

Art as the Heart of the School, Canyon Crest Academy: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT. Canyon Crest Academy (CCA) opened its doors in August of 2004; a brand new public high school shaped around the vision of creating an environment where art is a core focus of the curriculum. Offerings in the field of art would include the following disciplines: Painting, Sculpture, Theater, Music – including instrumental music, orchestra, jazz and choral, Digital Art, Dance and Film. Even core ‘academic’ courses would intertwine with the arts through interdisciplinary projects and lessons and technology was infused throughout. All of this was despite the fact that the State of California and the US Federal Education Department were not emphasizing arts education in any shape or form. And especially emphasizing ‘core’ subject areas like math and science due to the famous legislation around “No Child Left Behind.” By the time that CCA matriculated its first graduating class in June 2008, it had exceptional achievements on its resume: the highest College Board Advanced Placement exam passing results in the district and exceptional results on California standardized content exams; 99% of the students were finishing high school on time, well above the State and national average; recognition as one the top 200 schools in the United States by Newsweek Magazine. This is the school of the future and this article considers the development of this institution in the form of a case study by a former administrative staff member.

Keywords: Arts education, arts, Academic performance, California public school, No Child Left Behind, standardized exams

Canyon Crest Academy (CCA) opened its doors in August of 2004; a brand new public high school shaped around the vision of creating an environment where art is a core focus of the curriculum. Located in a residential suburb of San Diego, California, Canyon Crest Academy began its life as a unique school.

It was a vision and a dream – to structure a school where students could be exposed to a whole range of art offerings, a teaching staff of recognized artists, and an attitude that art is the common curricular theme that binds everything together. Offerings in the field of art would include the following disciplines: Painting, Sculpture, Theater, Music – including instrumental music, orchestra, jazz and choral, Digital Art, Dance and Film. Even academic courses would intertwine with the arts through interdisciplinary projects and lessons; technology was infused throughout.

But let’s place this dream into the context of American education, currently guided by the principles, standards and expectations of the famous law, “No Child Left Behind.” (NCLB.)

The premise behind NCLB is a lofty one – increase the results of American schools so that the US could not only increase its ranking in world education comparisons, but also create a nation of highly educated individuals who are prepared for post-secondary options and a world where knowledge is currency. (*No Child Left Behind Act*, 2011)

To achieve this, NCLB gave birth to a variety of initiatives, directing each state in the US to develop a set of standards (or curricular expectations and outcomes which each teacher will follow.) This was quite a change in practice – before, teachers selected what they would like to teach either based on their textbook (which had varied qualities and content), the guidelines of their local governing bodies, or their personal interests and preferences. Consequently, a student in San Francisco may spend four weeks on the causes of World War I in a Social Science course, while a student in San Diego may spend only one day on the same topic.

NCLB was going to change this: instead, everyone would have certain core curricular standards that had to be addressed. And in addition, the success of addressing these standards, and the increased educational effects, would be measured through a series of required standardized exams. The results of these exams would rate students, programs, and schools. Each school would receive a numerical ranking score – this ranking is referred to as Academic Performance Index (API.)

But NCLB was written by legislators who were themselves products of the American education system of the Cold War Era – a system where the emphasis was placed on Math, Science, History and Language Arts (specifically English.) So NCLB encouraged the development of curricular standards and guidelines that spell out learning outcomes and expected content to be covered for Mathematics, Sciences (separated at the secondary level into Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Earth Sciences,) Social Science or History (separated at the secondary level into U.S. History and World History), and English.

Over the last fifteen years, curricular guides were also developed for World Languages, Physical Education, and Arts Education. But, where NCLB spends its focus is the testing and the results – and testing is only done for Math, Science, History and English. So naturally, schools that are concerned about their rankings, schools that are worried about performance, place all their focus, effort and resources into improving those four core curricular areas. This leaves arts education in the cold... in fact, arts and world languages are not even referred to as ‘core’ subjects but ‘elective.’

In California, a boost to arts education came in the University of California (UC) system requirements – in 2003, the UC system made it a requirement for admission that students must have one course of fine or performing arts on their high school transcripts. (*Visual and Performing Arts*, 2011) This requirement has saved arts programs in California. In 2010 – when education budgets were on the chopping block, arts programs could not be cut at the secondary level because of this. (A marked contrast to the mid 1990’s: when budgets were cut then, arts programs were the first to go.) So why open a school that is built around arts education? Why develop interdisciplinary curriculum around arts if a school’s prestige and performance ranking is found elsewhere?

It was a very serious commitment by the founders of CCA to establish an environment that is not just about politics and performance, but the actual students. Remember those? Not all students are strong in Physics or Calculus. What if you had a school where students wanted to attend every day because they get to sing, dance, act, draw, design or sculpt? How would that affect the other areas of a school’s success?

A clear vision and mission was developed that placed arts education as the center of the school. A team of curricular and school culture experts was brought in to structure the school – including myself. With gutsy support from our local governing body, we were given the opportunity to require new teachers to sign an agreement that they would approach learning and education from an interdisciplinary mindset. We developed a school schedule that gave maximum opportunity for students to participate in and enroll in ‘elective’ courses.

Critical to the success of the philosophy of the school was the right organizational culture among both the staff and students. This school culture was installed around the principles of creativity: focus was on reflection, creation, application, and design. Even in a history or math class, the question was always about reflecting and process, not product. In English classes the students act out the plays that they are reading in full costume, and in the Advanced Placement European History class, the students spend time in art museums to learn to understand the role of art in political propaganda.

Staff meetings and professional development events very consciously harnessed the energy around reflection and creativity - tools were developed by our team to guide teachers in a reflective process using the all important standardized test results. These tools asked the staff to reflect, without fear or pressure of evaluation, and constantly be in a mode of setting new learning goals – for themselves and their students. In the same way that an artist would constantly want to evolve, the staff is encouraged to constantly grow and not fall into a rut of using the same materials or approaches term after term.

Canyon Crest Academy opened its doors in 2004 with only 200 students whose parents were willing to take the gamble that their children would receive an education at this new school that would still prepare them for university. (*CCA School Profile*, 2011)

By the time that CCA matriculated its first graduating class in June 2008, it had 1700 students and exceptional achievements on its resume: the theater department runs multiple show formats every term and the vocal program sings *Carmina Burana*; students were receiving awards for the digital art that they created using the newest industry standard in technology; the digital music recording studio that was on campus appeared on the evening news; Apple computers was sending scouts to meet with the students in the Computer Science course (some of whom had already sold software and coding to major companies); the robotics design team was a top competitor against high school teams from China and Japan. (Saavedra, 2006) And *ALSO*, CCA received the highest College Board Advanced Placement exam passing results in the local area (*AP Report to the Nation*, 2007) and exceptional results on California standardized content exams. 99% of the students were finishing high school on time, well above the State and national average.

Canyon Crest's API rose from an API of 843 the first year that the school had students at each grade level, 2008, to an API of 868 in 2009, and 894 in 2010, and 910 in 2011. It currently has the highest API of any comprehensive high school in San Diego County, and one of the top of the State. (Department of Education, 2011) An API point growth like this is almost unheard of in California where the average school sees one or two points of growth per year.

In the spring of 2011, CCA was recognized as one of the top 200 schools in the United States by Newsweek Magazine for the second year in a row. (*America's Best High Schools*, 2011) 95% of the students matriculating were going on to four-year universities and CCA produced more National Merit Scholars based on the famous SAT exam results, than any of its neighboring schools each year. There is a waiting list to attend the school. (*CCA School Profile*, 2011)

This is the school of the future.

And why is that? Because at Canyon Crest Academy the focus and the school culture is on the arts -and as a by-product, everything else flourishes. The student musicians are phenomenal performers and are composing their own music, because they are also seeing the application of music in mathematics. So they take the most advanced Calculus courses. The graphic design students enroll in Psychology courses to understand the psychology of color and communication, and take advanced level science classes because they want to understand the nature of their world to... well, draw it better. (Da Vinci would be so proud!) And the students, who are busily engaged in writing code for iPhone apps and computer gaming software, take Popular Culture and Politics courses to understand the trends and issues of the world around them, and of course, how that will impact the marketing of their software one day. The students in Acting take advanced level history courses to understand the playwrights, their plays, and the history that shaped those voices. (*CCA School Website*)

The result: higher achievement, critical thinking, a staff that is always – like the artists they are working with – willing to collaborate, innovate, adapt, and students who want to spend time at school.

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