



Education for the age of innovation

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By John M. Eger

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Tom Torlakson, state superintendent of public instruction, held meetings in Coronado Saturday to talk about “how the arts and creative education can transform California classrooms.”

And in the next few weeks, the California Joint Committee on the Arts will hold hearings on SB 789, which would require the governor to develop a “creativity index” to measure creativity in public schools statewide.

Authored and introduced by Sen. Curren Price, D-Los Angeles, the bill was approved by the Senate and is now moving toward Assembly passage.

The efforts of Torlakson and Curren represent an auspicious start to reinventing K-12 education, and San Diego is ready. San Diego schools have their financial woes, we know. But few of us know how much progress is already being made to merge the arts and sciences and in the process redesign the curriculum through “arts integration.”

“Arts integration” is not well understood but is simply interdisciplinary education, using the tools of the arts.

Many people don't take the term “arts” seriously. But we now know a lot more about learning and about how “arts integration” works. The California Alliance for Arts Education and the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities have said as much after years of research and study. According to the Obama committee's report, “Cutting-edge studies in neuroscience have been further developing our understanding of how arts strategies support crucial brain development in learning.”

Recently, California State University San Marcos, in collaboration with the San Diego County Office of Education, demonstrated to third- and fourth-graders in North County that it pays to DREAM (for Developing Reading Education through Arts Methods). DREAM is an “arts integration” project, which trains “teachers to use visual arts and theater activities in class to improve students' reading and writing skills.”

CSUSM reported that “using theater to teach literacy is an especially effective tool and one that deserves continued exploration.” More importantly, it said that students scored higher on the state standard tests and on reading comprehension tests.

San Diego Unified, the largest district in the region, has been infusing the arts across the curriculum at the elementary level for several years. According to Karen Childress-Evans, visual and performing arts coordinator, “theater concepts and strategies help students more easily access content knowledge in other academic subject areas.” But more, the visual arts, theater and dance are all used to make all the courses, particular science and math, easier to comprehend, and enjoy. Student attendance is up and where the techniques of art integration are fully embraced by both the principal and the teachers, the students are excelling.

In the Lakeside School District, National City and Chula Vista and elsewhere in the county, similar initiatives are being deployed. In Chula Vista and National, over 400 teachers and more than 9,000 students at 17 schools have been trained through an independent nonprofit called CoTA, a collaboration of teachers and artists. The

results here too, are impressive.

School-in-the-Park, in Balboa Park, has been working since 1999 with Rosa Parks Elementary using the park as an adjunct to the classroom, and several of the museums in the park coordinate the Collaborative Arts Resources for Education program, a school-based collaboration among four premier arts organizations in San Diego: the Museum of Photographic Arts, La Jolla Playhouse, the Mingei International Museum and the Timken Museum of Art. While not arts integration per se, it is a noteworthy effort to put art-based experiences into the curriculum.

In a 2004 book, “The Jobs Revolution; Changing How America Works,” Richard Riley, former U.S. secretary of education, predicted: “The top 10 in-demand jobs in the future don’t exist today. We are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist, using technologies that haven’t been invented, in order to solve problems we don’t even know are problems yet.”

That was almost 10 years ago. But now we are at a crucial juncture in the history of education. It is vital that we merge the arts and sciences, as High Tech High has done, by integrating all the disciplines into projects that students work on each semester. Doing so we can create the kind of curriculum at almost no additional cost that insures the higher order thinking and problem-solving skills that will determine student success in the workplace of the future.

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