

Arts-Integrated Learning Ignites K-12 Student Motivation And Engagement

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Students participate in a dance workshop with Latin Ballet of Virginia at a Lights Up! Youth Series ...

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Richmond Performing Arts Alliance

Over the past few months, I have written a series of pieces that explore the many ways communities can engage in K-12 schools and support student success. This may involve providing in-school and out-of-school support, wraparound services to meet student needs, or connections to community assets that create relevant, engaging instruction.

In this discussion, organizations that bring the arts to children and communities should also be acknowledged. Here is one more set of examples to consider.

The arts-integrated instruction movement, pairing community creatives and schools, can encourage educators to think more expansively about what vibrant classrooms look like. Arts-integrated instruction meets curricular standards and children's developmental

milestones with relevant, innovative, collaborative learning.

In the 2024 school year, these efforts are especially meaningful. Significant worries in K-12 schools include startling levels of student apathy and high rates of absenteeism. This is the dominant conversation in my education circles.

According to a [2023 Gradient Learning poll](#), student engagement and motivation are top concerns for educators. Results reveal teachers believe stronger teacher-student connections, real-world skills, leveraging students' interests and passions, and active hands-on learning are key to reigniting student engagement. The poll revealed teachers overwhelmingly (95%) say it "should be a priority for every school to support teachers with the tools and strategies they need to increase and sustain student engagement."

Teaching Through The Arts

Two organizations in the central Virginia community are actively helping schools develop arts-integrated instruction that engages students, taps into learners' and educators' creative passions, and invigorates teachers while meeting preK-12 curriculum requirements.

These organizations are not teaching art but, instead, are teaching *through* the arts.

PreK-12 collaboration looks like [Partners in the Arts](#) and the Joan Oates Institute for Integrated Learning. Through the leadership of director Rob McAdams, this regional consortium engages local school divisions, artists, and cultural organizations. The Institute for Integrated Learning facilitates workshops that support teachers' desire to develop "experiential and interdisciplinary instructional practices in all content areas, at all levels, and for all students." This can be accomplished through dance, music, visual arts, and theater, among other mediums, according to University of Richmond alumna [Kat Mitchell](#). PIA also trains artists and community experts to effectively deliver their content and knowledge in a K-12 setting.

"As a model of good teaching, the core processes of the arts align with the foundational process of how we learn. It looks just like the scientific investigation process," notes McAdams. In this [video clip](#), educators share how the arts integration approach opens their minds to new ways of teaching, learning, and assessment with rigor and connection [across the curriculum](#).

Through Engaging Creative Thinkers grants, innovative instructional techniques include [school projects](#) such as [Teaching Literacy Through Wrestling](#) and helping [English Language Learners Introduce themselves through Zines](#). Ultimately, according to McAdams, "Our goal is to support teachers as they help students discover 'how they are' as learners. That knowledge fuels the passion to find their path as students enter adulthood, college, the workforce, and their place in the community."

Teachers can use arts-integrated instruction to engage students and meet curricular standards.
University of Richmond, Partners in the Arts

Since 1994, PIA and JOI have offered professional development classes that build educators' skills and can result in an [arts-integrated learning certificate](#) for participants. Instructional approaches employ research and evidence-based best practices. The organization has received three federally funded grants over the years and received its largest individual gift from the remarkable artist, educator, and philanthropist [Joan Oates](#).

With a slightly different angle, [Richmond Performing Arts Alliance](#) is dedicated to creating a vibrant regional performing arts community. As part of those efforts, RPAA has an education outreach mission. Education outreach capitalizes on local teaching artists who lead professional development for teachers to promote standards-based learning in the preK-12 curriculum through arts-integrated instruction. The [Genworth Brightlights Education Center](#), the "hub" for RPAA's education programming, provides children with workshops, classes, and performances by bringing together artists, educators, and varied community resources.

As a former K-12 educator and leader, [Jennifer Maddux](#), Director of Education and Community Engagement, facilitates school and community partnerships to ensure high-quality instructional practices that impact the student experience.

One example is [Greater Richmond Wolf Trap](#), which pursues instructional practices that utilize the universally recognized 21st-century skills known as the 4Cs - creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication. The [research on the benefits](#) of incorporating arts in early childhood education acknowledges positive influences on brain development and unlocking "children's innate desire for joyful, active learning." Outcomes for Greater Richmond Wolf Trap Institute participants include increased language development, higher standardized test scores, and improved teacher creativity and instructional practices.

A mother and her child participate in a Baby Artsplay!™ class at Pine Camp Cultural Arts & Community ... [+]
Richmond Performing Arts Alliance

RPAA facilitates [Baby ArtsPlay!](#)™ for young children and their parents and caregivers. Teaching artists for Greater Richmond Wolf Trap use music and movement to explore the "important connection between performing arts and early childhood development" and offer meaningful bonding opportunities for young children and their adults. Early childhood music educator, musician, and performer Mary Anderson notes active music-making also [supports language development](#).

Taking energized movement and learning into the community, the [Genworth Lights Up! Youth Series](#) offers free visual and performing arts workshops for youth.

Under the guidance of Andrew Keeton, high school students can act (pun intended) upon their interest in the film and performance industry. Teenagers can produce video and audio productions through the [Digital Arts Lab](#). It is not unusual to see these hands-on learners moving about Lights Up! or Greater Richmond Wolf Trap events to produce digital content spotlighting RPAA activities and participants.

I want these experiences for myself, for my children, and for your children. The energy in an arts-integrated classroom is palpable, with vibrant educational moments that bring learning alive. If you are interested in learning more, Lisa Donovan and Sarah Anderberg's book *[Teacher as Curator: Formative Assessment and Arts-Based Strategies](#)* may interest you.

Schools Are Better When Their Communities Are Involved

The moral of these school-community partnership stories is there are countless ways to engage in K-12 schools—and schools are better when their communities are involved.

Community leaders, philanthropists, educators, artists, historians, and many others can give the gift of engaging, reimagined learning to preK-12 learners. By joining an established partnership or initiating a fresh conversation, community members and educators can identify common goals and capitalize on untapped assets. The opportunities are right in our own backyards. Or in our local artists and arts organizations.

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