Genesee Community Charter School at the Rochester Museum & Science Center

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Grades: K-6 Enrollment: 210 (2010-2011) Year Opened: 2001
Free/Reduced Meals: 10% Special Education: 9% English Language Learners: 0%

Authorizing Agency: Board of Regents

Performance Data (2009-2010)

Subject	Grade Level	% Proficient on New York State Assessments*
English Language Arts		
	Grade 3	88%
	Grade 4	61%
	Grade 5	74%
	Grade 6	86%
Mathematics		
	Grade 3	69%
	Grade 4	70%
	Grade 5	70%
	Grade 6	54%
Science		
	Grade 4	79%

Adequate Yearly Progress: Yes, all subjects and sub-groups (2009-2010)

Source: *New York State Department of Education (2011). New York State School Report Card. Test scores reflect post "recalibration" of New York State test results.*

Successful Practice: Integration of arts into inquiry-based curriculum and instruction

Background

The Genesee Community Charter School's name spawned from the Genesee River, as did its curriculum. This charter school is a successful K through 6 elementary school located on the campus of the Rochester Museum & Science Center in Rochester, New York. Its unique curriculum framework, which centers on the history of Rochester and its scientific prehistory, is enhanced by the school's unusual location.

When initially creating a school to reflect its vision of an inquiry-based program, the board sought an exemplary school leader, highly qualified teachers, and the best programs it could find. Then, the board formed a relationship with two strong educational organizations, Expeditionary Learning and Responsive Classroom. Utilizing the unique backdrop of the school's location within the Rochester Museum & Science Center and adopting these progressive models helped the school leader and staff develop the kind of active academic and positive social climate they wanted to generate at GCCS. In addition, to intentionally build a strong vibrant culture, the board also sought to integrate arts into every aspect of the curriculum; rather than residing in the periphery or marginalized as "special subjects," arts are at the very heart of learning at GCCS.

Integration of the Arts at GCCS

The arts are not subservient to the academic subjects at GCCS because classroom teachers rely on the arts to deepen student learning, and arts teachers rely on classroom teachers to provide the content and context for students to develop their artistic sensibilities. The arts reveal what students learn at GCCS. The hallways are adorned with student artwork that reflect children's unique understanding of the world around them, and that is because the community and city around them is the focus of the curriculum. Students express their understanding of rivers, flowers, cities, industries, outer space, major events in history, and much more through music, visual art, and dance. Each art form is its own language, and the students spend their tenure at the school mastering the skills of that art form as well as using it to express their knowledge of academic subjects. Key design elements of a meaningful integrated approach are communication between classroom teachers and arts specialists, a schedule that allocates adequate time to arts, full participation in the arts, and the curriculum.

Communication between Classroom Teachers and Arts Specialists
Professional development is a high priority at GCCS, and since the charter allows the school to create its own calendar, multiple days are allotted for in-depth planning. During planning time, arts and classroom teachers collaborate to form something greater than they could in isolation. For example, complementary studies in dance, music, and art bring fresh perspectives to second and third grade examinations of the origins of the universe and the solar system:

- GCCS blossoming dancers move and experiment with shapes to explore their connection to the earth and their own center of gravity. They practice various dance turns as a way to express their understanding of rotation and revolution. These movements inspire them to choreograph a dance piece, which the children perform at a GCCS site seminar.

- GCCS promising artists gather in front of the painting "Galaxy," by Rochester painter Fritz Trautmann, in a visit to the Memorial Art Gallery. They analyze Trautmann's overlapping use of color, color value, size, and depth in space. At school, a look at Spanish artist Joan Miró's work helps the students appreciate the evocative quality of space. Their resulting compositions reveal their understanding of the subject.

- GCCS budding musicians study musical intervals as a metaphorical analogy to the distance between the planets and the Sun. They internalize the order of the planets through song, by replacing planet names for the notes on a major scale. The key of the scale is represented by the Sun to emphasize how all the planets revolve around the Sun.

Meaningfully integrating the arts sends a vital message to the students at GCCS that the world is an interconnected place. Children enter kindergarten instinctively knowing this to be true, but the structure of many traditional schools does not fully leverage these connections. At GCCS, art is integrated as a mode of thinking in diverse ways about a diverse amount of subjects.

The Nature of the Arts Integration Instruction Drives the Schedule
Large blocks of time are built into the main schedule to support evocative learning through the arts at GCCS. This gives the staff the essential flexibility to determine what the students need to learn best as a project unfolds. For example, if fourth grade students are studying colonial America in the 1700s, they might be planning a production of the Broadway musical, *1776.*In this case teachers might arrange for the class to meet as a whole group to practice the choral numbers, and later the music teacher might use the time to work alone with the student who has a solo because she is portraying Abigail Adams.

Art time might be divided up into different crews for the purpose of accomplishing a variety of tasks such as designing costumes, painting scenery, and photographing actors for the playbill. While these students are accomplishing an art task, other students might be with their classroom teachers studying a timeline of the American Revolution or examining artifacts of the period.At GCCS, teachers have learned that great things can happen when the arts aren't relegated to small chunks of time for the purpose of giving the academic subjects teachers time to plan.

Full Participation
Reflecting the school's commitment to the arts, all students are required to participate in a variety of art activities. For instance, everyone is a member of the choir at the Genesee Community Charter School. This inclusive approach supports the philosophy that children are inherently creative beings and that every child, especially at the elementary level, should have ample opportunities to tap into that potential. There is no separate band or chorus at GCCS because all of the students participate and perform as a result of what they have learned in connection with their academics. Three times a year GCCS hosts evenings for students to exhibit their work for their families, and the arts are central to these events.

Full participation also means that classroom teachers attend the arts classes with their students. It is a radical approach that reaps radical benefits for the students at GCCS. This key factor enables teachers to help their students discover important correlations between subjects. Teachers regularly see students experience "aha" moments when they suddenly make cross-curricular connections. Often they will look at their classroom teacher and shout, "Hey, we learned about this in science!" This phenomenon happens in the reverse as well. For example, one third grader recently exclaimed, "I learned about goods that were shipped along the Erie Canal from that song we sang in music!"

Classroom teachers can also use the time that they spend in the arts to assess how well the students are grasping the concepts or content of a particular

subject. Misconceptions abound sometimes, for example, when students are asked to transform their understanding of say, simple machines, into something artistic. Right away the teacher can identify whether or not students grasp the concept of a wheel and axle if they have to show it through movement and choreography. This also applies to when they have to compose lyrics to a song about simple machines or create sculptures that require artistic renderings of levers and screws.

In addition to authentic assessment, classroom teachers who attend arts classes naturally bring back to their classroom the songs, dances, and ideas that they experienced with their students, and use those materials to enrich the classroom culture. It also provides an opportunity for them to bond with their students in ways that only singing and dancing and making art can.

Curriculum Framework

GCCS' curriculum defines the school in the broadest of terms, and provides a launching point for everything that happens at the school. The curriculum spans the course of time relative to the geology and social history of Rochester. The first segment of the curriculum is prehistory, and consequently most of the grade levels, with the exception of 6th grade, study an aspect of that period. For example, kindergarten and first graders examine fossils native to Rochester and learn about how Rochester was once a warm sea. Second and third graders access the planetarium at this time and study the planets and other mysteries of the universe. Fourth and Fifth graders learn about geology through the lens of the Genesee river.

This curriculum framework anchors almost everything that happens at GCCS. It gives purpose to the rich fieldwork experiences that take place throughout grades, and it initiates the topics of conversation between arts teachers and classroom specialists. The approach to arts integration at GCCS goes hand in hand with this framework. Ironically, the specific structure of the curriculum sets a boundary that allows creativity to abound between the subject areas. For example, young children who are studying fossils come to music class and perform an opera about earth's prehistory. The focus in language arts is the parts

of a story, and in music the connection is how opera communicates a story through song.

Replication Conditions

- Hire well: A strong school leader and exemplary teachers are the foundation of a successful school
- Establish a clear and coherent vision
- Ensure that allocation of resources (people, time, and money) reflects the vision
- Leverage creativity provided by New York charter school law (e.g., distinct curriculum and extended school day)
- Identify high-value external partners (e.g., Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, Responsive Classroom, and Rochester Museum & Science Center)

References/Resources

- Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound: http://elschools.org
- Genesee Community Charter School: http://www.gccschool.org
- New York State Testing and Accountability Reporting: https://www.nystart.gov
- New York State Board of Regents, Charter School Office: http://www.p12.nysed.gov/psc/