Arts Education Policy Lessons Learned from the Southeastern College Art Conference

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Abstract: This article provides functional, moderate, and constructive arts education policy lessons drawn from the development of two Southeastern College Art Conference (SECAC) visual arts education policy statements over the past fifteen years. These lessons can help formulate action-oriented school, district, state, and national pre-kindergarten–20 educational policies to improve and advance all arts education. The article offers a history of these documents’ development, two action examples, conclusions, and recommendations for current and future advocates. SECAC’s most recent policy document can be found at http://www.unc.edu/~rfrew/SECAC/index.html.

Keywords: advocacy, organizational structure, policy, Southeastern College Art Conference, visual arts education

Over the years, visual arts education has been present but has lacked a high profile in the Southeastern College Art Conference (SECAC) and, to a greater extent, in the College Art Association. However, increased art education involvement in SECAC since the early 1990s has somewhat changed art education’s position and importance. In 1994, the Visual Arts Education Forum was set up for the delivery of scholarly papers and presentations outside the auspices of the National Art Education Association (NAEA). Under the leadership of the SECAC presidents and its board of directors, the organization has created an art education policymaking venue unlike any other on a regional or national level.

This paper explores the policymaking lessons learned from the Visual Arts Education Forum and makes specific recommendations about how these lessons may assist other organizations and associations with policy development. These recommendations are particularly timely, and at the 2008 SECAC conference in New Orleans, the organization’s new president, Debra Murphy, agreed to begin updating and revising the 2004 policy statement. With the release of the 2008 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data (U.S. Department of Education 2008), continuing dialogue about state and national revision of the arts standards, and the possibility of revision and reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education 2002), it is a particularly important time to make such policy recommendations.

For an organization like SECAC to acknowledge and institute an ongoing interest in art education is a significant development. Within the organization there has been increased awareness and interest in art education and the preparation of art students at every level, from pre-kindergarten through graduate classes.

SECAC’s focus on providing art education policy statements to help guide, shape, and administer art education programs in pre-K–20 is rare. Historically, visual arts education policy—especially policy that directly impacts the quality and substance of the pre-K–20 arts education system—has not been a major focus for the NAEA, and the College Art Association still does not recognize art education as a distinct discipline, classifying it as a studio program. A few ideologically driven ad hoc policy groups support more community and local arts organizations, but their members have relatively little knowledge of what actually goes on in public schools. Many of these groups appear to be driven by a postradical, social reconstructivist political agenda. This is not to say that supporting community arts, social justice, and civil liberties is not important, but these marginalizing policy positions can further disconnect higher education from pre-K–12 education and may undermine, rather than support, policy and advocacy in the public schools. For SECAC to actively assemble guidelines for implementing and improving art education at all levels is unusual and admirable. Institutional impetus must
exist for any advances in art education to be made.

**Policy Chatter Turns into Action**

The same year that the National Standards for the Arts (Consortium of National Arts Education Association [CNAEA] 1994) were published, SECAC entered the policy discussion with the SECAC Policy for Visual Arts Education, a statement addressed to college and university faculty and administrators (Brewer 1994b). In the spring of 1995, a committee met at the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies to draft a statement and present a panel discussion entitled "Who Makes Public Policy in Arts Education?" The statement was revised and adopted at the 1995 SECAC meeting at Georgetown University.

In 1995, SECAC argued that policy issues in visual arts education are relevant to all studio art and art history faculty, not just art education faculty. Many higher education art departments hold little regard for the art education that students receive in public schools prior to university. Ironically, university art departments usually occupy the bottom rung on the higher education ladder, just like their counterparts in public schools. Perhaps by showing an interest in their public school counterparts, higher education art departments might be perceived as positive professional and educational links by the legislators, state board of higher education members, and university administrators who make policy decisions about funding and programming that significantly affect visual arts education from kindergarten through postgraduate levels.

The broad institutional scale of SECAC could contribute to the achievement of these aims. Founded in 1942, SECAC includes more than 122 colleges and universities and over 500 individual members (art historians, studio artists, art educators) from twelve southeastern states. The organization’s interest in and development and endorsement of policy statements are consequently very significant. If SECAC members or any faculty are interested in influencing public policy awareness and policymaking, the statement suggests that the university allot them time for that work, as well as professional acknowledgement in annual reviews and salary, promotion, and tenure decisions. Such acknowledgment would emphasize the value and import of policy-related professional activities and recognize and reward them. This type of public support helps promote research and scholarship that can directly improve public education.

SECAC also supports departments, colleges, and universities that emphasize faculty development of innovative programming in cooperation with public schools; public outreach to support art education; student assessment and program evaluation efforts; and beneficial policy collaborations with partners who have shared goals.

The 1995 SECAC Policy for Visual Arts Education produced positive results. The Vanderbilt forum on "Who Makes Public Policy in Arts Education?" included arts supervisors from local school districts, state arts supervisors, local and state political leaders, representatives from local arts agencies and cultural arts institutions, faculty and administrators from higher education and public schools, and interested arts supporters. Although it is difficult to assess the concrete effect of the forum, it is certain that such a wide range of arts advocates had never been assembled in the area to discuss these issues before. Two years later, in the fall of 1997, the Metropolitan Nashville Public School District announced the hiring of more than seventy new visual arts teachers. Nashville educational and political leaders played a significant role in this decision, but the leadership efforts of SECAC certainly acted as a catalyst for the improvement of public school art education in the region (Brewer 1997).

A similar policymaking symposium occurred in 1993 at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock that had a comparable effect on art education (Brewer 1994a). Ten years after this symposium, with the support of many of the same art education advocates, the Arkansas legislature and Governor Mike Huckabee passed an unfunded bill requiring every elementary school to employ a full-time art educator. This unfunded mandate is less than ideal, but the policy initiative does provide many more elementary students the benefits of art education directed by qualified art teachers. This legislation emphasizes the need for long-term and continuous art education policy efforts from numerous sources to positively improve art education over time.

This type of action-oriented policy work could serve as a productive model for other districts' and states' arts education policies. Improving and changing arts education policy is much like running a relay race at a track meet. One group carries the baton (policy issue) and passes it off to another group, which then carries and passes, and so on. The results of a single effort are not clear-cut, but over the course of the race, the final goal—policy development—is eventually achieved. A document like the SECAC statement provides a starting point to improve and change practice.

The 1995 SECAC Policy for Visual Arts Education statement moved beyond the regional scope to address state and national policy issues. This statement had implications for policymaking at all levels: for faculty and administrators who value innovative programs in arts education; and for university retention, tenure, promotion, and salary processes. This version of the SECAC policy statement is also relevant to the disciplines of music, dance, and theater education. The need for faculty and administrative involvement across the nation in all arts disciplines is ongoing and essential. Cooperative work must occur between all levels in arts education to improve substance and content in curricula and develop opportunities for students within and beyond the educational system.

**Moving On**

In the spring of 2003, SECAC President-elect Donald Van Horn began the process of creating committees to rewrite six SECAC policy documents.
As chair of the 1995 Policy for Visual Arts Education statement, I was asked to set up a working committee to draft a more current statement reflecting developments triggered by the NAEP Arts Education Report Card (Persky, Sandene, and Askew 1998) and NCLB (U.S. Department of Education 2002). The committee was composed of ten members, with three incumbents.

The revision process began in the spring of 2003. A Policy Dissemination section was added, and the recommendations in all areas were expanded and revised significantly. One of the most important additions to the 2004 document was the emphasis placed on contemporary art and art education policy. The first concern related to the issue of art chosen for study. In today's more comprehensive art education, in which the study and analysis of artwork play a significant role, the selection of artwork for classroom use is critical.

Contemporary art produced in the last twenty to thirty years is often more aesthetically challenging, highly charged, and reflective of our lives, and thus can be more instructive than the Modernist abstractions or Impressionist and Romantic works that are still used in many art education classrooms today. The same premise applies to the selection and promotion of various art education policies. We need to base our policy development on current realities in the ever-changing educational arena, not on the educational milieu of the post-World War II era.

The second new policy position adopted in the 2004 SECAC statement called for the development of art-specific assessments in public schools pre-K-20 based on the NAEP Visual Arts Report Card (Persky, Sandene, and Askew 1998). These assessments directly examine learning in the visual arts, rather than grounding the subject in other academic areas. After all these years, the field of visual arts education still lacks a definition of what visual art learning includes, and little research has been conducted about the use of art education in integrated or interdisciplinary curricular approaches. Few recent research studies and policy papers mention the NAEP Report Card. This study sparked justifiable debate and criticism regarding the design, administration, and results, but little has been done to use or refute those findings for future research and policy development. Two researchers who conducted secondary studies and analysis of the 1997 NAEP Report Card, Dr. Read Diket and Dr. Richard Siegesmund, are members of the SECAC Art Education Policy Committee. These two scholars aided the committee in recognizing the educational benefit of using baseline data to further investigate the status and nature of art education and recommending more such research.

The ongoing question addressed by the committee was how to best disseminate and implement this policy statement. The goal was to provide all pre-K-20 art education administrators, professors, and teachers with a broad set of operational standards to delineate policies, procedures, and content. This document could be applicable to both teachers in the classroom and school boards developing policy. On the university level, the statement could assist faculty in establishing program standards. Chairs and deans could use the policy statement to argue for improved arts education and strengthen their advocacy efforts.

To say that the field of arts education is currently under great pressure would be an understatement. Prior to the severe economic downturn of late 2008 and early 2009, which has led to job reductions in some districts, the single-minded drive to implement standardized reading and math assessments seriously impacted scheduling and funding and left many arts educators and programs in a quandary. It is vital for all interested parties to seek endorsement and support from public schools, colleges, and universities, as well as community-based arts organizations. A particularly important goal is the securing of endorsement of and support for the statement by individual state arts education associations, the NAEA, the College Art Association, and the Music Educators National Conference.

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Conclusions

Although visual arts education was not a prominent issue in SECAC's first fifty years, a focus during the last fifteen years on establishing a policy position has produced major results. Art educators feel they have greatly benefited from their membership in SECAC and the professional opportunities afforded by that membership. The opportunity for art educators to work collaboratively and cooperatively with art history and art studio faculty has been a great professional development opportunity for everyone. The Art Education Policy Committee is now beginning the third revision of the Policy Statement to include detailed recommendations for teacher preparation, roles and responsibilities of art education faculty, curricular and textbook issues, standards for working conditions, art education tenure and promotion, and expanded endorsement mechanisms. This new policy statement will necessarily respond to the 2008 administration of the art portion of the NAEP Report Card, the rewriting of many state standards documents, and the much-needed reauthorization of NCLB legislation.

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Recommendations

As art education advocates and policymakers engage in future rounds of developing and lobbying for new arts policies, some of the following recommendations learned from the refining of the SECAC statement may help.

Refocus on policy to improve and enhance arts education in pre-K–20 education. At times arts educators seem to have lost sight of the constituency we have served and should continue to serve. There is such a heavy emphasis on community-based art organizations, artist-in-schools residencies, and after-school arts education activities that efforts to improve the quality of arts education within the public schools suffer. A case in point can be illustrated by a fall 2008 NAEA Higher Education listserv debate about goals for the national division. The discussion revolved around the question of whether the focus of higher education should lie in traditional school-based settings or more community-based settings. The debate predictably broke into two camps composed of educators who were involved in actual teacher preparation and educators who were not. From an administrative point of view, shifting arts education activities that require costly time and materials to the extramural sphere is the easier solution. This focus on noncurricular arts education is exacerbated by national- and state-level policy that deemphasizes specialization areas like visual arts, gradually driving them to the fringe of the educational curriculum in favor of a general education mentality and administrative budgetary concerns. It is important to recognize that the 2004 SECAC statement does address the notion of community-based involvement as a facet of art education. Article 1c seeks to “encourage broad audience development through the visual arts by comprehensive programs that incorporate contemporary and relevant issues in art, and by active collaboration between public and private organizations including community-based resources, museums, corporations, government agencies, and PreK–16 schools.”

Maintain and restore disciplinary integrity. In the future, we must acknowledge, promote, and further develop art-specific learning. Samuel Hope recognized the increasing focus on integrated arts curricula in 1993 when the national art standards were written. Then, as now, integrating arts across the curriculum was the last of six national standards in visual arts established by the federal government (CNAEA 1994) and the only one to address the use of an integrated curricular approach. Arts integration is not the only standard, as is so often the perception of educators and administrators at all levels. Standards that are founded on disciplinary integrity, such as the development of technical, conceptual, critical, and historical skills, are often either overlooked or ignored. In an arts education advocacy and policy course that I teach, many graduate students are surprised to hear advocates, policymakers, and scholars espouse a need for disciplinary integrity. These students seem to view integrated arts as the primary mode of arts education. A glance at current trends quickly explains why. Recently, integrated arts courses have been popping up in the curriculum for elementary education majors. In fewer and fewer preservice programs are future teachers required to take three-credit-hour courses in the areas of art education, music education, and physical education for a total of nine credit hours. The new integrated arts courses can adopt many forms. One course includes one hour of art, one hour of music, and one hour of physical education. This particular trend has gained traction at the university level and is slowly trickling down to public schools. Just as three university courses are being reduced to one, three public school teaching positions (one for art, one for music, and one for physical education) risk being combined into one position. Integrated approaches can ease the burdens of a public school administrator to cut budget and teacher costs, but they occur at the expense of quality, discipline-specific learning. In straitened economic times, these reductions are even more significant.

Leave your baggage at the door. It is critical for policy and advocacy efforts to carve arts education policy out of a middle ground through discussion, debate, agreement, and compromise. After all, life and education are matters of seeking and finding a working, functional middle ground, both conceptually and philosophically. People who drag their postradical, social reconstructivist ideological and political issues into policy spheres distort the realities of the public school learning environment and further alienate and broaden the gap between policy, research, assessment, and curriculum. Extreme stances tend to polarize issues and groups.

Strive for continuity in leadership. One primary lesson that art educators have learned from their participation in SECAC is that consistent, supportive leadership is extremely important. At times, the structure of large national organizations like the NAEA seems to defeat any long-term substantive policy development. The short two-year terms of the president and board of directors can create a constant state of flux that prioritizes special interests that wax and wane as each new person assumes office. SECAC, on the other hand, has a much smaller and more manageable size, with three-year terms for the president and the president-elect. As a result, fewer organizational levels facilitate more direct communication, and over the past fifteen years, SECAC’s leadership has invited and encouraged policy development for the benefit of visual art education programs, faculty, and the entire membership. It is also important to recognize that SECAC’s membership is overwhelmingly composed of higher education teachers; the numerous divisions often found in larger national organizations do not exist.

Go beyond statements and positions to implement action-oriented policy works. Perhaps the most frustrating component of developing arts education policy is the lack of implementation of functional arts education policy. Discussing policy is a whole different story from putting policy into practice. SECAC’s policy initia-
tives are thus significant because they have actually positively impacted how arts education functions in the states, school districts, and public schools.

Small may be better; local may be more important than national. In September 2008, Ron Jones, a dean at the University of South Florida and the newly elected president of the International Council of Fine Arts Deans (ICFAD) stated that it may not be possible to influence budgetary or regulatory policy on art and arts education because of political obstacles. Jones claimed that change in arts education policy, decisions, and funding can occur more directly through the university, district, or school levels. As Joe Pickens, the former chairman of the Florida education and budgetary committee, said at the meeting, "The best way to influence policy is to get in and be personal with your elected officials." The subtext is that it's not so much what you know or what you want to accomplish, but who you are and who you know. Even if you know your legislator, the most beneficial arts education policy or rules or legislation may not be enacted. As the chairman admits, legislators are not the right people to be making decisions about arts education policy: they do not have the expertise. So how does one bridge the disconnects between access, expertise, and decision making? Starting locally, at the school and district levels, and using some of the policy lessons presented in this paper may well be the most effective strategy for improving and sustaining arts education in our public schools.

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References


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