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## **A Mixed Methods Case Study of Two Successful Arts Integration Efforts Going Beyond Their Program's Standards**

Kate Wheeler

### *Abstract:*

*In this case study for two successful North Carolina (NC) A+ Schools, public End-of-Grade (EOG) data is triangulated with qualitative data from successful NC A+ program school leader interviews. The quantitative findings from NC school report cards compares 37 arts-integration public K-8 schools in North Carolina called "A+ Schools" with 37 traditional public K-8 NC schools, revealing that the majority of NC A+ schools averaged lower EOG scores than the schools in their district in recent years. In this data sample, both A+ Schools and traditional schools' scores in NC had a downward trajectory since 2001. Additional findings included increased arts classes offered at A+ schools and slightly decreased chronic absenteeism compared to traditional public schools. In the analysis of the three interviews: with a NC A+ administrator, with an arts director at an A+ school, and with a principal at an A+ school, challenges to implementation within the NC A+ program are discussed as well as methods of preparation and practice that link these two high-performing schools to four highly acclaimed arts-integrated school programs. Results reveal that a five-part framework for arts-integrated schools is shared between arts integration programs that have increased EOG scores: (1) the use of data-driven planning, (2) garnering funds, (3) collaboration between arts educators, arts specialists and classroom teachers, (4) ongoing professional development (PD), and (5) showcases of student work.*

## **The Problem**

Although the 2019 average End-of-Grade (EOG) score of 58% makes the “A+” schools appear to have an ironic title, there is always a chance for change. When comparing North Carolina (NC) A+ schools to highly successful arts integration school reforms, it became apparent that there are numerous measures that are not being undertaken in the NC A+ schools, measures that may be key to reaching success. In this article, I define success as cases where the schools report EOG averages above 65% or improvements of 15% or more within a 3-year period. Thirty percent of A+ schools and a handful of whole-school arts integration reforms around the US have shown academic score improvement as well as the linked result of whole school student engagement (Birsa, 2018; Snyder et al., 2014; Scripp & Paradis, 2014; Stoelinga, 2015; Walker et al., 2011). In the next section, successful arts integration methods will be compared to methods discussed by successful A+ school leaders and contrasted with the requirements set by the NC A+ program, raising questions about best practices for reaching high standards in arts-integrated schools.

### **What is Arts Integration and What are Examples of Successful Implementation?**

The Kennedy Center, which leads the way in arts integration, describes arts integration as “an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both” (Silverstein & Layne, 2020, paragraph 1). In the current context of education in the United States where the arts are commonly cut or downsized in public schools (Strauss, 2015), a pedagogy that weaves music, visual art, theater and/or dance into academics has met with its fair share of paradigm resistance, especially in the south. However, supporters like myself see huge benefits from this interchange. As a classroom and current visual art teacher, I have seen students embrace learning and soar to higher-level thinking when combining arts with academics. Wolff et al. (2018) states, “Research shows that bringing the arts into the instruction of other classroom subjects benefits students’ academic, cognitive and personal outcomes . . . The challenge is how to best integrate arts learning in ways that support effective teaching and supplement and support other core areas of study” (p. 1). Preparation and infrastructure that support arts-integrated pedagogical school change have traditionally included professional development (PD), teacher collaboration, the employment of arts specialists, funding, and the integration of arts into the curriculum (Davidson, 2009, Duma & Silverstein, 2014; Stoelinga et al., 2015). The methods of successful schools may help provide pathways to success for struggling programs.

### **Positive Relationships Between Arts Integration and EOG Scores**

The following four arts integration programs from regions across the United States are highlighted due to the positive relationship found between increase in Arts Integration practices and EOG scores.

- In fourth-sixth grade classes in Chicago, after four years of implementation, Partnerships in Arts Integration Research (PAIR) supported by the Arts in Education Model Development and Dissemination (AEMDD) grant raised student reading proficiency to 85% compared to the district average of 59% and the achievement gap was lessened 22% compared to 11% in control schools (Scripp & Paradis, 2014).

- After two years of implementation, supported by School Improvement Grants, all eight Turnaround arts integration schools showed growth in either math or reading scores, average ELA proficiency gains were 23%, math proficiency gains 13% (Stoelinga et al., 2015).
- In New Jersey public schools, supported by AEMDD grants, results from drama-integration in grades six and seven English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms showed arts integration to increase the odds of students passing the state assessments by 77% in ELA and 42% in Mathematics (Walker et al., 2011).
- After four years of arts integration implementation at a low performing Maryland public school through the Supporting Arts Integrated Learning for Student Success (SAILSS) model and supported by AEMDD grants, sixth and seventh grade state standardized achievement scores rose 20% and discipline referrals decreased 77% (Snyder et al., 2014).

These programs all utilized the following five aspects:

- Being goal-oriented and data driven to improve scores.
- Reliance on large federal grants.
- Dependence on collaboration between content teachers, arts teachers, and outside arts specialists.
- PD that continued throughout the school year.
- Showcases of student work including exhibits and performances.

### **NC A+ Schools Appear to Have Little in Common with Successful Efforts**

Since its inception in 1995, the NC A+ schools have been encouraged to apply a set of standards during the PD the arts council provides, but have been given free rein to conduct arts integration in individual ways. According to my 2020 interview with a top administrator in the NC A+ schools, the program had a handful of schools that were “inactive” in terms of arts integration, but no requirements or disqualifications were enforced. Encouragement has not always led to fidelity to the suggested framework. The continuation of this free rein approach has not led to success for the majority of A+ schools. However, the actual root causes are likely more complex than can be seen with limited research. The following are the summarized NC A+ schools’ recommended commitments: (1) inclusion of all the arts, (2) collaborative and two-way integration of curriculum, (3) multiple intelligences and 21st century skills, (4) hands-on and arts-based learning, (5) enriched assessment, (6) teacher collaboration, (7) supportive infrastructure, and (8) a positive school climate with a shared vision (NC A+ Schools Network & National A+ Schools Consortium, 2016). I asked myself, how can this list be considered meaningful when no fidelity to their standards is kept? The NC A+ program clearly intends to support student growth in multiple areas. However, their framework is noticeably different from highly successful national programs. For example, the NC A+ Schools do not focus on improving test score results, do not facilitate partnerships between schools and outside artists, do not require collaboration between arts and classroom teachers, do not have PD beyond a summer conference, and student presentations are not included in the commitments list. More

importantly, there has been no fidelity to upholding their proposed framework. With a failing average of 58% in NC A+ schools sampled; it is fair to suggest there is room for improvement.

The following was stated in a publication written by the NC A+ Schools Program in 2014: “The requirements for A+ schools are not uniform, and the approach does not prescribe a specific curriculum, methodology, or process of implementation” (p. 4). The open admittance to their approach which lacks an approach may indicate a cultural acceptance of this type of attitude. After paying for the PD and the inclusion on the A+ schools directory, the methods are left up to the school. The cost is \$60,000 on a sliding scale, which provides three yearly 3-day summer PD teacher trainings (or less if the school desires), a list of “fellows” who can be contacted for assistance with implementation, and the list of commitments found on their website (NC A+ Schools Network & National A+ Schools Consortium, 2016). Administrator Jones (name changed for anonymity) stated that she believes schools should never be disqualified because they might “get engaged” again when a new principal comes on board. Below, the percentage of low EOG scores, minimal demonstration of higher engagement through chronic absenteeism percentages, and lower scores associated with higher numbers of arts offered provide evidence of limited success in the NC A+ schools with the methods used by their organization over the past 25 years.

### **Aiming to Increase Both Arts *and* Academic Performance**

Reports in the past decade have focused overly much on the positive *social and emotional* results from arts integration, (Anderson & Valero, 2020; Caracciolo et al., 2017; Ingraham & Nuttall, 2016; Robinson, 2012), the NC A+ program has stressed this *affective* impact on their students, thus ignoring the *co-equal* approach which facilitates simultaneous implementation of arts *and* academic objectives to bring out benefits in student expression through arts *and* student academic performance (Bresler, 1995, as cited in Robinson, 2012). Highly successful arts integration schools have been *defined* by the co-equal model in multiple reports and studies (Birsa, 2018; Snyder et al., 2014; Scripp & Paradis, 2014; Stoelinga, 2015; Walker et al., 2011). After conducting research into two successful case studies in NC and analyzing quantitative data from the field, I have come to the conclusion that failing arts-integration programs may experience untold benefits by following in the frameworks set forward by successful arts integration school systems.

#### **Research Questions**

- How effective has NC’s A+ program been over time compared to district schools at increasing EOG scores, number of arts, and decreasing chronic absenteeism?
- What are common frameworks of successful arts integration schools and how do they compare to those of the A+ schools in NC?

#### **Results of Research**

##### ***Qualitative Research Methods***

After going through the approval process for research with the Institutional Review Board (IRB), interviews were conducted with three leaders in the A+ field in NC who had at least 10 years of experience in Arts Integration leadership and association with a school or

schools that reported EOG averages above 65% or improvements of 15% or more within a 3-year period, within the last 5 years. The questions posed were designed to uncover the methods and planning used that made up the framework of arts integration implementation at the associated successful schools or organization.

**Table 1**  
*Interviewee Data*

<b>Title</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Years in Position</b>	<b>Degree Earned</b>	<b>Race</b>
NC A+ Schools Administrator	Jones	25	Bachelors	White
Arts Director of A+ elementary school "1"	Holly	18	Bachelors	White
Principal of A+ Elementary school "2"	Julian	10	Masters	White

**Table 2**  
*Interviewee and Quantitative School Data*

<b>School Name</b>	<b>Student Population</b>	<b>Economically Disadvantaged</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>2019 EOG Average</b>
37 A+ schools (NC)	150-600	57% (average)	Urban/Rural/Suburban	58%
37 Corresponding District schools (NC)	150-600	58% (average)	Urban/Rural/Suburban	63%
A+ School 1	529	10%	Urban/Suburban	76%
A+ School 2	160	53%	Rural	72%

***Quantitative Research Methods***

All NC A+ program schools were included in the sample except for those that were found to be inactive or that commenced programming in 2017-2021. The district within which each A+ school resided was included in the data sample resulting in 37 A+ schools and 37 districts. EOG scores for A+ schools and corresponding districts were collected by averaging the Math, English Language Arts and Science proficiency scores for the EOG tests for each school or district without the inclusion of School Academic Growth. Scores were collected from three dates (1) The score at commencement of the A+ program; (2) five years after; and (3) 2019. Since 15 A+ schools joined the program in the 90's before publicly available scores were published online, score 1 for those 15 schools (out of 37 schools) was taken from the earliest date available, which

was 2001 (NCDPI, 2001). Additionally, for the six schools that joined the A+ program in 2014 and 2015, Score 1 and 2 were two years rather than five years.

Number of arts, chronic absenteeism and economically disadvantaged (ED) school percentages were collected from 37 A+ schools and 37 corresponding districts using the NC Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI)'s online database (NCDPI, 2019). Number of arts refers to the music, visual art, theater, and/or dance classes the school provided during that year. This count was included to further observe differences between arts integrated and corresponding district schools, as well as the relationship between number of arts and proficiency. Because chronic absenteeism rates are related to disengagement in school, they were collected to find indications of student engagement levels. Chronic absenteeism represents the percentage of students that were absent for 10% or more of all school days during that year. ED rates were collected to perceive a clearer picture of each school and district. Descriptive statistics tests were run for mean and standard deviation of EOG scores, number of arts offered at the school, percentage of chronic absenteeism, and ED for both groups. A Pearson Correlation test was run comparing A+ schools achievement scores in 2019 with years in A+ programming to measure the bivariate relationship between time in A+ and achievement scores. A one-way Anova test was additionally run to show the relation between the number of arts in A+ schools and proficiency scores.

### ***Limitations of the Study***

This study is limited in its scope and breadth. It did not include alternative arts integration programs such as STEAM that would have provided further qualitative comparative analysis. A longer time frame and a wider net of score trajectory or specific case studies would have brought further clarity to the picture of arts integration. Qualitative evidence was only gathered from school leaders, rather than teachers, parents, or students.

## **Research Findings**

### ***Quantitative Results***

A+ schools did worse overall than their district counterparts. 70% of A+ schools in 2019 had EOG score averages lower than 65%, with an average score of 58%. More than half (62%) of corresponding district schools also had score averages in 2019 lower than 65%, with an average of 63%. Scores ranged widely for A+ schools: from 22%-83%. A statistically insignificant positive relationship was found between years of time in A+ and growth of proficiency scores [ $p$ ]= .25 ( $r$ )=.20]. The top five scoring A+ schools in the sample scored between 76% and 83%.

**Table 3**  
*Top Five A+ Schools*

<b>A+ School</b>	<u>Score 1</u>	<u>Score 2</u>	<u>Score 3 (2019)</u>
District Name			
<b>Cranberry Middle</b>	92	69	<b>83</b>
Avery County	85	64	71
<b>Saluda</b>	94	92	<b>82</b>
Polk County	91	89	80
<b>Avery Middle</b>	87	59	77
Avery County	90	64	71
<b>White Oak</b>	91	87	<b>76</b>
Carteret County	87	76	76
<b>The Arts Based School</b>	73	71	<b>76</b>
Winston-Salem/Forsyth	86	76	61

**Table 4**  
*A+/Corresponding Districts Proficiency Score and Absenteeism Averages*

<u>Schools/District</u>	<u>Chronic Absenteeism</u>	<u>Score 1</u>	<u>Score 2</u>	<u>Score 3</u>
A+ schools	.16	71%	65%	58%
Districts	.17	75%	68%	63%

A+ schools overall averaged lower in EOG (proficiency) scores compared to their districts in each instance studied. Score 1 represents the commencement of arts integration, score 2 was taken about five years later, and score 3 came from the most recent scores available in 2019. On average, the A+ schools' most recent EOG scores were failing. Although this points to a failure for A+ schools, the quantity of poor results does not discredit the small number of good results. 30% of A+ schools had average EOG scores of 65% or higher and the highest A+ score (83%) was very impressive, and higher than their district, giving strong indication that the A+ school



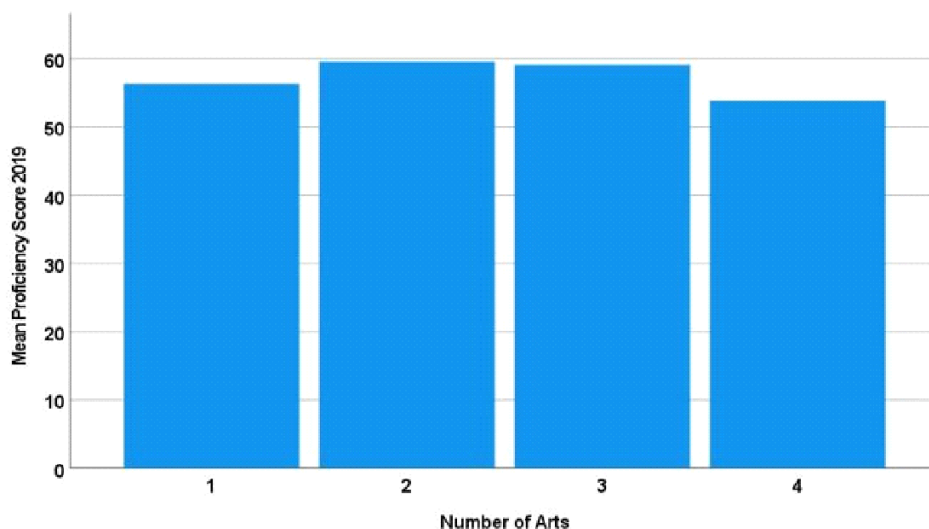
program *is not a complete failure*. The wide variability in A+ scores compared to district scores, however, may indicate a wide variety of *methods being used* at A+ schools which do not always support success.

### ***Number of Arts***

A+ schools had, on average, higher numbers of arts educators at their schools. This may be a good sign for the A+ program because it indicates there has been some effort to meet the standards of their framework, which states that students’ education will be “inclusive of drama, dance, music, visual arts and creative writing” (NC A+ Schools Network & National A+ Schools Consortium, 2016). However, increasing arts opportunities did not correlate with an increase of EOG scores. (Figure 1)

**Figure 1**

*2019 Average Score at A+ Schools with 1, 2, 3, and 4 Arts*



The lower average score associated with higher numbers of arts offerings gives indication that some aspects of proper implementation may not have been put into place, such as enough materials and space, enough PD in helping facilitate arts integration, and/or enough planning time for teachers of the arts to collaborate with the classroom teachers. It was observed that only 21.62% of A+ schools had four arts (visual art, music, dance, and theater). This amount, however, represents more arts educators on average than district schools, (0% of districts sampled had four arts). About half of A+ schools (48.7%) only offered two arts (music and visual art). What could all this mean? In schools that did not have the support of all the arts specialists, it is possible that the A+ schools were limited in their approach. Additionally, if the arts educators were not certified and/or not highly skilled in collaborating with classroom teachers, then the staff in place may not have been of much support to the school-wide reform. The lower proficiency scores at A+ schools despite the higher number of arts reveals that implementation of arts integration was not successful in terms of academic growth. Some A+ schools with four arts were on the lowest end of EOG performance displayed in data from 2019 (Mineral Springs Arts: 42% and Leadership Magnet Middle: 42%). This is contradicted by

research conducted by numerous educational organizations, which report that higher student academic success results from increased arts experiences (Arts Education Partnership, 2021; Ludwig et al., 2017; National Urban Alliance, n.d.).

### ***Chronic Absenteeism***

The positive bivariate relationship between chronic absenteeism and 2019 scores ( $r = .171$ ) at A+ schools implied *slightly* higher student engagement due to arts integration as demonstrated in other studies (Stoelinga, 2015; Ludwig et al., 2017). If arts integration methods can be pinpointed that further lower the chronic absenteeism at A+ schools, EOG scores may rise proportionally (Birsá, 2018; Snyder et al., 2014; Scripp & Paradis, 2014; Stoelinga, 2015; Walker et al., 2011).

### **Qualitative Findings**

The interviews brought to light some of the challenges A+ schools have faced, the methods that have brought success in some NC A+ schools and the similarity between the successful school leaders' schools and various national successful programs. Both A+ school leaders stated specific problems that required their constant attention including (1) raising money; (2) garnering arts specialists; and (3) maintaining the fidelity of set standards by implementing requirements. When asked what it takes to achieve successful arts integration, Julian shared that "You have to have money" (personal communication, October 2, 2020). Holly (name changed for anonymity) echoed this sentiment, stating "Charter schools don't get any bond money or lottery money, so you can understand, we have a lot to raise" (personal communication, October 20, 2020). She stated that their capital campaign was one of the main reasons her school had success, as well as the addition of her own role as arts director. Julian (name changed for anonymity) described the challenge of including all the arts with only one arts educator who taught both music and art, "I try to bring black box [local arts programming] in to do that, the dance and movement piece, or I'll try to do the theater, you know, do a theater club or do something after school for theater to kind of supplement, so they're getting all [arts] areas" (personal communication, October 2, 2020). Another difficulty this principal cited was the lack of support throughout the school year to help the teachers implement arts integration. The A+ program has about 50 "liaisons" who are supposed to be available to answer questions and even do school visits. However, Julian, a liaison himself, discussed how they were not always available, not to mention "it varies in their expertise and their knowledge, and their skill set" (personal communication October 2, 2020). One major difference between A+ school 2 and A+ school 1 became evident when I asked Holly, "What is the main strategy you can't do without to make arts integration work in [school name]?" She responded, "It requires cooperation and collaboration" (personal communication, October 20, 2021), a focus absent from Julian's discussion of his school as of Fall 2020. Holly shared specific tactics for collaboration including sharing pacing guides and scheduling classroom teacher participation in the arts classes (personal communication, October 20, 2020). From the administrative perspective, Jones described how collaboration was expected and *encouraged* in A+ schools. Encouragement may need to be backed up with consequences, both positive *and* negative, for greater results.

### ***Defining Arts Integration Success***

Although scores were high at Holly and Julian's schools, both school leaders highlighted student engagement over score achievement results. However, the connections between

engagement and academics *were* made. For example, arts director Holly (personal communication, October 20, 2020) shared multiple statements about how arts integration “makes students love learning,” as did Julian and Jones. The A+ administrator, Jones, described the social and emotional aspects of Julian’s school, “I would say they're really strong in the climate essential, really just making it a place where people just want to be” (personal communication, September 29, 2020). Increase in student self-esteem and self-efficacy through arts integration has been documented to directly promote the effort students put into their work and likewise their academic performance (Robinson, 2012). Holly similarly described the value of arts integration in how “it supports a powerful sense of identity, resiliency, belonging, and self-confidence in students (personal communication, October 20th, 2020).

A positive climate has been understood for a long time to be central to arts integration that is done well (Bentz, 2020; Bernard, 2010) and research has linked arts integration methods that boost student self-esteem and self-efficacy *with positive academic effects* (Durham, 2010; Robinson, 2012). The methods described by Holly facilitated academic success *as well* as social and emotional gains, and largely mirrored the framework from the four successful national arts integration programs. The methods of A+ school 1 are highlighted below because the school scored in the top five of A+ schools studied in 2019. Holly described the following key aspects of A+ school 1’s framework (1) budgeting -garnering funds; (2) Data-driven -with requirements; (3) Teaching artists -bringing outside experiences to students; (4) PD -continued throughout the school year; (5) Showcases -required weekly to be presented to families and/or the public. To further elaborate on the above list, PD at A+ School 1 included *embedding arts into the core curriculum, planning student showcase events, collaborative planning, observing other teachers’ methods* and *raising money*. The framework used by A+ school 1 went beyond the A+ School’s list of recommendations and had many parallels to the four highly acclaimed national arts integration programs discussed earlier in the article. Julian, whose school was eighth in the top 10 NC A+ schools, discussed similar framework topics in terms of requiring arts-integrated aspects in the curriculum, yearly PD, and *applying for grants* to support costs. He discussed how requirements such as documented arts integrated lessons throughout the year were necessary for classroom teachers and teachers of the arts to keep arts integration in their minds. Jones stated an important step taken at the outset of joining the A+ schools, “85% of their certified staff has to be in agreement that A+ is a good fit for the school” (personal communication, September 29, 2020). However, the complexities of promoting a new pedagogy can still prove extremely difficult and can become affected by a high staff turn-over rate. Julian stated that, “I think the driving force is leadership” (personal communication, October 2, 2020).

### ***Correlations Between Successful NC A+ Schools***

According to the information shared by both school leaders, a co-equal academic and arts-focused approach to arts integration was an important part of their program's success, strengthened by a framework upheld by leadership, which Jones also described as key to their approach. In this co-equal approach, arts teachers and classroom teachers worked together on planning and integrating curriculum in a way that guided students to use higher-level thinking skills in both the arts and the academic content (Bresler, 1995, as cited in Robinson, 2012). The inclusion of higher level, critical thinking within arts integrated lessons may be key to increasing academic performance. Holly stated that her schools’ method “develops real-world problem-solving skills in students” (personal communication, October 20, 2020), a point left unmentioned by Julian. Another difference between Holly and Julian’s schools was noticeable in

Julian's discussion of visiting arts events, but no events to celebrate the children's arts-integrated work, which were discussed at length by Holly.

It is hard to pinpoint exactly how these additions to the A+ essentials may have increased student engagement and likewise schools' scores. Both A+ school 1 and 2 had students participate in viewing arts showcases, which may have increased learning engagement and been a key cause of academic success. Why the A+ program's commitments do not include a commitment to student showcases or a commitment to bringing in outside arts specialists is surprising when considering the performing/exhibiting section of the National Standards for the Arts (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014). Arts teachers from within the school are touted as integral, but the A+ program offers no special training for arts teachers within A+ schools to prepare them to take such a leadership role within their schools, and as earlier noted, the increase of arts educators in the 37-school sample did not correlate with increased EOG scores at A+ schools. In comparing A+ school 1 and 2, however, it is key to take note of the greatly reduced economically disadvantaged student population at A+ school 1 (10% compared to 53%) as well as the addition of an arts director and funds for materials from their yearly capital campaign. More research is necessary to uncover all the factors involved and the intersectionality of effects resulting from divergent and parallel factors.

### ***Linking Arts Integration to High Achievement***

The NC A+ program has not stressed the importance of academic achievement or methods, and it has made public only the rare academically successful stories. In an effort likely to explain away the poor EOG achievement in most of their schools, the council for the arts has stated, "Success and quality at A+ schools is measured far beyond the measures of test scores" (A+ Schools Program of the NC Arts Council, 2014, p. 36). This redefinition of success turns a blind eye to the academically failing students and the *diminished opportunities for their future*. Do many schools join the A+ network just for fun? Perhaps some schools join the A+ network to fulfill PD suggestions from the state? There are many questions left to be answered. As has been stated by other researchers passionate about high quality arts integration, if not implemented beyond standard approaches, then their "school-wide reform" is largely meaningless, fluff (Bresler, 1995, as cited in Robinson, 2012). Holly described successful arts integration this way, "Measurement needs to be how do you get them engaged in learning goals which you have determined to deliver. Not that they are just happy" (Personal communication, October 20, 2020).

Arts integration aligns with recent educational initiatives to increase student achievement through developing social emotional skills, which have been shown to be effective at closing the achievement gap (West Ed, 2019). Like findings of researchers in the field, (Biscoe & Wilson, 2015; Stevenson & Deasy, 2005), this study's findings on lowered chronic absenteeism at A+ schools indicates that arts integration promotes student engagement in the affective domain. The success of 30% of A+ schools demonstrates that A+ schools *have* demonstrated some success, despite numerous instances of 50% or higher economically disadvantaged populations. Some frameworks, such as the ones utilized at the schools of those interviewed, have been providing pathways to success. Further research is needed to clarify specific frameworks for effective arts integration.

It is my hope that this study will be a wake-up call for teachers, stakeholders and researchers involved in arts integration because of the study's critical look at low results and low expectations within the program in NC. Organizations may take the ideas and make them their

own as they teach, research, or create educational policies for the greater benefit of students in NC and elsewhere.

Top-achieving A+ school leaders took it into their own hands to create highly structured frameworks that painted a new picture of arts integration that included higher standards. Their individual implementation plans, if researched, could provide examples for those leading Arts Integration programs. If a well-researched arts-integration framework is implemented with fidelity and enough funding, the power A+ schools have to inspire learning will likely expand. For example, as discussed earlier, arts-integrated schools may need help finding grants or ways to fundraise for special projects, may need help inspiring teacher buy-in, scheduling collaborative work-periods, or intermittent workshops (Lajevic, 2013; Wolff et al., 2018). Additionally, there is much argument to suggest that the co-equal approach may be the best approach to take in arts integration, where students are taught to use higher order thinking skills in relation to both arts *and* core subjects (Bresler, 1995, as cited in Robinson, 2012).

### ***Rising to The Challenge***

Successful arts integration that raises student proficiency scores can be seen as an Everest for some in the field. Indeed, raising student academic scores through *any* means, let alone arts integration, is seen by many educators as a difficult task. However, pairing the arts with academic learning has been shown to exponentially support the focus on learning and in many cases the scores are there to prove it. For a long time, people thought climbing Mount Everest was unattainable. Once one person climbed it, however, that one person proved it was climbable and 4,000 have successfully reached its summit. It is true that the A+ schools have shown a predominate lack of ability to attain this “Everest.” However, the documented successes of arts integration around the country and in the top-ranking arts-integrated schools in NC demonstrate the achievability of academic success through arts integration. An affective or socially based method of arts integration is not all we can offer our students at arts integration schools. It is in our power to help schools achieve a higher peak of educational possibility, so let us rise, standing on the shoulders of giants.

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