



The A+ Schools Program: Sustainable, Arts-based School Re-form

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Program Description

The A+ Schools Program (<http://aplus-schools.uncg.edu/>) is a whole school “re-form” model that views the arts as fundamental to teaching and learning in all subjects. The Program mission is to create schools that work for everyone: students, teachers, administrators, parents and the community.

Grounded in the A+ Essentials™ which outlines the commitment and practice of the Program and the schools, the central vision of A+ is to create enhanced learning opportunities for all students. This is accomplished by using arts-integrated instruction which incorporates Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, other intelligence theories, recent brain research findings, along with dance, drama, music, visual art and creative writing. For schools, A+ is a comprehensive education reform because other school practices (assessment, scheduling, collaboration, parent involvement and more) are re-formed as necessary to achieve this central vision.

Brief History

Established in North Carolina in 1995 by the Kenan Institute for the Arts, the A+ Schools Program began with 25 schools, representing the diversity of North Carolina schools and communities. Those schools implemented the program and participated in an extensive four-year evaluation. The results of the initial evaluation and the subsequent eighth year evaluation attributed the success and sustainability of the Program to the use of the arts in school reform, the professional development, and the statewide Network created to support teachers and schools. In 2003 the A+ Schools Program moved from the Kenan Institute for the Arts to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) (www.uncg.edu). Currently, the North Carolina A+ Schools Network includes 40 schools with plans to add new schools each year.

In 2000 the A+ Schools Program at UNCG began a four-year process to assist the Kirkpatrick

Foundation in Oklahoma City in establishing a statewide A+ Schools Program in Oklahoma (www.okaplus.ucok.edu). Today, the Oklahoma A+ Schools program has 39 schools, with plans to continue adding schools each year. In 2001, the North Carolina Program joined with a private Arkansas foundation and the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville to assist in establishing a statewide A+ Program in Arkansas (www.aplusnetwork.org). There are now 14 A+ Schools statewide, with plans to bring new schools into that Network.

Nationally and across North Carolina, the A+ Schools Program at UNCG continues to provide consultation services and professional development to assist in establishing statewide and regional A+ Schools networks and partnerships. The Program is currently funded in part by the North Carolina State Legislature and by grants and contracts from public and private agencies and foundations.

Research-Based Results

An intensive 4-year evaluation of the Program by independent researchers and a follow-up study after eight years showed significant positive effects on schools, communities, teachers and students in areas including:

- **Instructional Strategies** - Teachers changed their instructional strategies to be more engaging and experiential, which enhanced learning for all students.
- **Assessment Strategies** - Teachers developed richer, more substantive and authentic classroom assessments.
- **Student Benefits** - Researchers found the A+ approach to teaching equally beneficial to all groups of students regardless of cognitive development, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.
- **Academic Environment** - Teachers designed enriched academic environments – more ways for students to “understand” and demonstrate understanding of the curriculum – with improved assessment results.

- **Standardized Tests** - Test scores increased at a level equal to or greater than other schools across the state, but A+ schools were able to demonstrate this increase without sacrificing a balanced curriculum that included social studies, science, physical education and the arts.

A follow-up study (2003) demonstrates the sustainability and resilience of the A+ Schools Program as a whole-school reform after 8 years, unusual in the history of school reform. The researchers attribute this to the Program's high-quality, ongoing professional development and the creation of a Network of schools which increased communication and collaborative planning within and among schools. A+ was also sustained because it became deeply engrained in teacher culture in the schools. Most importantly, the study states that "the reason A+ reached so deeply into the culture of schools is because it speaks to the bottom line of teachers. For teachers, the arts invite students to learn and this makes teaching worthwhile."

National Recognition

The A+ Schools Program is now nationally recognized as an effective, research-based strategy for sustainable, arts-based school reform. It has been highlighted in national publications including *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development* (2002, Arts Education Partnership <http://aep-arts.org/>); *Putting the Arts in the Picture: Reframing Education in the 21st Century* (2004, Center for Arts Policy at Columbia College Chicago <http://artspolicy.colum.edu/>); and more recently in *Third Space: When Learning Matters* (2005, Arts Education Partnership <http://aep-arts.org/>).

In North Carolina, the A+ Schools Program has been recognized and cited extensively as an exemplary program by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction as documented in two of its most recent publications, *A Balanced Curriculum*, (elementary and middle schools editions) (<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/curriculum/balancedcurriculum.pdf>),

With over ten years experience working in school "re-form," A+ has shown that through high-quality professional development and ongoing Network support, teachers can learn to be both efficient and creative with their time and

resources by integrating instruction *and* assessment to teach all disciplines and meet accountability standards.

Current Initiatives and Partnerships

While the primary focus of the A+ Schools Program is the ongoing support and expansion of the North Carolina A+ Schools Network and the continued development of new A+ Networks across the country, the Program also initiates numerous short-term projects that support its mission and goals. Highlights of these initiatives include:

- Hosting a national conference in December 2005 that brought together researchers, teacher education faculty, funders, policy makers, and school-based leaders from the A+ Schools in North Carolina and other states, and from similar programs across the country. The conference, funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and two private foundations, focused on the role of the arts in education reform over the last 10 years and will set an agenda for future research and development.
- Sponsoring a 10-year celebration and state conference in August 2005. This conference showcased the classroom practices of A+ teachers from North Carolina and other states and provided workshops by the A+ training staff, the A+ Fellows. The A+ Schools Program will sponsor its next Conference in August 2007.
- Working with UNCG faculty and staff to develop a pilot teacher preparation model at UNCG that will focus on interdisciplinary teams of student teachers and will involve the School of Education and arts departments.
- Coordinating a Federal grant in collaboration with Appalachian State University to develop seven A+ schools in western North Carolina and partnerships with local arts councils.
- Developing and implementing intensive Teaching Artist training in collaboration with the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County (MD)
- Consulting with organizations and school districts to establish new A+ Schools Programs and provide professional development to teachers and schools.

For additional information or to schedule professional development, contact: aplus-schools@uncg.edu or call 336.217.5117.