COMMENTARY

Developing Arts Education Policy at the Federal Level: The First 10 Months of the National Education Taskforce

Dennis Earl Fehr

Three years ago I was asked to become an advisor on education issues to Nancy Pelosi, who at the time was the Congresswoman from San Francisco. I was pleased to agree. Shortly thereafter Ms. Pelosi made history by becoming the first woman House Minority Leader. In November of 2007, when the Democrats won majorities in both chambers of Congress, Leader Pelosi made history again by becoming the first woman Speaker of the House. Two days after the election, with the Speaker-to-be no longer needing my services, I was asked to begin advising Congressman George Miller, Chair of the House Committee on Education and Labor. I agreed under one condition: Given the greater scope of my advising (effectively to the entire House of Representatives through the Committee), I would need a group of educators to advise me. My condition was accepted and the National Education Taskforce (the NET) was born. I began Googling prominent educators, sending each an invitation to join.

Nearly everyone I have invited has accepted. As I write this, the NET has about 100 members, two thirds of whom are women. Our membership includes African Americans, Asians, Caucasians, Hispanics, and Native Americans. It reaches from coast to coast with members from about half of the U.S. states and two from Canada.

Based on members’ expertise and interests, the NET subdivided into three divisions: Educational Policy, Organizational Levels, and Academics. Each division has several committees. The Committee on the Arts falls under Academics. The NET’s Advisory Board consists of the committee chairs. The Executive Board consists of the executive director, an associate director, and a secretary.

The NET is a child advocacy group. Teachers, administrators, staff, and other groups within the education field advocate for their interests through their own professional groups. Children, on the other hand, cannot unionize. They cannot lobby. Therefore the NET advocates expressly for children in schools. To keep itself free of undue influence, it is a nonprofit 501c(3) organization. Because children are more effectively served if the NET works with people of all political stripes, it is nonpartisan. Because issues, however serious, come and go but relationships endure, the NET is based on relationships among its members rather than on issues as such.
The issue we have grappled with since the NET’s inception is the renewal of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Most of the NET’s committees have formulated advisory statements that, along with other information, are posted on our website at http://www.natedtaskforce.org

In July of 2007, three other NET members and I joined four members of the Institute for Language Education and Policy (an English Language Learner advocacy group led by James Crawford, a member of the NET) in Washington, DC. We were there to meet with the offices of Congress members including Representative Miller and Senator Ted Kennedy, Chair of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions. Miller and Kennedy are considered the co-authors of NCLB.

Over the course of two and a half days, we had meetings in the offices of 12 senators and 18 representatives. On July 12, Speaker Pelosi invited me to meet privately with her and her chief of staff. My description of the meeting, written with a bit of humor, appeared in the August edition of NETwork, the NET’s newsletter, at http://www.natedtaskforce.org/NETwork/07/08_aug/Pelosi%20meeting.htm.

At every opportunity in our meetings with Congress members and staff, I argued the case for replacing NCLB’s arts education language (which is almost nonexistent) with language that makes clear its importance to children's development. I also left documents summarizing my points. (I should add that the NET has also placed our materials with Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. NET member Linda Darling-Hammond advises Senator Obama on education issues. If Mr. Obama becomes president, the NET’s influence will extend to include the White House.)

I was especially determined to be persuasive in Miller’s and Kennedy’s offices. Miller was speaking on the House floor at the time of our meeting, but he had three staffers meet with us. They listened with interest to my arguments and requested that I stay in communication with them. During the meeting in Kennedy’s office a staffer asked if my documents were written in legislative language. I said no, but that I would be happy to submit them as such. He suggested that I do so in 2 days, since the House wanted to vote on the bill before the August recess. The NET and other advocacy groups felt that an unacceptable version would be voted on at that point, so with vigorous lobbying we managed to create gridlock through 2007, knowing that 2008, an election year, would give us more time to press for a better-informed bill.

I arrived at home, wrote a legislative language draft, had my art educator wife Mary critique it, made the excellent changes she suggested, and forwarded the copy to Patty Bode, who chairs the NET’s Committee on the Arts. She too offered excellent suggestions. By then two days were nearly passed, so I forwarded the document to Miller’s and Kennedy’s offices. I received an e-mail thank you from each office. The document we created reads:
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Section 1. Title V, Part A, Subpart 15, Arts in Education is amended—
(a) in subsection 5551(a)(1) by inserting “The arts are defined as
creative activities and products of the theater, the visual arts,
dance, music, and multimedia combinations of the above, and
shall be henceforth referred to as ‘the arts disciplines’”; and
(b) “To foster divergent thinking as a counterbalance to the
convergent thinking fostered by most school curricula, a goal of
public education shall be that all children are taught the arts by
arts specialists. A further goal is that teachers of other subjects
from Early Childhood through twelfth grade shall use the arts to
embellish the teaching of those subjects. The teaching of art by
teachers of other subjects shall not replace the teaching of the arts
by art specialists, but shall occur in addition to it.”
(c) in subsection 5551(a)(2) by inserting “A goal of public education
shall be for all children to receive an average of ninety minutes of
art instruction per week, under the guidance of specialists in the
respective arts disciplines. This instruction is to occur during the
regularly scheduled school day. Arts instruction time shall not be
interrupted to tutor children in other subjects or to prepare them
for assessment examinations in other subjects”; and
(d) “A goal of public education shall be that arts education shall
include instruction in every arts discipline.”
(e) in subsection 5551(a)(2) by inserting “To foster diversity, the
study of arts forms created by artists and communities representing
multiple races, cultures, religious affiliations, gender identities
and under-represented groups as well as traditionally recognized
groups, shall be included in all arts curricula”; and
(f) “To teach children to interpret media messages critically, arts
curricula shall include study of mass media and popular culture
with attention to the manipulations of arts and aesthetic content
in advertising and propaganda”; and
(g) “To create a civically engaged and ethical citizenry, study of the
arts shall include the examination of social justice and ethical
questions posed by artworks throughout history and across world
cultures.”

If this arts language becomes Federal law, what will that mean? First, the
language refers not only to visual art, but to the arts; it would affect theater,
dance, and music as much as visual art.

Second, it will make U.S. arts education curricula inclusive. One would
think arts educators would unanimously support this development, but
sexism, racism, homophobia, and myriad other prejudices live on in our
profession. So this language, if made law, will create controversy within the
arts fields.

Third, the law will protect arts education from encroachment by other
subjects. If our proposed language is not included in NCLB’s new incarnation

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(Speaker Pelosi told me she wants to call the replacement law New Directions), it most likely will be because of this third point. As readers of this journal know, the prevailing mindset regarding public education is still that the core subjects of half a century ago—math, reading, science, and social studies—form an adequate core for today. None of the “enrichment” subjects is judged worthy of core status.

This view is open to an array of sobering critiques. One of the most glaring stems from the fact that the US no longer dominates the world. Unprecedented political, economic, and even theological challenges are emerging from every corner of the globe—India, the European Union, China, the Middle East, the Pacific Rim. Our children need to learn more than how to work on the farm or in the factory. And the private sector periodically points out that our schools do not graduate innovative problem solvers.

Arts education skeptics must acknowledge that the outside-the-box thinking children develop in arts classes can help solve tomorrow’s challenges. We all must realize that our artist-visionaries aid human progress. The nations whose workforces have the greatest imagination, creativity, innovation, and vision are already poised to lead in tomorrow’s global community. Note the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which a decade ago, I personally observed, did nothing with creativity in their schools. Since then they have discovered the link between innovation and economic success and are moving toward first place in the global market.

However, many policy makers do not understand arts education. They want the schools to remain free to use “enrichment” subject time for standardized test practice in math, reading, and science. For this reason they might object to the part of the proposed arts language that protects arts instructional time.

What, then, if our proposed language does not survive debate? The arts will continue their struggle to survive. We will continue our efforts to replace our nation’s benighted views with informed ones. The NET will continue to work with Congress (and, we hope, the incoming occupant of the White House) to legislate robust language for arts education.

So where do we stand today?

• An art educator directs the NET.
• The NET has forged a number of bipartisan relationships on Capitol Hill and established contact with two presidential candidates.
• The NET’s membership includes renowned members of the education field, as well as many unsung heroes of our public school classrooms.

These circumstances offer arts education an unprecedented policy opportunity. Our task is to make the most of it. For example, art education advocates can submit the legislative language to state legislatures. If you want to join the National Education Taskforce, please contact me at dennis.fehr@ttu.edu.