

Arts in Education:

Discovering Our Full Humanity

*Where self-discipline and self-expression
flower into self-knowledge*

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IN THE ART THAT WE CALL EDUCATION, WHAT ROLES DO THE VISUAL ARTS AND PERFORMING ARTS PLAY? MUSIC AND DANCE, PAINTING AND SCULPTING, COMEDY AND DRAMA, POETRY AND PHOTOGRAPHY: ARE THEY MERELY NICE ADD-ONS TO THE CURRICULUM, OR MIGHT THEY BE, IN UNEXPECTED WAYS, AT THE HEART OF A LASALLIAN EDUCATION?

Open the newspaper and you're apt to read, once again, about your local public school district cutting arts programs. The chorus, the band, the painting class, the dance class, the literary magazine: These "extras" seem to be the first things dropped when funds get tight.

Tight funds, of course, are a way of life for private, Catholic schools, which need to apply every dollar of their budgets to maximum effect. Yet in the schools of the San Francisco District the arts are blooming, booming, zooming—

literary artists, choose your own metaphor. "I've been in lots of different schools," says Greg Kopra, Associate Coordinator for Lasallian School Programs, "and it is striking that in our District the arts are as fully a part of school life as any of the athletic or academic activities. We have strong arts programs, and they're getting stronger all the time."

Brother Christopher Brady, FSC, principal of De La Salle High in Concord, agrees: "We just opened a new music building this spring, which is a wonderful addition to our



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arts facilities. Why are the arts a priority for us, not just as extra-curricular activities but as part of the curriculum? Because the more arts opportunities we provide, the more students can discover gifts and talents they were not aware of before.” Richard Gray, president of La Salle High in Pasadena, says, “Experience has taught me that the arts in high school are crucial, for at least three reasons. First, a school can’t truly be college-preparatory unless it helps to foster in students an aesthetic appreciation for life.

Second, if we don’t provide opportunities for arts, we will miss meeting the needs of many students who have a particular focus on kinesthetic learning.



The Saint Mary’s College Dance Company performs “Revised Dido, Clever Queen,” a re-telling of the story of Dido and Aeneas, choreographed by Cathy Davalos, assistant professor of performing arts.

Top left: Student dancers at Saint Mary’s College High School, Berkeley



“When you incorporate the arts into your curriculum you make for better learning, because the arts engage so many aspects of the full human being. They require both orderly thinking and intuitive thinking, both brainwork and physical work. The way arts tap into our intuitive minds is particularly important for what we say we’re all about—which is human and Christian education.”

—Ernie Casciato, Arts Department Chair,
La Salle High School, Milwaukie

Student production of “Man of La Mancha”—La Salle High School, Milwaukie, Oregon

Third, the arts humanize a school—they remind us to be in the present moment, to stop and smell the roses.” Gray says that among La Salle Pasadena’s goals is doubling the size of its arts facilities.

The newest school in the District, De Marillac Middle School in San Francisco, has instrumental music lessons built into its curriculum because, says Sister Lucia Lam Nguyen, “There are times in our lives when words are not really the best form of communication. Music allows the students to express what is going on in their hearts.” Ernie Casciato, chair of the arts department at La Salle High in Milwaukie and an alumnus of the school, has taught there for 27 years: “Experience tells us, and studies confirm, that when you incorporate the arts into your curriculum you make for better learning, because the arts engage so many aspects of the full human being. They require both

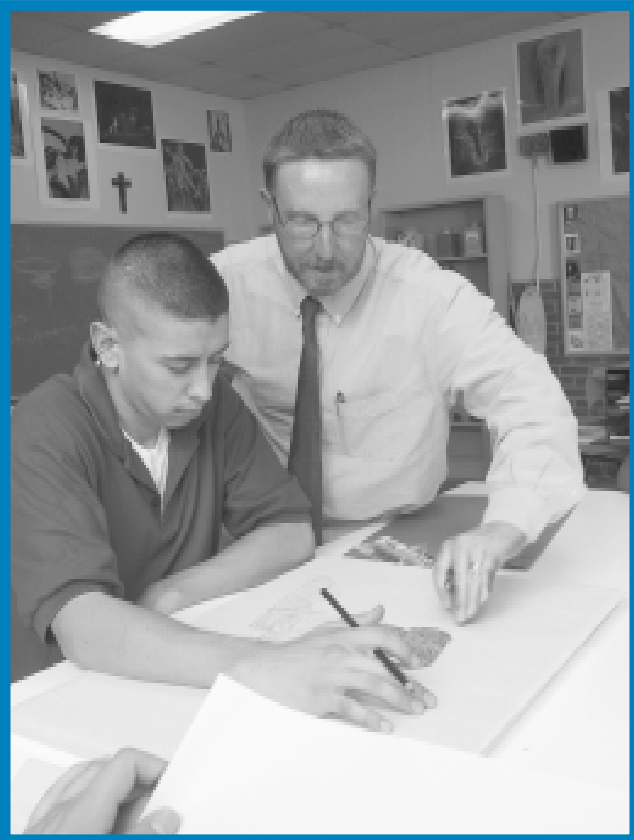


orderly thinking and intuitive thinking, both brainwork and physical work, whether it’s moving the body or playing an instrument or manipulating clay or paint. The way the arts tap into our intuitive minds is particularly important for what we say we’re all about—which is a human and Christian education, because that intuitive part is where the spirit moves and prayer happens. A Catholic Christian school without a strong arts program is missing out.”

No less an authority than Pope John Paul II—an actor, playwright, and poet as well as a priest—might agree. In his widely acclaimed “Letter to Artists”



Christian Brothers High School students prepare to film a news broadcast in the Sacramento school’s new television studio, KBFT, which opened in 2002.



Art class, Cathedral High School, Los Angeles

of 1999 he declared, “Every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of man and of the world. It is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith, which gives human experience its ultimate meaning.”

Diane Green, director of dance at Saint Mary’s College High School in Berkeley, is also convinced of the spiritual value of the arts: “Dance is a spiritual exercise, as it develops skills that are not just physical but are emotional, mental, and spiritual. For dancing you must first be grounded and centered. The same is true for praying and for living. In dance training you can learn to be aware of yourself, to take care of yourself, to move with a positive attitude. These are not just performing skills but also life skills. What the arts can do for students is to create a place where students can learn to know themselves, because the arts teach both how to discipline yourself and how to express yourself.”

It has also been observed that it is not only students who can learn much from the practice of the arts in schools, but also teachers. Studies recently collected in a book titled *The Arts: Critical Links to Student Success* suggest that the arts can help to make teachers more aware of students’ abilities, giving them fresh insights into who students are and what they can do. The arts thus give one way of fulfilling John Baptist de La Salle’s charge to teachers that they should understand their students deeply.

Joe Walsh, chair of the arts department at Cathedral High in Los Angeles, says, “Reading Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is one thing. But assign a 13- or 14-year-old boy to speak Romeo’s monologue in the balcony scene and you’ll hear groans, and you know they’re anxious. But two weeks later they are thrilled to be Romeo for a minute and a half. You get to know them as they get to try something brand new and kind of liberating.”

It is not just in the San Francisco District that trustees and parents and alumni and benefactors are working hard to support and expand the arts. So are their counterparts in Lasallian schools across the nation. This year’s Huether Workshop—an annual conference involving faculty, students, and administrators from the whole United States / Toronto Region—is devoted to the arts in education. Brother John Johnston, FSC, Director of Education for the region, states explicitly the consensus animating the Huether Workshop 2002: “It is our conviction that [the arts] are essential components of authentic Lasallian education—whatever the age, academic level, ethnic heritage, or socioeconomic situation of our students, and whatever the nature and



“We believe that Visual and Performing Arts teaching is both an art and a skill which invites students to grow in awareness of their surroundings and their relationships to those surroundings and to one another.”

“We believe arts education gives students a working knowledge of tools and techniques employed in many mediums which then allow students to develop their own creative gifts in a continuum from theory to practice.”

“We believe arts education encompasses autonomy and teamwork as students work on their individual skills and their contributions to the larger community of learners as well.”

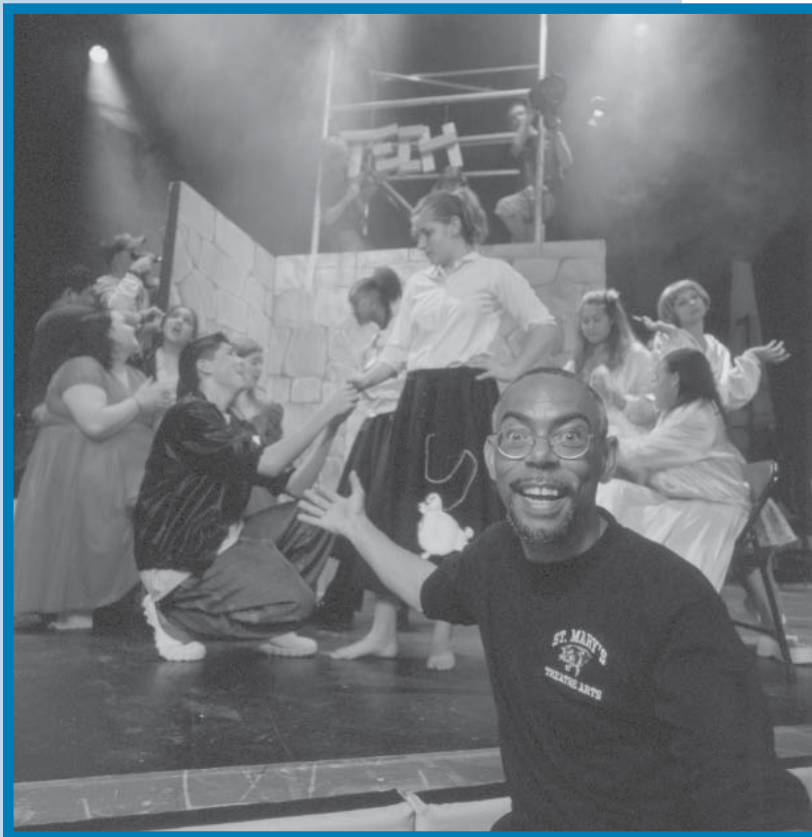
—From the mission statement of the Visual and Performing Arts Department, De La Salle High School, Concord

level of the educational institution at their service.”

Joe Walsh agrees, observing that schools must realize that “It’s not the person, it’s the program. The structure must be in place so that the vitality of a school’s arts program remains despite the inevitable changes of personnel. To my mind, one of the best effects of a commitment to the arts in a school is how the arts help to build community. Among students putting on a concert or an art exhibit or a play, a wonderful temporary community emerges. And the arts can bring together students—say, freshmen and seniors—who might not meet ordinarily meet in the course of a school day.”

A good instance of that is senior David Seitz of Saint Mary’s College High in Berkeley. His performing arts work this year includes acting as a teaching assistant for a sophomore performing arts class. David was on tech crew his first two years and has been an actor as a junior and senior. He says, “My theatre arts work is the highlight of my day. But I’m really a writer, and my theatre experience has been really good for my writing. It has helped me to see people speaking the writing as I write it.”

JUSTIN-SIENA PERFORMING ARTS
presents
Guys & Dolls
a musical fable
of Broadway



Performing Arts Chair Antone Olivier directs the Saint Mary’s High, Berkeley, cast of “Grease” in a 2001 production.

Saint Mary’s High sophomore Zakiya Mackey has arts bursting out of her in every direction.

“Dance and movement I love, I’ve been doing dance since I was three. And I love

poetry: It’s for my frustration and sadness, I put it down, I get it out. It’s always been a personal thing, but last year my freshman English teacher, Ms. Claman, read my poetry and



“Sing Noel” —one of several cd’s produced by the Sacred Heart Cathedral Prep Chorus, San Francisco.

helped me learn how to go deeper with it. And acting—I find that when you have to portray a different character, you get to know more about who you are.” Zakiya is an assistant director for the fall play this year, and hopes to sing in the chorus next year.

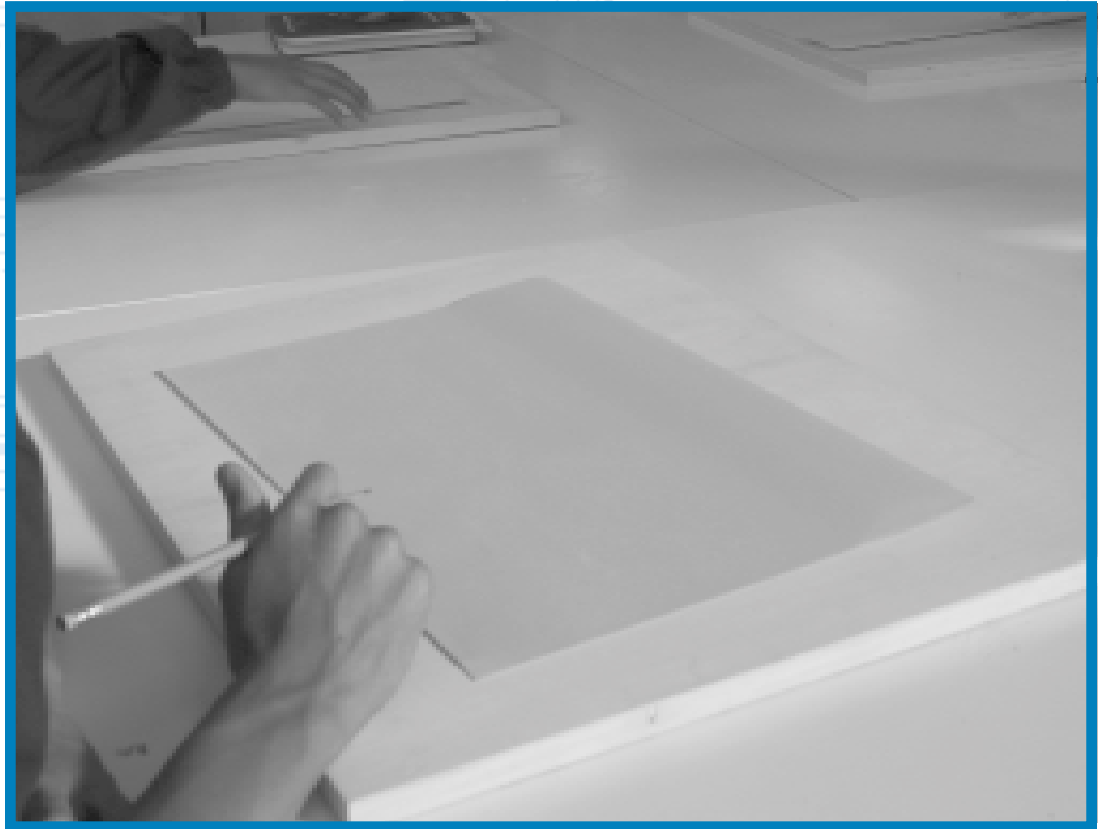
Asked if he can imagine his high school experience without the arts, David shakes his head decisively. “Going to public schools I experienced the scarcity of arts and when I came here it was stunning, the difference. I wouldn’t go to a high school without a commitment to the arts.”

There is a sense in which all of us have a vocation as artists, even if we are not professional practitioners of the visual or performing arts. “Not all are called to be artists in the specific sense of the term,” says John Paul II’s *Letter to Artists*. “Yet, as Genesis has it, all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece.”

That is the ultimate work of art toward which all the arts in Lasallian education are directed. ■

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Underlay: “The Word Is Inside You,” a setting of De La Salle’s words, “Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God,” composed by Professor Martin Rokeach, Saint Mary’s College of California.