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Panel: "Principals Take the Lead with Arts Education Planning"

(Panelists: Una McAlinden, Executive Director, ArtsEd Washington; Laura Ploudre, Principal, Parkwood Elementary, WA; Doug Poage, Principal, Carnation Elementary School, WA. Moderator: Bob Morrison)

*Bob Morrison: Today our panel will be talking about a very important topic – **arts leadership and how to build it**. Principals, in their role as the building leaders, can really make a difference, despite limited resources, when they have the will and commitment to do so.*

The pioneering Principals Arts Leadership (PAL) program was created and is sustained by ArtsEd Washington. Established in 2004, the PAL program has positively influenced the provision of in-school arts instruction in participating schools in the Puget Sound area. Its systematic three-year approach positions principals in a pivotal role as school arts leaders. Una, could you briefly describe the concepts behind the program, tell us how many schools are involved, and explain the program's core objective?

Una McAlinden: Principals Arts Leadership (PAL) is a three-year capacity building program that helps elementary school principals develop and implement a rigorous arts plan. Its purpose is to build and sustain arts programs with the principal in the role of instructional leader. ArtsEd Washington provides support and a roadmap with the aim of taking arts program offerings from being random/sporadic efforts to a more systemic/sequential/equitable approach. Nearly 50 (48 now) elementary schools have gone through or are currently in the program.

Basically, the three-year breakdown is:

Year One – Assemble team and conduct planning

Year Two – Implementation of the plan

Year Three – Develop strategies that will lead to program sustainability

Following completion of this core program, school teams become program alumni and remain active in our principals' network.

ArtsEd Washington now brings about ten schools into the existing pipeline each year, joining others at various stages of the program. As time goes on, schools join an existing cohort, and benefit from peer coaching from alumni. Doug and Laura are trained coaches. Our goal is obviously that each school have an arts plan and implement it but our larger goals are to increase the amount and quality of arts education; to develop a peer network of principals committed to arts education; and to build a replicable model for this program to extend it beyond our immediate service area.

Bob Morrison: Laura, how has the training impacted the way your school provides arts education and how has the training impacted your role as 'school arts leader'?

Laura Ploudre: This is my 11th year at Parkwood Elementary. When I first arrived, there was a haphazard non-systemic approach to arts education and a big missing piece was high quality professional development in fundamentals of the arts. The depth and the rigor wasn't there. Our involvement with PAL really formalized and catalyzed our efforts. I saw a commitment to the arts, but the teachers just needed more support to improve programs - they were hungry to do so but it was important to formalize a structure with goal setting and procedures for high quality professional development for all teachers. We wrote some grants to get that professional development and, as a result, we aligned lessons with standards and specific assessment targets around all of the arts.

Establishing sustainability of programming was really key for us. We had a lovely program featuring artists in residence, who arrived with amazing learning experiences, but then they would leave after two days or a week and we felt a sense of deflation. Learning how to create a long-term plan through PAL involved building arts goals and very specific objectives into our required school improvement plan. As a result, our arts goals moved from being add-ons to core goals, alongside the reading and math goals that were already required by our state.

In a very short time, only three to four years, the program built its own momentum, and there was a strong sense of expectation from our school community to support the momentum. I noticed that our hiring practices and parents' outreach both changed as a result, and that specifically we were looking for people who shared our commitment to arts education programs that are equitable and excellent for all students.

Bob Morrison: Doug, can you tell us how the PAL program helped to change how the arts are taught at your school?

Doug Poage: It was also 11 years ago when I came to Carnation Elementary; it's in rural King County, so our access to services are somewhat limited. Back then, the only arts education we had was a full-time music teacher but, during some years, because of budget constraints, the position became part-time. When the PAL program came along, all four elementary principals joined. While creating a sustained plan, we put all the arts on the map; until then, dance, theater and the visual arts had no plan. There was an art docent program where a parent would come into a classroom once a month and present a masterpiece of the month. The need for qualified and skilled teachers was very apparent. I was concerned and asked my staff, 'would we hand over math to a parent to teach once a month?'

We now have a system and a plan for arts education, and can tap into networks, resources, and grants for teacher training and staff development. Now, probably 90% of our teachers have been trained in a two-year arts teaching program, and we have a two-year curriculum in the visual arts. The arts are now included in evaluations and on student report cards. The state of Washington already requires math and reading plans; now, all of our schools also submit an arts plan to our school board to discuss.

Bob Morrison: From volunteer parent docent to submitting fully developed plans to your board, well-articulated programs taught by qualified arts teachers, and the fact that you have professional development for all of your teachers, that's an incredible story and it speaks well to this type of program. Please tell us about the direct impact that

the program has had on students or how it's impacted parental and community support for the arts in your schools.

Laura Ploudre: Parkwood is located in an inner urban area just north of Seattle. Approximately 50% of our students qualify for free/reduced lunch and over 25 languages are spoken in our students' homes. Over 30% of our students speak English as a second or third language. The pressure is certainly on in a school like Parkwood for students to perform in areas of reading and math. We live and breathe the high stakes standards and assessments that have come down the pike so when questions were raised about our commitment to the arts, they were framed around 'how would you have time for that?'. Those questions started to fade when our students began to get a lot of attention in the form of state awards.

While it's hard to prove a direct correlation, I really feel our qualitative data and anecdotal information can be related to improved student performance in reading and math. Our PAL involvement began in 2004, and following that our entire staff received intensive training from 2005 to 2007. Since 2007, we've been using a comprehensive arts curriculum K-6, and that was when our school received the first of six State level academic achievement awards. Being a Title 1 Schoolwide school, and a school with a lot of English language learners, what we've discovered is that the arts are a pathway for students to become engaged more effectively than they are in the traditional pencil/paper route.

In our special education population (moderate to severe disabilities, perhaps nonverbal or quite autistic), we have found that the arts level the playing field. It's difficult to make a direct correlation but people here in our school do see that the arts are having a dramatic impact overall. Our parental and community partnerships have expanded alongside our reputation as a strong arts program. A grandfather who is a premier wood carver came and taught children to do carving; a sculpture done by the children sits outside my window. Another parent, a principal dancer with the Pacific Northwest Ballet, started his own arts outreach project called Seattle Dance Project; we wrote a grant together which resulted in four teaching artists becoming part of our staff for a year. Every student received weekly dance instruction for a year as well as community performance opportunities. Those partnerships have really shifted us away from a somewhat tricky parent art docent program to 'finding the artists in our parents,' in our community, and they're becoming part of our program in a powerful way.

Doug Poage: Our data and results are very similar and parallel to what Laura described. Though the free lunch/ESL population is not as large here, the case can be made that the arts are good for all children, no matter what their background is or where they come from. One area that Laura didn't mention is the area of student discipline. When we went into this, we weren't looking to improve any one thing, not even our state test scores. But what we found was that the influence of student engagement and using all the different modalities to engage students in their academic learning has resulted not only in better test scores but lower discipline rates. I discovered that in the five years that we've been involved in PAL, without changing anything we were doing in our student discipline/student management program, our discipline referral rates to the office dropped 86%. In other words, we had 86% fewer discipline referrals. And, we also had higher attendance rates – students were showing up more often, they were more engaged in their learning and it was evident in their test scores as well.

Bob Morrison: Doug, you are a member of the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP). Could you tell us why you introduced the PAL program to that group and how have they taken to the partnership?

Doug Poage: The introduction came about as a result of my own frustration that this area was not being addressed. I think it's interesting to note that I'm now at the National Association of Elementary School Principals conference and there's not one arts related item on the agenda.

I started by complaining, saying 'why isn't there anything that I'm interested in, what about the arts?' and got a reply back from the AWSP director asking 'what would you like to do?' Now, the AWSP is a strong PAL partner: they do organizational public relations and they're letting principals know that this is an important area and that people are getting results.

Bob Morrison: Una, what's next for PAL?

Una McAlinden: We've done research on the interventions that we've been seeing, stories like Doug's and Laura's, and in 2009, we decided to take a closer look because we almost felt that what we were seeing was disproportionate to the size of our interventions. It's a fairly modest program, but we were seeing these huge changes. We did some research (link below). As a result of that, we've made a lot of improvements and changes to what was already working, but really concentrated on developing facilitated protocols that these coaches are now leading as peers. We are looking at replicating and scaling, not only to serve the rest of Washington state, but we're now getting requests from all over the country. With such limited capacity, we're at a plateau for our own reach and the best we can do for others at the moment is refer them to our research. So, we need some enlightened funders to support our next R&D phase to really give life to the full potential of the program.

Bob Morrison: It's certainly an admirable program and a tremendous model. I will be calling you to see how we could launch this program over here in New Jersey because it just sounds fantastic and we have a great relationship with our principals and supervisors association. I encourage others who are interested to look at the research and learn more about the program.

Links:

ArtsEd Washington: <http://artsedwashington.org/>

Principals Arts Leadership (PAL) program: <http://artsedwashington.org/for-educators/principals-arts-leadership>

PAL Research, May 2009: <http://artsedwashington.org/for-educators/principals-arts-leadership/pal-research>