Encouraging Entrepreneurial Behavior in Public and Organizational Policy

Deborah B. Reeve

The powerful influence that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has exerted on schools in the United States has prompted just about all education organizations to rethink the way they do business. Some have tried legal strategies to change or block the law. Others have become involved in the legislative process as never before.

For the National Art Education Association, the post-NCLB environment has proven to be both a challenge and an opportunity. Our members have shared the goal of putting the importance of student learning in and through the arts at the core of the reauthorization of the federal law. To do that, though, the Association has begun trying a new approach: “entrepreneurial policymaking.” The importance of policy and its effect on practitioners has long been understood; NAEA has become increasingly interested in influencing policy decisions by bringing the insights and lessons of practitioners to the forefront.

As David Hart (2003) wrote, no matter how good the intentions of policymakers, the policy process inevitably has limited time and information. And, Hart continued, no matter how hard people try to be objective, they cannot fully shed preconceptions built over a lifetime of experience and training. Therefore, entrepreneurial policymakers, like entrepreneurs in the private sector, have needed to be nimble and adaptive, trying creative strategies to bring ideas to the table that serve practitioners well.

As a result, the NAEA has been developing the characteristics of entrepreneurship, which include forming new alliances, creating unique ways for leaders to think and work together, trying new ideas, and assessing our risks on investments. And in doing so, we have also seen new value placed on creativity, innovation, design, and empathy. That shifting emphasis, which author Daniel H. Pink (2005) defined as more reliant on the right than the left hemisphere of the brain, has led us to expand our previous notions of the traditional roles for organization leaders and organizations themselves.

A Policy and Research Agenda

Over the past months, the leadership of the NAEA has begun to facilitate a set of strategic conversations with the NAEA Board of Directors and other national leaders to more fully understand the landscape of the NCLB reauthorization and to come to clarity—if not consensus—on the core values that visual arts education provides. Now, and over time, these strategic conversa-
tions will influence a proactive policy and research agenda for the association that will inform our entrepreneurial policy work. To date, NAEA's national policy discussions have particularly focused on four areas.

**Art as a core subject.** As changes in our society and the nature of business demand the crucial entrepreneurial skills of innovation and lateral thinking, visual arts education becomes more important as a means of enabling students to develop skills in self-expression, problem solving, communications, and teamwork. As Pink (2004) said, “We are all in the art business.”

As NCLB undergoes reauthorization, NAEA and our like-minded partners are looking for ways to document and assess how the arts nurture these important skills. NAEA is not looking to integrate arts into other subject areas, which could reinforce the perception that arts are not a core subject. Instead, the Association is looking to assess content for every program in arts education and make the case for art as a core subject to governors, state legislators, and members of Congress.

**Student access.** Collecting and reporting on the status and condition of arts education at the state level is critical to ensuring equitable access. States should be required to collect and report comprehensive information about the status and condition of all core subjects for which challenging academic standards apply. The report should include student enrollment, pupil/teacher ratios, amount of instructional time, budget allocation, teacher subject certification, full-time equivalent teacher load and/or other such measures chosen by the state to be significant in the subject area.

At the same time, our Association and its partners must become more engaged in the issues over teacher quality that are also at the heart of NCLB. In its work with a number of organizations, including the Arts Education Partnership, Americans for the Arts, and others, NAEA is emphasizing the distinctive value of teachers who are trained and certified in visual arts education. Both Arkansas and South Carolina, for example, have raised the standard for teaching visual arts by mandating a certified art teacher in every school. Other states are beginning to take notice as the conversation about the relationship of creativity to the economy grows stronger.

**Data on arts education.** NCLB makes it clear that decisions regarding education should be made on the basis of research. U.S. Department of Education research efforts must be strengthened by systemically including the arts in studies conducted on the condition of education, practices that improve academic achievement, and the effectiveness of federal and other education programs. As the nation crafts major policies regarding the future of public education, it is imperative that sound research is available on the status of learning in our schools. In addition, the next National Assessment of Educational Progress in the Arts (NAEP), the nation's arts “report card,” was recently administered in 2008, and the results are planned for release in 2009. NAEP is an essential tool for many NAEA members in studying and improving access to the arts as a core academic subject.
Reauthorizing the Arts in Education programs. The Arts in Education programs of the U.S. Department of Education should identify and support successful models of arts instruction, integration, and professional development. The language of professional development in NCLB should focus on teachers who are fully certified to offer instruction in the visual arts for the grades they are assigned to teach, with some of these teachers serving as consultants, supervisors, and trainers for classroom teachers. Funds from NCLB should not be funding artists-in-schools programs or amateurish curriculum. Nor should NCLB funding be used to train artists as teachers. Instead, artists who are interested in teaching should be encouraged to pursue training as a visual arts teacher leading to certification from NCATE-accredited university art education programs.

NAEA as an Entrepreneurial Organization

Beyond using entrepreneurial methods to inform legislative policy, NAEA is creating the conditions in which entrepreneurial behavior can influence our own organizational policy and behavior as well. We come to these approaches with an understanding that entrepreneurship depends on an ability that is in short supply in many organizations—the ability to collaborate. NAEA is placing significant energy into building collaborative relationships as a means of increasing our ability to be innovative and flexible—and to leverage our resources and shorten our response time.

The Association is also investing heavily in technology—both as a means of building the organizational infrastructure and as our communications vehicle. In doing so, the Association is seeking more than competitive advantage; we're seeking to provide an essential go-to place for members to find the ideas, research, tools, and professional network that keeps their own teaching and work state-of-the-art.

Just as with our federal policy efforts, engagement and knowledge are at the core of our internal efforts. NAEA is more than a nonprofit organization. Through transparency, engagement, and shared values, NAEA is becoming a truly public organization. Like other social entrepreneurs, NAEA is producing goods and services that promote arts education as a means to support not only students, schools, and our communities, but also the larger collectives of society and culture.

To accomplish this, we are working on ways that enable us to have relevant and current knowledge of the diverse constituent groups of the Association. As NAEA President Bonnie Rushlow, other members of the Board, and I participate in regional and state conferences, we're facilitating a variety of strategic conversations and focus groups. We are building leadership capacity among our national and regional leaders that taps the intellectual capital and experience of our members. And we will be using that data to orient and guide the work of the Association.

We are also creating alliances with like-minded organizations. Such alliances not only give us greater strength in numbers, they also give our arguments greater intellectual strength.
For example, there may be seemingly little crossover between the memberships of the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) and the NAEA, but on closer reflection, it’s amazing how aligned our views are. NSTA has made a series of statements linking academic achievement and advancements in science learning with learning in the arts.

The Association is also engaging staff throughout the organization. Everything we do at NAEA is focused around team execution. We strive to bring multiple viewpoints within the organization to the table to create a perspective and multi-faceted understanding that one of us alone simply cannot provide. Core staff teams have been created that include members from Executive, Member Services, Publications, and Finance and Human Resources divisions.

Entrepreneurship can be exhausting! But our belief in the power of the arts to develop creativity, leadership, teamwork, and innovation fuels our own imaginations and sustains our efforts for continual creative change and value innovation. To turn a phrase, you might think of NAEA’s entrepreneurial policy efforts—internally and externally—as operating with rational exuberance.

References