Math instruction and learning matter. Science instruction and learning matter. And, to show how much they matter, federal and state policy makers (if we use NCLB mandates as evidence) emphasize that teachers should spend copious amounts of time, energy and money preparing students for standardized assessments of those content areas. One might conclude, in fact, that the more often something is assessed, then the more important it must be.

In keeping with this line of thinking, other curriculum offerings that are of value should act and look more like math and science. This tension is also an argument not unfamiliar to some scholars who must negotiate the perceived value between arts-based research and qualitative studies versus quantitative analysis. Nel Noddings, in this recasting of her earlier 1992 work, asserts that what matters most is not a debate characterized as either–or in terms of what part of the curriculum is most important or how often it should be assessed. Rather, she frames the debate about what matters most in today’s schools as a measure of how students and teachers can create a context for cultivating care. Whether the pedagogical practice or curricular assumptions be progressive or traditional, whether the subject be mathematics or art, Noddings notes that the essential conversation should be one focusing on ways in which we might help students be reflective, curious, and caring in all school subjects, with all people, and with our environment. It is this notion of what we call the “cult of care” that guides her analysis and discussion in this 2005 edition The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education.

In this review, we consider three aspects of Noddings’ work, with particular attention to their applications to art education. First, we discuss her guiding principles and assumptions regarding the notion of care. Secondly, we reflect on her assertions regarding assessment and the focus on disciplines as related to discipline-based art education (DBAE). Lastly, we detail her view of care as the binding thread for all curricula in a global and democratic society.

Noddings establishes throughout her book that care is the sine qua non for authentic learning. And by authentic (our word), she is considering
learning where students are collaborators in both the selection of subject and the development of understanding. But for Noddings, care is not a matter of looking after someone or sympathizing with another … or worse, pitying another. Noddings explains: “An ethic of care embodies a relational view of caring; that is, when I speak of caring, my emphasis is on the relation containing carer and cared-for” (p. xv). It is this bidirectional nature of caring that moves Noddings assertions away from care as solely one person’s responsibility.

In many ways, Noddings’ notion of care requires a major shift in the nature of power and responsibility in school cultures. Can care be something that a teacher brings to a child? Certainly there are many giving teachers who care for their students. Many of us have heard good people, who happen also to be teachers, speak of their love for their young charges. But for Noddings, this notion of giving care is only half of the necessary equation. In order to balance the equation, care must also be reciprocated, and it is the responsibility of the teacher, in large part, to cultivate an environment that supports such an egalitarian context. In order for such an equitable process to emerge, one that certainly reflects notions of a democratic society, teachers must relinquish some of the power and control that many jealously protect in today’s classrooms.

Reciprocal, egalitarian, openness, honesty, fairness, collaboration, reflection—these and other characteristics are the descriptors of Noddings’ school built on care. And for her, these are the attributes that can, and ought to be, a part of all curriculum components. In essence, then, care for Noddings is central to cultivating an honorable, reflective, and caring society. Without it permeating the fabric of our society, then we lose the ties that hold us together as a democratic society. Democracy, for Noddings, is a process and a practice rather than a product. “Democracy is not the outcome of a common set of words and customs. Rather, it is an achievement—one that depends on the desire to communicate and the goodwill to persist in collaborative inquiry” (p. 164). It can be difficult to discern how high stakes testing serves such a purpose.

Secondly, Noddings finds that current emphases on assessment coupled with the idea of making all curricula discipline based, and thus easily assessed, is absolutely contrary to the democratic ideal of equal access for all. She admits, however, that “this approach is highly cognitive and appeals to the same linguistic and mathematical/logical capacities that support the rest of the curriculum” (p. 159). For the art classroom, Noddings considers discipline-based art education (DBAE) guilty of guiding the pendulum toward the traditionalist end. What is lost is at the core of what makes art different, and thus notable. It is not like the other disciplines. “It is the inquiry, dialogue, reflection, and response—not a particular set of books—that guide our particular exploration of themes of care” (p. xxiv). But by pushing art as a discipline, an emphasis
or focus on the student is lost. In true Deweyian style, Noddings asserts that when one loses sight of the children in the classroom because of an emphasis on the discipline and assessment of that discipline, then one has forgotten what matters most. For Noddings, “The living other is more important than any theory. This is a central idea in an ethic of care” (p. xix). And little, for Noddings, about NCLB or DBAE is consistent with care theory. “When we care for others, we do not try to motivate them by threats, sanctions, individual comparisons, and harsh penalties. We do not ignore the expressed needs and varied talents of students and insist on a deadly standardization” (p. xxi).

Making the art classroom like other subjects eliminates the very thing that gives many students hope within a school world that otherwise holds no validity or relevance. Noddings, in considering the consequences of making art rooms like those of other disciplines, asks, “But I wonder, if you do this, what will happen to all those young people who for years have found the art room the only place in school worth attending, whose interest in art has kept them in school long enough to qualify for a chance at life’s standard goods” (p. 161). In describing her experience as a mathematics teacher with a group of art students, Noddings was moved by the power and significance of the art experience and the subculture of care and support that emerged for those students. If art classrooms became more like those of other disciplines, then the students who usually did well in the other disciplines would likely do well in art. But the students who sought out the art experience and its uniqueness would undoubtedly be marginalized and lost. In trying to highlight the danger of the homogenous curriculum, Noddings states, “The major concern that emerges is that students who are really talented in art will be disenchanted by the standard cognitive approach” (p. 161). And in terms of those art students who sometimes struggle with more rigid and traditional coursework, Noddings found them to be deeply engaged in “the cognitive dimension of art [that] grew out of their passionate involvement with art production.” She added that she “suspect[ed] that their knowledge was active and well integrated with their central interests” (p. 161).

Noddings is unabashed in her disappointment with the heavy reliance on standards, assessment, and the role that NCLB has had in supporting such a dependency. In terms of such heavy-handed assessment strategies advocated by NCLB, Noddings laments that many progressive and traditional educators alike “share my disgust with the current trivialization of education” (p. xiii). Interestingly, for Noddings the emergence of DBAE did little to cultivate a sense of care in schools and in some ways anticipated the practices found in NCLB strategies. In fact, discipline-based and scientific-based curriculum, as a priority over student needs, might be expressions shared by both the NCLB and DBAE perspectives alike.
Lastly, although care is a central part of the dynamic found in healthy art rooms, it must not be relegated to such a singular existence. For Noddings, care is the binding thread for all curricula in a global and democratic society. She imagines that if we could consider putting care in a prominent place within and throughout the curriculum, then the benefit to students and teachers would be real and meaningful. In fact, Noddings suggests that “education should be organized around themes of care rather than traditional disciplines” and based in a “general education that guides them [the students] in caring for self, intimate others, global others, plants, animals, and the environment, the human-made world, and ideas” (p. 173). She offers six guiding principles that deserve some note here. To engage fully the idea of care and school reform Noddings imagines, we would: (1) be clear and unapologetic about our goal, (2) take care of affiliative needs (e.g., keeping students and teachers together for several years, and keeping students together longer in order to cultivate care), (3) relax the impulse to control, (4) get rid of program hierarchies, (5) give at least one part of every day to themes of care, and (6) teach students that caring in every domain implies competence.

With the recent emphasis on standards, assessment, and standardized testing, the practice of teaching art in K-12 schools could very easily be reduced to pencil-and-paper tests. But for art to take on leadership within the schools, those art teachers must also recognize the role of care in cultivating reflective and engaged students. Recognizing the daunting task of restructuring schools around care theory, Noddings admonishes, “I think it is essential for art curriculum makers to study problems of instruction carefully. Curriculum implementation is part of curriculum making, not a totally separate enterprise” (p. 168). And for Noddings, the joining of curriculum and instruction development with care theory provides the foundation for substantive and powerful change in today’s schools.

When the Federal government threatens schools in an attempt to make them improve (Chapman, 2005), then there is the assumption that schools are not motivated to improve and are intrinsically lazy or negligent. In a parallel fashion, when students act out and disturb classes, less grounded teachers will find that exerting power and withholding privileges will cajole students into passive obedience. Noddings’ care theory offers us an ethical alternative to such thinking so as to support students, teachers and schools. It is a theory grounded in the ethics of fairness, kindness, social justice, equity, openness and not a practice that seeks power at the expense of what matters most … the children. We suspect that some federal, state, and local leaders might do well to consider the key teachings found in Noddings’ book.

**Reference**