

Driven by Your Mission and in Honor of Your Customer

by Jacquelyn Zimmermann

Imagine walking into any federal agency. What would you experience there? Most likely you would experience a security process that has you waiting to be escorted by an employee. While you waited you may view news on a TV or rolling messages on a screen about agency activities—perhaps the only clue you'd have of that agency's culture or mission.

That was the lobby experience in the U.S. Department of Education 10 years ago, with the exception of stereotypical icons of education—cut outs of yellow school buses and crayons. Today, even before entering the building, you would experience windows full of original photographs from school visits announcing “This place is about education and helping students to be successful.” Once in the lobby, you would be surrounded with examples of the stellar work students and their teachers are accomplishing in classrooms from around the nation and the world.

In your experience, you would recognize that the works announce the department's mission: “To promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.”

The Transformative Nature of Collaboration

Jim Shelton, the department's assistant deputy secretary for innovation and improvement and an Obama administration appointee, called the student art exhibits in the lobby “transformative.” The transformation began 10 years ago when I assumed a new responsibility in the department to supervise the creative team. I thought we could do better than displays of school buses and crayons to represent “education.”

I realized that the lobby was a natural art gallery, and that using it as such would allow the department to communicate to employees and visitors the importance of the work that takes place in classrooms. Transforming

the lobby would help show that such work is not only the result of talent but rather of rigorous and persistent work by students, teachers, and supportive families and communities.

I envisioned having several exhibits a year with a ceremonial opening for each so that we could invite students, teachers, and families to celebrate their accomplishments and to bring department employees face-to-face with their customers.

My next move was to secure student art. Not so fast! I realized that to successfully implement my vision I needed partners, namely art teachers who would provide student work from the classroom, as well as colleagues. From the conceptualization stage, I already saw the important role collaboration would play, because I had nothing and could transform nothing without student artwork.

Articulating a Win-Win Result

My first step toward this collaboration was to call art teachers—at random and at all levels, pre-K through professional art school—to ask if they would be interested in having their students' work exhibited at the department. Without exception, each responded with a version of “absolutely! What we lack most is exhibit space and opportunities to show our students' work.”

Thus I knew I had something as valuable to offer my collaborators as they had to offer me. When it came to asking for a real commitment—dates for exhibits, performances by their students, and speakers from among their leadership—I expanded on the definition of my offering: the opportunity to showcase their students' artistic achievement at the national level as well as their excellence as educators. The department would be representing the importance of arts education and providing our employees with the means to be in daily contact with their mission and customers.

The director of the Alliance for Young Artists and Writers at the time, BJ Adler, articulated early on the

Collaboration Growth in the Department of Education’s Student Art Exhibit Program: Year 1 to Year 10

2004

- August 2004–05 Alliance for Young Artists and Writers Scholastic Art & Writing Award Winners
- November/December VSA arts visual art and poetry from around the world, and Merit Elementary School’s (DC) winning “Pandamania” sculpture from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities contest

Total Number of Works Exhibited: 38 artworks, 15 poems
Number of Openings: 0
Performances: 0

2013

- January/February National PTA
- Feb. 22 Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz National Performing Arts High School Jazz Quintet with jazz recording artist Tim Green
- March/April Military Child Education Coalition and Mount Vernon High School (Va.) student JROTC Color Guard and performers
- April/May Flint (Mich.) Institute of Arts, Flint School of Performing Arts, Flint Youth Theater, and Tapology, Science of Dance, Art of Rhythm
- June/July North Carolina Art Education Association Affiliates
- August/September Scholastic Affiliate
- Sept. 2013–Aug. 2014 Alliance for Young Artists and Writers Scholastic Art & Writing Award Winners
- October/November Iredell-Statesville, North Carolina Schools
- November/December VSA/Kennedy Center art and writing from around the world

Total Number of Works Exhibited: 325 works of visual art, 60 films, music compositions, dances, and writing, and book of writing
Number of Openings: 8
Performances: Music composition, dance choreography, jazz quintet, string quartet, theatre, tap dance, bagpipes, vocals, poetry performance, poetry recitation, and clogging

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significance of our offering: “What was lacking was official recognition by the educational establishment that arts education is valuable and a critical aspect to the learning of all children. This to us was a major breakthrough to have this recognition from the department.”

In the context of the Alliance’s Scholastic Art and Writing Awards success—winners of this 90-year-old national competition include Andy Warhol, Truman Capote, Joyce Carol Oates, Robert Redford, and others of that caliber—Adler’s endorsement was instrumental in bringing forth more collaborators.

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Focusing on Results for Students and the Country

Further enhancing the collaborative effort are the remarks and performances by guests at the ribbon-cutting ceremonies. Having guest artists creates a privileged position from which to articulate the importance of celebrating arts education. For example, TV and movie star Kalpen Modi, aka Kal Penn, pointed to the economic benefits of the arts. “The arts,” he said, “create billions of dollars in revenue, and urban renewal programs all around the country are relying on, and have involved, the arts in a lot of their developmental activities.”

Likewise, Tony Award-winning playwright Stew focused on the artist’s work ethic as the binding element in all artistic ventures. Artists aren’t “half-steppers” he

said; rather “an artist’s day is 24 hours long, and they can’t punch a clock to escape the work of the day.”

In addition, we have partnered with VSA, an organization founded by Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith, to ensure that people with disabilities participate in and learn through the arts. Through the students featured on our walls and in the performances, we were able to show that engaging the imagination through the arts gives students the affirmation needed to beat seemingly insurmountable odds.

Building Relationships That Last and Multiply

The first year’s exhibits came about through serendipity. Unbeknownst to me, the day after I presented my proposal for the art exhibit program to senior leadership, a senior person from the National Endowment for the Arts, Doug Herbert, came to work for the chief of staff, who passed the proposal to him. Knowing the correlation between students’ academic performance and participation in the arts, Herbert was immediately on board and suggested we showcase work not only from local students, but also from those at the national level.

Herbert knew the folks at both the Alliance for Young Artists and Writers and VSA, and offered them the opportunity to exhibit the winning works from their competitions at the department. Both organizations have exhibited every

year since then. The Scholastic exhibit has grown from 18 works the first year to about 55 works of 2- and 3-D work, plus eight winning films and animations, a book of winning writing, and, since 2012, the works of the first-ever National Student Poets.

In 2005, we had three exhibits. We now have seven or eight annually. The National PTA has become a regular partner. In our 10 years of exhibits, we have rarely needed to seek exhibitors. Rather, word has spread about the opportunity, and educators approach us for exhibit space and time.

People who come to openings tell their colleagues about their experience, particularly the best classroom practices they learn about at openings. This forum for sharing among arts educators has brought art

Customer Quotes from Headquarters Lobby Guest Book

Thank you for such an inspiring and uplifting morning.

The museum education programs exhibited here give strong evidence of their success with helping students learn skills that can help them succeed in all subjects and lead a worthy life. The museums get little recognition for this work and so I'm glad the Department created this space and time to showcase this work.

Just imagine schools without art teachers. For example, the students exhibited here may not have been able to share their creativity and knowledge and hard work with us. The country would be lacking in sources of innovation. The global tradition of artistic communication would be broken. Just imagine! Thank you ED for supporting teachers and students to continue our nation's work in knowledge through the arts.

I appreciate coming here and looking at my artwork ... worth coming across the country all the way from San Diego! It's pretty awesome to see my artwork right here in the U.S. Department of Education. I'm proud! Thank you all!

I hope you will find this work of Kyrgyz children beautiful and recognize that Kyrgyzstan is the country in the heart of Central Asia with natural beauty and people with big spirit and ancient history. (Ambassador of Kyrgyz Republic)

Wonderful! Thank you – it makes us remember why we do what we do for a living. (a teacher)

How do we educate the future doers of tomorrow? We allow them the opportunity to experiment and creatively interpret the world. We provide the canvas, the teacher and enable youth to create. You provided the opportunity to be seen and appreciated! Thank you.

What a wonderful display! The arts are so vitally important and as our school budgets become less and less it is so important that we bring the arts to our children. Thank you!

If it were not for the arts, my granddaughter would not have stayed in high school. She has gone on to further her education in the arts. Thank you for supporting these programs that can change lives.

The Department's Student Art Exhibit Program truly inspires us to keep advocating for arts education for all children. (Judi Myers, director of strategic communications, National Parent Teacher Association)

I love this place!

and performances from individual public and private schools, entire school districts and schools state- and countrywide.

We've also had international students, and have featured winning art from competitions run by arts organizations, works from professional arts schools, and works from museum education programs. Many of them collaborate with organizations in their communities to bring performing arts for the openings.

The result of all of this relationship building is significant: The exhibit program is booked solid through mid-2017. In addition, we've been recognized by the Partnership for Public Service as a model innovation, and by the General Services Administration's Art in Public Places as a model showcase for the arts.

As states and organizations around the nation focus on articulating robust, measurable performance standards to ensure the success of students in school, work and to prepare them to contribute in a global society, the Department of Education's collaboration with arts educators and leaders helps ensure that the evidence of this success is exhibited and celebrated in the nation's capital, where it can benefit from a large and diverse audience.

Jacquelyn Zimmermann is director of editorial policy, publications, and printing at the U.S. Department of Education. She founded and directs the department's Student Art Exhibit Program. She also co-founded Conversations About Leading, a monthly effort to develop leadership capacity. Contact her at Jacquelyn.Zimmermann@ed.gov.