



## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Superintendent Greg Baker

**FROM:** Deputy Superintendent Mike Copland, on behalf of the PreK-12 Visual and Performing Arts Advisory Committee

**RE:** PreK-12 Visual and Performing Arts Program recommendations

**DATE:** August 5, 2014, 2014

We are pleased to present the following document that provides information about the Visual and Performing Arts (VPA) committee process this spring here in Bellingham, and outlines a set of programmatic recommendations designed to provide guidance for continuing improvements in our overall Arts program in the school district. The document is organized in five sections:

- I. Introduction
- II. Review of high quality VPA program offerings/recommendations.
- III. Overview of current BSD program in the visual and performing arts
- IV. Overview of the Committee process and summary discussion
- V. Committee recommendations intended to guide planning and action for the ongoing development of the visual and performing arts program in Bellingham for the next five to seven years.

## **I. Introduction**

The report that follows outlines the process and recommendations of the Bellingham Schools' PreK-12 Visual and Performing Arts advisory committee that met over the course of three months in the spring of 2014. The PreK-12 Visual and Performing Arts advisory committee charge was as follows:

- Review the current state of visual and performing arts (VPA) program in Bellingham Public Schools.
- Explore the nature of program offerings/experiences in schools/districts with reputed high quality approaches to VPA teaching and learning.
- Compare current Bellingham Public Schools approaches to VPA teaching and learning with those best examples. Critically examine the similarities and differences.
- Advise the superintendent on efforts to continue to improve our district's programmatic offerings/approach/experiences in the visual and performing arts for all students PreK-12.

We first want to commend Bellingham School District efforts to preserve a significant commitment to the VPA program despite the lived experience of recent years of declining state education budgets. When other districts were, for example, completely eliminating school orchestra programs, BSD has managed to keep a program alive in both middle and high schools. While the economic downturn of the past few years has impacted the VPA programs in Bellingham, the program has been kept alive to the best of the district's abilities, despite competing demands on available dollars.

We further commend the District and the School Board for adoption of outcomes that highlight the importance for the system of preparing students in the visual and performing arts. The Bellingham Promise specifically notes Board Ends 2.0 outcome of preparing students to become "artists, performers and trades people." Board Ends 3.0 outcomes additionally call on the District to prepare students who are "innovators and creators" as well as "leaders, collaborators and team players." The committee members share this clear perspective that a strong program in the visual and performing arts is an essential factor in the realization of these ends for our graduates.

We further explored the question -- What is our program in the "visual and performing arts?" The committee was encouraged to consider all facets of an existing or potential program – music, art, drama and dance. Committee membership included a cross section of Bellingham teachers in the arts, including teacher representatives from art, music, drama, and from across both elementary and secondary levels. The committee also included community representatives, including a representative from the Bellingham Schools Foundation, as well as Bellingham school administrators representing elementary, middle, high school and the central office. The committee met five times beginning in February through May of 2014.

## **II. Review of high quality program offerings/recommendations from research and policy**

In the national and state policy realms, there exists strong recognition and support of programs in the visual and performing arts as "core" content. VPA education is widely recognized as integral to an excellent education for every student. The ability to pursue education opportunities in VPA is not "fluff" or "extracurricular" but central and core to a high quality academic program of study. These

perspectives resonated strongly with the committee. Materials were gathered, disseminated, and reviewed by committee participants. For purposes of the report, we include these various resources as Appendix A, but will not elaborate here on those findings. The committee also sought examples from across the state and region of programs in other systems that presented aspects of what could be considered exemplary efforts to promote the visual and performing arts as a core aspect of the overall educational program of study. Committee members leveraged their regional and state (and in some cases national) networks to scan the landscape of available program offerings, in an effort to learn what other systems are doing to promote a high quality VPA program. While not reviewed here, Appendix B includes support materials for programs that were reviewed and considered.

Given our review of the research and policy reports, in combination with the review of high quality programs elsewhere, and taking account of specific local programmatic interests and opportunities, the committee then established a set of decision principles drawn from these scans that could support subsequent committee deliberation and decision-making. The principles are as follows:

- Understand the visual and performing arts as core to Bellingham’s instructional program.
- Ensure students are taught by highly qualified visual and performing arts instructors.
- Provide sustainable adequate staff and financial resources and program leadership/coordination to ensure a high quality and equitable visual and performing arts program.
- Ensure equity among all visual and performing arts disciplines across every school and every level. Neighborhood should not determine opportunity for students in the arts.
- Ensure flexible schedules that provide time for visual and performing arts education and expands student access to VPA choices across P-12.
- Strengthen two-way partnerships with community visual and performing arts organizations.
- Regularly assess and report on student growth in visual and performing arts education, employing research-based, relevant formative assessments that help teachers to continue to improve knowledge and skills in VPA for students.

### **III. Review of current BSD program in the visual and performing arts**

The committee next moved to take stock of our current VPA program offerings. This section of the report reviews the current program by level – elementary, middle and high school.

#### *Elementary Program*

Elementary general music is offered to primary students twice per week for a total of eighty (80) minutes, and once per week to intermediate for a total of forty (40) minutes. Specific elementary general music instruction varies by school, dependent on teacher interests, and available instrument resources. Recorders have been funded for all elementary programs as a standard practice this year.

Two schools produce annual or bi-annual musicals currently (Happy Valley and Roosevelt). These schools are funded with additional .1 and .2 FTE (respectively) to enable this to occur in the school day. The additional FTE at Roosevelt also supports cross-school coordination work. The other elementary schools usually (but not in every case) offer students the chance for music performances/ musicals during assemblies during the school day. Many music specialists are also conducting evening performances with primary grade students.

Additional specific instruction in instrumental music is currently not offered in the elementary, except in few schools as a “pay to play” extracurricular activity, or with PTA funding. Choirs exist at some elementary schools, but with the exception of the musicals noted above, choir is offered as an extra-curricular activity, outside of the school day. At the beginning of the 2013-14 school year, only Sunnyland and Northern Heights elementary schools did not offer a choir experience. However, students pay to be involved in choir and/or beginning instrumental programs offered by PTAs. In schools offering afterschool activities, some scholarships are made available to students in need in order to support their participation.

Certificated art instruction is currently not offered in the elementary program. What occurs is largely dependent on volunteers, or parent group support for extracurricular offerings. Appendix C shows the various art experiences currently available in elementary schools. District curriculum provides a programmatic connection to Allied Arts, which operates in the five Title 1 elementary schools to bring one experience of an artist-in-residence into each school to work with students each year. These experiences are determined at the school level to be either a classroom based experience, or a school-wide project. All elementary schools have participated in the Allied Arts “Art Walk” in the spring of the year.

Drama instruction is currently not formally offered in the elementary schools, with the exception in some schools as a “pay for play” extracurricular opportunity after school. Some drama instruction occurs naturally in the elementary music classroom when learning songs with movement and expression. However, this instruction is limited, in that elementary music specialists focus on a few of the drama standards (e.g., remembering characters in theater texts/performance; creating facial expressions for a character in a reenactment of a story; applying vocal projection in order to be heard and understood in a performance; development of role-playing skills), but not all.

Dance instruction is a focus for elementary music specialists. Some elementary music specialists teach a specific unit on folk dancing, while others focus on movement/dance activities, incorporated on a regular basis throughout the school year rather than just in one unit. Teacher representatives on the committee suggest that students are meeting almost all of the elementary dance standards in music class. Also, as students learn about composers and various pieces of music, a focus on dance is included through examination of historical and cultural information.

### *Middle School Program*

All middle schools offer experiences in instrumental music, both orchestra and band, and two schools offer choral classes currently, another offers a choral experience in a world music class (Kulshan), and a

fourth (Shuksan) has choir as a club. All middle schools offer experiences in the visual arts. FTE allocated toward visual art instruction varies by schools, and program offerings not uniform in scheduled availability. Whatcom is staffed in visual art at a 1.0 FTE; other schools do not staff a full time art teacher. Drama is currently not taught in the middle school. Some dance instruction occurs in the middle school physical education program, but the depth and breadth of these offerings varies greatly dependent on teacher. The current middle school schedule (number of class periods) precludes students taking multiple arts offerings, and in some cases students are asked to choose between a world language course or visual arts offering.

### *High School Programs*

The three comprehensive high schools offer and maintain multiple performance group offerings in music – orchestra, band and choral – including advanced/enriched offerings in all of the schools (BHS Showstoppers, SHS advanced orchestra, guitar, AP music theory, SQHS AP music theory and guitar).

In addition, all comprehensive high schools offer art instruction in multiple media (ceramics, paint, drawing, etc.) The specific nature of offerings varies by school. Art teachers express that scope and sequence of instruction in the high school art classroom is difficult to maintain, because students at varying experience and skills levels are often combined to enable higher overall numbers of students per class. For example, advanced art students are often enrolled as members of beginning art courses so as to increase student FTE and justify the offering.

Two of the high schools offer four levels of drama, the third offers one level. Over the past ten years teacher time has fallen from 1.0 FTE at all high schools to .2 FTE, .4 FTE, and .5 FTE respectively as of this date. Enrollment drops are directly attributed to lack of FTE available for small class enrollment numbers, lack of feeder programs at the middle schools, and the removal of speech/drama as a graduation requirement.

There is no formal dance instruction currently offered in the high schools. The schools each have an after-school dance team or club in which students may participate as an extracurricular activity, and are “pay to play” programs. One large scale musical theater offering occurs (Bellingham High) and two other schools are providing more limited offerings. Visual art is offered at Options, but no music program.

The current constraints of the six period instructional day limits students’ abilities to take courses in the visual and performing arts, as well as in elective areas beyond the arts. Principals express concern that the nature of FTE allocation forces them to close small classes in the arts, and deters the development of a more robust program. Because students are limited in the number of arts classes they can take in a six period day and still graduate on time, they generally have to choose between drama, music or art. Graduation requirements make it virtually impossible for students to take an arts class every semester, or to choose more than one arts course. Further, constraints on FTE allocations based on class size ratios put pressure on high school principals to eliminate classes with fewer than ~27 students, making it difficult to offer smaller arts specialty courses.

#### IV. Initial Committee Brainstorm and Discussion

Given this backdrop, the committee next engaged in a brainstorm focused on their “hopes and dreams” for the future of Bellingham’s VPA programs. (See Appendix D for a complete list of program ideas). Several key issues bubbled up for consideration in the dialogue that followed the brainstorm activity. These included:

- a. Incorporation of visual art, instrumental music and additional general music in the elementary program taught by certificated instructors. Visual art taught by certificated staff at all levels a minimum of once per week was a strong desire. Strong support also emerged to return instrumental music instruction to the elementary, beginning with fifth-grade, alongside of a twice-per-week general music experience for all students, at primary and intermediate grades, as these components are understood as complementary in their content focus. In other words, the desire was for elementary students to have access to both instrumental and general music, not choose one over the other.
- b. The committee discussed a desire to eliminate or reduce scheduling headaches and roadblocks to more robust course taking opportunities in the secondary schools. The members were clear in supporting a move to add period(s) to the secondary schools’ student day to ensure greater access to VPA offerings, and decrease students in the position of having to choose one course of interest over another (AP vs. Choir; World language vs. music or art, etc.....)
- c. The committee discussed a desire to add to existing middle school options in VPA, including the possibility of a return to a true exploratory experience that could include adding back in a “wheel” approach to VPA/technology electives in the middle level. The committee recognized that this would require the addition of a seventh or eighth period in the middle school student day.
- d. The committee expressed a desire for program leadership in VPA from the district office. The consensus on the committee was that without leadership that is squarely focused on supporting the VPA program, the program will not be understood as ‘core’ to the overall student experience.
- e. The committee expressed a desire for more equitable, dependable staffing FTE in the arts across levels/schools. At the secondary schools, VPA staffing currently tends to fluctuate based on student elective choices, causing some courses to be taught some years and not in others. The argument here was that if the VPA disciplines are really core to the overall program, we should staff in a dependable manner, and not default to class size ratios in dictating the program offerings year-to-year.
- f. Strong desire to institute an equitable approach to community offerings for all students in accordance with BSD’s One Schoolhouse strategy. For example, while most of the PTSAs are able to provide one field trip to Mount Baker Theatre per year, there are inequities among the schools in terms of attendance. Schools in higher income areas have PTSAs that are able to raise more funds and are able to send each student to more than one performance. By contrast, schools lower income areas are able to generate less revenue through PTSA

fundraising, and subsequently less able to support student attendance at Mount Baker Theatre performances.

Following the brainstorm and discussion, the committee was asked to prioritize the ideas using a “value vote” process. Each committee member received 12 votes. They were able to place these they favored as recommendations moving forward. Results of the votes are in the far right hand column of Appendix D. The discussion that ensued from the value vote led the committee to prioritize nine key recommendations.

## **V. Committee Recommendations**

The committee prioritized recommendations that focus on enriching the district programs in all VPA disciplines, starting with elementary, and that push the district to ensure equitable “one schoolhouse” opportunities for all students, in all disciplines, regardless of school/neighborhood.

- **Recommendation 1. Ensure that all elementary students (PreK-5) receive general music instruction a minimum of twice per week.** Currently all students do receive instruction, but intermediate grades receive only one music class per week, while primary receive two. With the advent of new preschool program emphases, attention to preschool VPA offerings also is warranted, and viewed as important for building the program in the upper grades. The committee also encouraged consistent attention to dance and drama standards in the general education music program, to work for alignment of the program offerings in those areas. Based on current FTE expenditures, the cost of this addition would be on the order of 2.25 FTE.
- **Recommendation 2. Add certificated visual art instruction at the elementary level.** Utilize a “push in” model (similar to how garden educators “push in” to classrooms now) that would eventually guarantee high quality visual art instruction for all elementary students. The committee suggested a way to begin would be to pilot a “push in type program with 3-4 schools with highest needs, and provided this pilot proved workable, consider expansion of art offerings and FTE as funds become available. A pilot program would start with 1-2 FTE certificated art specialists; the “high form” program with art incorporated at every grade level in every school, would require 6.5-7.0 FTE. Moving to incorporate art specialists in the elementary general education classroom also has implications for teacher professional learning, to help general education teachers and art specialists collaboratively design experiences in the visual arts that support and enrich the general education curriculum.
- **Recommendation 3. Develop the instrumental music program at the upper elementary.** For 2014-15, the committee supports the development of a 10-12 week afterschool experience in instrumental music for every 5<sup>th</sup> grader, as a way to begin to reintroduce instrumental music back into all the elementary schools. There is strong interest in the community and among committee members that this initial instrumental program focus on strings, given the loss of the elementary strings program that the district had for many years. Over time, the committee encourages the

district to reintroduce instrumental music offerings back into the school day, including moving strings in grade 5 as a focus for initial FTE return in 2015-16 as a part of the instructional day, but including other instrumental emphases (band instruments, drums, keyboard, etc.) as budget allows. Associated costs for putting instrumental instruction into the student day are approximately .1 FTE per school to run an instrumental experience at a given grade level for 40 mins twice per week, which equates to 1.4 FTE overall to run a year-long instrumental program at a given grade level in all schools.

- **Recommendation 4. Equalize and support a standard model of MS staffing in the arts.** Provided a class schedule that allows for the return of a more consistent, robust arts program in the middle level, the committee recommends a staffing model for each middle school that would include a full-time certificated art teacher and .5 certificated music teacher in each of three areas (orchestra, band, choral). The move to a standard model of staffing would supplant the ratio-based approach for staffing arts offerings that currently exists. The committee also encourages district leaders to consider the reintroduction of drama in the exploratory offerings at the middle level, possibly through a return to the elective wheel concept that the system previously employed. A key question that remains and is worth further exploration is how to balance this approach with the need to keep teaming alive in the middle level.
- **Recommendation 5. Expand/redistribute secondary school schedules to accommodate more access to arts offerings for students.** The committee encourages the district to elongate the student day to accommodate enriched elective/arts offerings at the middle and high school. This could include the expansion or redistribution of time in the middle school daily schedule to incorporate a true exploratory that includes visual arts, music, drama and other enriched core learning experiences such as world language, but continues to support the team concept that has proven to be successful across our middle schools. Further the committee supports the expansion of the high school schedule to 7 or 8 periods to enable student to take broader range of arts (as well as elective) offerings.
- **Recommendation 6. Hire a director of the visual and performing arts.** The committee recommends hiring a director, even part-time initially, charged with program coordination and development. Such a person might potentially share coordination responsibilities in other program areas that are strongly connected to the visual and performing arts (e.g., highly capable, and physical education). A director could also represent the visual and performing arts in the planning processes for new facilities, as well as provide budget oversight and consideration for arts needs in connection to maintenance and operation levy funds to cover annual refurbishing costs for the program (instruments, equipment, etc.)
- **Recommendation 7. Reinstate a minimum of .6 FTE drama instructor at each high school.** In order to ensure consistency of offerings across the comprehensive high schools, the committee recommends establishing a minimum FTE of .6 needed to support a program in drama. In addition,

the district is encouraged to restore stipends for after hours work on drama productions/musicals to previous levels.

- **Recommendation 8. Increase connection with and leverage of community resources in the arts.** The committee recommends the district work to guarantee one Mount Baker Theatre experience annually for each student in the primary and intermediate grades in order to provide equitable access to cultural events and enhance curricular connections to the arts. We also see opportunities to work more closely with the Mount Baker Theatre representative to ensure that the selected performances meet the educational and experiential goals of elementary teachers in BSD. The committee also recommends that the district leadership in VPA explore ways to deepen Western Washington University connections in the arts disciplines. Some connections exist now, but more could be done with thoughtful planning. Finally, the district is encouraged to explore more ways to get working artists into schools in a concentrated, but equitable way. At present, these connections are largely ad hoc, and dependent (at times) on parent groups in individual schools to promote and define opportunities for students.
  
- **Recommendation 9. Scope out a 5-7 year plan for VPA budget prioritization that can realistically achieve program goals.** The committee recognizes that achieving the vision associated with the principles we established, and inclusive of the eight recommendations above, will require a systematic, long-range commitment of resources. We know this plan cannot happen overnight. We encourage the district to think and plan for long-term budget prioritization of the program in the visual and performing arts.

Thank you for the opportunity to engage on these important issues. We respectfully submit this plan for consideration.