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Eighth-Grade
Findings from
the National
Assessment of
Educational
Progress

music

MUSIC

theatre

theatre

visual arts

visual arts

dance

dance

The NAEP 1997 Arts Report Card

U.S. Department of Education,
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
NCES 1999-486



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NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

The NAEP 1997 Arts Report Card

**Eighth-Grade Findings from the
National Assessment of Educational Progress**

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Executive Summary

The last several years have seen a growing resolve among educators and policymakers to assure the place of a solid arts education in the nation's schools. There are many reasons for this resolve, but certainly among the most important is the contribution the arts make to the quality of education. As stated in the *Improving America's Schools Act of 1994*, "The Congress finds that the arts are forms of understanding and ways of knowing that are fundamentally important to education."¹

For over 25 years, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has reported on the knowledge and skills of children in the United States. If policymakers, educators, and concerned citizens are to reform and improve the United States educational system to ensure that students receive a solid arts education, they need valid and reliable information about the arts skills and abilities of our nation's students. As the nation's only ongoing survey of students' educational progress, NAEP is an important resource for understanding what students know and can do. NAEP assessments have explored students' abilities in a range of subject areas, including reading, science, U.S. history, and mathematics. Based on assessment results, NAEP reports levels of student achievement and the instructional, institutional, and demographic variables associated with those levels of achievement.

In 1997, NAEP conducted a national assessment in the arts at

grade 8. The assessment included the areas of music, theatre, and visual arts. (Though an assessment was developed for dance, it was not implemented because a statistically suitable sample could not be located.) For each of these arts areas, this *Report Card* describes the achievement of eighth graders within the general population and in various subgroups. Taken with the information provided about instructional and institutional variables, this report gives readers a context for evaluating the status of students' learning in the arts.

Readers should note that this report is intended to be read with a CD-ROM. The CD features the complete text of the report, as well as many more examples of student responses to assessment exercises.

The NAEP Arts Education Assessment Framework

The arts assessment was designed to measure the content specifications described in the arts framework for the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The central principle underlying the arts framework is that dance, music, theatre, and visual arts are crucial components of a complete education. The arts have a unique capacity to integrate intellect, emotions, and physical skills in the creation of meaning. Further, (according to the framework), at its best, the teaching of the arts will emphasize Creating and Performing works of art as well as studying and analyzing

existing works. Thus, meaningful arts assessments should be built around three arts processes: Creating, Performing, and Responding.

- **Creating** refers to expressing ideas and feelings in the form of an original work of art, for example, a dance, a piece of music, a dramatic improvisation, or a sculpture.
- **Performing** refers to performing an existing work, a process that calls upon the interpretive or re-creative skills of the student.
- **Responding** refers to observing, describing, analyzing, and evaluating works of art.

In order to capture the processes of Creating, Performing, and Responding, the arts assessment exercises included the following:

- Authentic tasks that assessed students' knowledge and skills in Creating and Performing music and theatre, and Creating in visual arts. Among other activities, students were to sing, create music, create and perform dances, act in theatrical improvisations, and work with various media to create works of visual art. Students were also to evaluate their own work in written form.
- Constructed-response and multiple-choice questions that explored students' abilities to describe, analyze, interpret, and evaluate works of art in written form.

The Arts Assessment Student Samples

The NAEP 1997 Arts Assessment was conducted nationally at grade 8.² For music and visual arts, representative samples of public and nonpublic school students were assessed. A special sample was assessed for theatre.

The decision to assess a special sample of students for theatre was made based on the results of the 1995 NAEP field tests in all four arts at grades 4 and 8. Field test data indicated that small percentages of students were exposed to comprehensive theatre programs in the nation's schools. (Eleven percent of students that were part of the random sample taking the 1997 visual arts assessment had some exposure to theatre education.)

To ensure rich results about what students who have been exposed to theatre in school know and can do, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), members of the arts community, and Educational Testing Service (ETS) decided that a "targeted" sample of students should take the theatre assessment. Schools offering at least 44 classroom hours of a theatre course per semester,

and offering courses including more than the history or literature of theatre, were identified. Students attending those schools who had accumulated 30 hours of theatre classes by the end of the 1996-97 school year were selected to take the theatre assessment.

In this *Report Card*, discussions of student performance on the theatre assessment refer to this special sample of students, not to the nationally representative sample of students who took the music and visual arts assessment.

Also based on the results of the 1995 arts field test, a decision was made to have a targeted sample of students take the dance assessment. (Results from the 1997 arts assessment indicate that 3 percent of students in the national random sample received dance instruction in school three or four times a week.) The NAEP staff responsible for drawing NAEP samples and obtaining participation worked with the arts community to set criteria for the dance student sample and then to locate schools offering comprehensive dance programs.³ However, after considerable effort, a sample suitable in size and national distribution could not be found.

So that readers will have a picture of the performance assessment in dance that was developed based on the arts framework, the dance exercises that were intended for administration to students are included in this *Report Card*. (Appendix A contains information on sample sizes and participation rates for the assessment.)

Student Achievement

In this report, student performance on the arts assessment is presented in several ways. Overall summaries of results for Creating, Performing, and Responding in terms of student- and school-reported background variables are featured. For theatre, student results are also discussed in terms of teacher-reported background variables.⁴

The overall summaries of results deal with Creating, Performing, and Responding separately. Responding results within music, theatre, and visual arts are grouped for summarization on three NAEP arts Responding scales, each of which ranges from 0 to 300. Average Responding scale score results are presented by demographic and "opportunity to learn" variables (such as frequency of arts instruction, arts

2 The arts assessment was administered at grade 8 only because, due to budget constraints, NAEP could not comprehensively assess the arts at all three grade levels. (This shortfall also affected other NAEP subjects, such as math and science.) The arts community was consulted widely and recommended that the assessment be administered at one grade, grade 8. In this way, a full assessment of the Arts Framework, with authentic Creating, Performing, and Responding exercises, could be administered in the different arts.

3 Students who would have taken the dance assessment attended schools that offered at least 17 classroom hours of a dance course per semester. These students would have to have been currently enrolled in dance classes, or would have to have taken dance coursework in the last year. Coursework needed to include more than dance in athletic contexts, for example, dancersize or dance team, and more than aesthetics or criticism.

4 A teacher questionnaire was administered only for the theatre assessment because of the special nature of the theatre sample. Students who took the music and visual arts assessments were a random national sample. These students attended schools where music and visual arts may be taught by itinerant teachers or part-time staff. By contrast, those who took the theatre assessment attended schools that featured theatre as a substantial part of the curricula. This increased the chance of teacher response to the questionnaire.

facilities, and classroom activities in the arts) based on student-, school-, and, in the case of theatre, teacher-reported background information. Creating and Performing results are not summarized using a standard NAEP scale. Instead of a scale, Creating and Performing results are presented as average percents of the maximum possible score on exercises, in relation to demographic and opportunity-to-learn variables. (These average scores represent the overall mean percentage students earned of the possible number of points for the components of Creating and Performing tasks.)

Major Findings in Music, Theatre, and Visual Arts for the Nation

Music

- *Responding.* Most students could select appropriate functional uses for different types of music and could partially justify their choices in writing. For example, 79 percent of students could identify an excerpt from Brahms' "Lullaby" as being suitable for putting a child to sleep and could provide some justification for their choice.
- *Responding.* Students showed some skills in critiquing simple music performances. For example, 45 percent of students were able to identify and describe two errors, and 16 percent of students were able to identify and describe three errors in a performance of "Michael Row the Boat Ashore."

- *Creating.* Students showed limited abilities in creating music. When asked to create a rhythmic embellishment based on the first two phrases of "Ode to Joy," 24 percent of students were able to perform music that was scored "Adequate" or above in overall appeal and interest.
- *Performing.* Students' singing abilities across various aspects of musical performance were mixed. When singing the song "America" with a taped accompaniment, 78 percent of students were able to sing the rhythms of the melody with generally acceptable rhythmic ensemble and accuracy. In contrast, 35 percent of the students sang almost all of the pitches of the melody accurately, and 24 percent sang with a tone quality considered appropriate in most sections of the music.

Theatre

- *Responding.* More students could describe feelings conveyed by actors in dramatic performances, or what actors did with their faces, voices, or bodies, than could explain how actors used their faces, voices, and bodies to convey character and feeling. For example, 41 percent of students could describe the voice used by an actor in a radio play. Fourteen percent were able to describe ways the actor's voice conveyed his character.
- *Responding.* Students showed some knowledge of the technical elements of theatre. Sixty-five percent of students could offer

- reasonably accurate plans for how to create lighting effects for a scene in a Carson McCullers play. Fifty percent were able to draw ground plans for a set of that scene that showed some understanding of a theatre space. Seventeen percent of students were able to draw complete and essentially error-free ground plans.
- *Creating/Performing.* Students' abilities to combine dialogue, action, and expression to communicate meaning to an audience varied across Creating/Performing tasks. Sixty-seven percent of students demonstrated this ability most of the time in an improvisational task, and 2 percent did all the time. In a cold reading of a script, 30 percent of students demonstrated the ability to convey meaning (if only generally) most of the time, and 6 percent did all the time.

Visual Arts

- *Responding.* Some students were able to accurately describe some aspects of artworks. For example, 29 percent of students could describe three ways Raphael created a sense of near and far in a Madonna and Child painting.
- *Responding.* Students' abilities to place artworks in historical or cultural contexts varied. For example, 55 percent of students could identify which of four works was a work of contemporary Western art, and 25 percent could identify which of four works contributed to Cubism.

- *Responding.* Generally, linking aesthetic features of artworks explicitly with meaning seemed challenging for students. Four percent of students could write a brief essay linking a full analysis of technical aspects of a Schiele self-portrait to an interpretation, while 24 percent were able either to link sparser technical analyses to interpretations or to analyze technical aspects without an interpretation.
- *Creating.* Students showed some ability to create specific, fully observed, and expressive two-dimensional artworks. One percent of students created expressive collages that showed a consistent awareness of qualities such as color, texture, and contrast. However, 42 percent were able to effectively use collage techniques in parts of their collages.
- *Creating.* Students seemed to find applying their knowledge and skills to three-dimensional tasks challenging. For example, 3 percent of students were able to create freestanding sculptures out of plasticine and wire that skillfully combined shapes, details, and textures into an imaginative interpretation of kitchen utensils. Many more students (21 percent) created sculptures that were not freestanding, or showed some ability to realize an idea in an inventive, organized interpretation.

Major Findings for Students and Arts Learning in the Nation's Schools

- A large percentage of grade 8 students attended schools in which music and visual arts were taught, in most cases by full-time or part-time specialists. Student access to theatre and dance instruction was more limited.
- Most students attended schools in which instruction following district or state curricula was offered in the subjects of music and visual arts, but not in theatre or dance.
- Most visual arts and music instruction took place in school facilities dedicated to that subject. Where available, dance was usually taught in gymnasiums. Where available, theatre instruction usually took place on a stage or in a room dedicated to theatre teaching.

Major Creating, Performing, and Responding Findings for Student Subgroups

- In the NAEP arts assessment, females consistently outperformed their male peers.
- White and (where sample sizes were large enough) Asian students had higher average scores in Creating, Performing, and Responding than did Black or Hispanic students in some instances. However, music Creating scores of Black and White students were comparable,

as were music Creating and Performing scores among Black, Hispanic, and Asian students.

- Consistent with past NAEP assessments, higher levels of parental education were associated with higher levels of student performance in the arts assessment.⁵

Cautions in Interpretations

The reader is cautioned against interpreting the relationships among subgroup averages or percentages as causal relationships. Average performance differences between two groups of students may result in part from socioeconomic and other factors. For example, differences among racial/ethnic subgroups are almost certainly associated with a broad range of socioeconomic and educational factors not discussed in this report.

Additionally, readers should avoid making comparisons in scores across arts areas. The scales in each subject are independent, and the same score in two arts areas may not mean the same things in terms of student achievement.

Finally, readers should note that NAEP administered assessments in music and visual arts in 1974 and 1978. However, the assessment results for 1997 examined in this report are not comparable with the results from the earlier assessments, because of considerable changes in the nature of the 1997 assessment, based on the recently created *Arts Education Assessment Framework*.

⁵ Note that the student samples for music and visual arts differed from the theatre sample. While students who took the music and visual arts assessments were a random national sample, those that took the theatre assessment were selected from students who had some theatre education.

A Note About the Field Test Process Report

There is much to be learned from the process of developing, administering, and scoring an innovative performance assessment in the arts intended for a national sample. This information could not be accommodated in this *Report Card*. In order to share this information with the public, NAEP will be creating a report detailing the creation, administration, and scoring of the 1995 and 1997 arts field tests. (In 1995, NAEP field tested dance, music, theatre, and visual arts at grades 4 and 8. In 1997, NAEP field tested those four subjects at grade 12.) The forthcoming *1995 and 1997 Arts Field Test Process Report* will also include examples of exercises and student work. This will enable readers curious about measuring student performance at grades 4 and 12 and about measuring performance in dance to learn about the methods used in those field tests.⁶

⁶ Additionally, most items created for both the 1995 and 1997 arts field tests and the grade 8 arts assessment will be released for public use in 1999. Teachers, students, and other members of the general public will have computer Web access to assessment exercises, scoring guides, and sample responses. However, dance videos, music audio, artworks, and theatre performances used as stimuli for exercises may not be available on the Web, due to copyright restrictions.