visual arts also boosts awareness of spoken language in young readers, strengthens critical thinking, enhances writing achievement, including skills and writing quality, and improves early reading skills, especially in underserved student populations (Arts Education Partnership, 2019; Bowen & Gisida, 2018). Eighth graders from low SES households who engaged in significant levels of art in elementary school had higher test scores in writing than students with lower levels of art (Catterall et al., 2012).

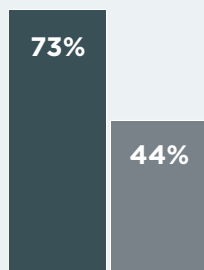
**ART EXPERIENCES
INCREASE FOCUS
AND ENGAGEMENT,**
positively impacting student
academic achievement.

Drawing before writing
can help students
**FORM IDEAS, BUILD
STORYTELLING SKILLS,
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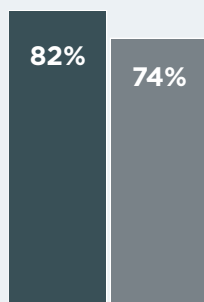


8th Grade Students from Low Socioeconomic Households (Catterall et al., 2012)

- Arts Experiences
- No or Few Arts Experiences



Read a Newspaper at Least One Day in the Past Week



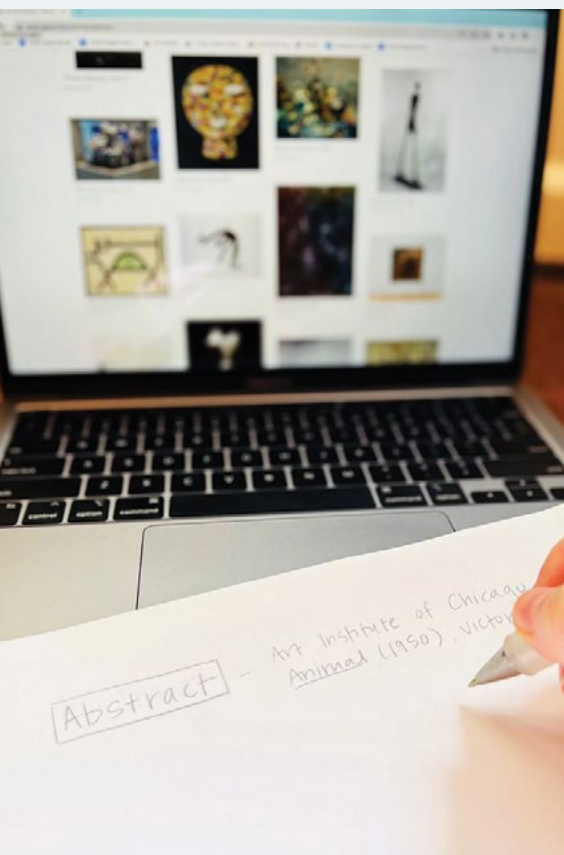
Read at Least One Book in the Last Year

One study showed that students with access to certified visual arts, theater, instrumental music, and music teachers achieved at or above “Approaching Grade Level” standards more often than students without arts access (Holmes, 2018). Compared to other fine arts, visual arts students outperformed in creative writing (Spelke, 2008). Another study revealed that 73% of 8th-grade students from low socioeconomic households who had arts experiences read a newspaper at least one day in the past week compared to only 44% of peers in low socioeconomic households with no or little art. Additionally, 82% of students with higher art experiences read at least one book within the last year (1999-2000) compared to 74% of their low-art exposure peers (Catterall et al., 2012). Students in this study who had more arts experiences also visited the library more frequently (Catterall et al., 2012, p. 19).

STEAM-infused learning integrates visual art with writing and math giving students increased art exposure through the common core subjects. In a study in a large urban district in California, researchers were expecting to find elevated benefits for English language learners in STEAM projects as described in the literature reviewed; however, they found that STEAM benefits all learners equally and art enhances student engagement (Graham & Brouillette, 2016). Graham and Brouillette (2016) noted, “The STEAM lessons not only gave students an exposure to the arts, which they would not have had otherwise but provided an opportunity to experience the science concepts and vocabulary from an engaging new perspective” (p. 9).

Mathematics

Participation in art classes has shown higher math scores among elementary and middle school students (Kinney & Forsythe, 2005; Winsler et al., 2019). Fourth-grade students participating in an arts-rich curriculum at an Arts IMPACT low-income school scored significantly higher math proficiency scores on the Ohio Fourth-Grade Proficiency Test math subtest than students with lower arts exposure in a low-income control group (Kinney & Forsythe, 2005). Kinney & Forsythe (2005) add “This finding suggests that the arts curriculum may be even more beneficial to students in low-income school environments” (p. 46). On the 2018 Algebra I EOC exam, students with higher arts exposure scored at or above the benchmark more often than the comparison group (Holmes, 2018). In addition, students who took art courses in high school earned a 2.63 grade-point average in math, exceeding their non-art peers’ grade-point average of 2.41 (Catterall et al., 2012).



In addition to benefits in math achievement for students with high art participation, visual art can also be integrated with math skills through STEAM curriculum. In one study, students who struggled the most with math preferred an educational experience with math and art combined (Thuneberg, 2017). This middle school study combined art and math through a mobile interactive mathematics exhibition, Art of Math, where students built math structures through hands-on art activities. As a result, the math achievement quartile showed significantly improved achievement for the Art of Math participants. This experiential teaching method merged concrete and creative elements and was preferred by the lowest achievers, allowing them a new perspective on learning a complex subject (Thuneberg, 2017).

The increase in math achievement for art students also continues in college. One study showed that students taking visual arts performed better on tasks centered on geometry in visual forms (Speike, 2008). The amount of visual arts training students received related to how accurately those students performed on geometrical invariant tasks. Additionally, there was a clear correlation between fine arts and specific mathematical abilities, suggesting that there is a relationship between the cognitive skills needed for math and those gained through artistic endeavors. Medical students who continue to engage in visual art classes in college have shown increased geometry skills and more accurate observational skills (Speike, 2008).

Graduation Rates

Academic engagement, increased through arts education, aligns with lower dropout rates. Students with art credits are less likely to dropout of classes, and those with more than the minimum required art credits are at the lowest risk of dropping out. Students who have not completed art classes are at a higher risk of not graduating (Steele, 2019; Thomas & Klopfenstein, 2015). Catterall et al., (2012) suggests, “high school students who earned few or no arts credits were five times more likely not to have graduated than students who earned many arts credits” and face an increased dropout risk each year (p. 14). Students who exceeded the fine art graduation requirement had the lowest dropout risk (Thomas et al., 2015). Regardless of socioeconomic status, high school seniors with many art courses were significantly more likely to belong to academic honors societies than students with less art coursework (Catterall et al., 2012).

High school students
who earned few or no arts
credits were

5X

more likely not to have
graduated than students who
earned many arts credits.



Students who had intensive arts experiences in high school were

3X

more likely than students who lacked those experiences to earn a bachelor's degree.

Engaging students in art electives by 6th grade is
KEY TO A SUSTAINED EFFORT TO ENSURE ART EXPERIENCES THROUGH MIDDLE SCHOOL.

STUDENTS WHO TOOK ART COURSES WERE MORE LIKELY
 than students who did not take art courses to
ATTEND COLLEGE AND EARN A FOUR-YEAR DEGREE.



Furthermore, secondary students from low-income households who participate in art with more than the minimum required art credits, graduate from high school at an increased rate and experience more college success (Catterall et al., 2012; Spelke, 2008; Thomas et al., 2015).

College and Career

Elementary students with the opportunity to experience art demonstrate greater engagement and increased college aspirations (Bowen & Gisida, 2019). In a study by Steele (2019), students with arts participation were more likely to enroll in college and maintain strong GPAs and leadership roles. In another study (Spelke, 2008), students who took art courses were more likely than students who did not take art courses to attend college and earn a four-year degree.

Catterall et al., (2012) identified that students who had rich art experiences from 8th through 12th grade showed significant academic and social advantages by age 26. Low SES students demonstrated greater advantages in college attendance, academic performance, employment, and attainment of terminal degrees when they attended schools with extensive arts programs compared to their peers in schools with limited exposure to the arts. The following table shows some of the notable results from his study.

Outcomes Stemming from Rich Art Experiences from Grades 8-12

	High-Art Experience	Low-Art Experience
STUDENT OUTCOMES		
Attended college	71%	48%
Earn an associate degree	24%	10%
Earn a bachelor's degree	18%	6%
Earn a graduate or professional degree	1%	0%
LOW SES STUDENT OUTCOMES		
Average high school GPA	3.17	2.97
Attended college	74%	43%
Planned to earn a bachelor's degree	61%	43%
Earn a bachelor's degree	17%	5%

Findings by Catterall et al., (2012).

Summary

The collective research presented in this report underscores the transformative power of exposure to the visual arts. Integrating arts-rich environments into education increases student engagement, improves test scores, and reduces suspension rates. These benefits are particularly crucial in underserved communities where access to art experiences outside of school is limited. Notably, research suggests that introducing students to art electives as early as 6th grade is pivotal for fostering ongoing engagement throughout middle school (Winsler, 2020). Remarkably, 80% of students not exposed to art by 6th grade did not opt for art classes in 7th grade. This underscores the importance of early exposure; without it, students are less likely to pursue visual arts education later on. Providing young learners with consistent opportunities for visual art education is not just beneficial—it's a significant contributor to fostering student success.



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