



**Education Commission**  
of the **S t a t e s**

## ARTS AND MINDS

*Conversations about the Arts in Education*

*May 2006*

State Superintendents **Elizabeth Burmaster** (*left, above*) of Wisconsin, **Sandy Garrett** (*center*) of Oklahoma and **Tom Horne** (*right*) of Arizona

# State Superintendents Are Powerful Advocates for the Arts in Education

State school superintendents Elizabeth Burmaster of Wisconsin, Sandy Garrett of Oklahoma and Tom Horne of Arizona recently sat down with Doug Herbert, special assistant and acting chief of staff, Office of Innovation and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, to talk about their efforts on behalf of the arts in education in their states.

This interview, conducted on January 20, 2006, in Phoenix, Arizona, is part of the Education Commission of the States' (ECS) Arts and Minds Series, which features the views of today's leading thinkers on topics pertaining to the arts in education. ECS is pleased to provide this series as part of *The Arts — A Lifetime of Learning* initiative, led by Arkansas Governor and 2004-06 ECS Chairman Mike Huckabee.

**Doug Herbert** — Welcome and thank you for being part of this interview. I'm honored to be with you today, and to talk about your support for the arts in education. All of you have been particularly visible and vocal advocates for the arts in education in your states. Tell us what motivated you to step forward on this issue.

**Sandy Garrett** — As a former teacher, I am very passionate about the importance of integrating the arts

into not just elementary education, but also middle and secondary education. The arts provide a dynamic that is not present in most academic subjects, and make learning a richer experience. Personally, having grown up with music in my life including piano lessons, tap dancing, and the marching band in high school — I know that the kinds of interactions and experiences you have with the arts are part of your being and the foundation of your thinking as you go into the world of adulthood.

In 1989, when we passed legislation in Oklahoma creating standards-based reform and a state-articulated curriculum — I was the governor's secretary of education at the time — I became very interested in and vocal about making sure that the arts were not left out of the discussion. The fact that all of the coalitions supporting the arts came together over the next year and made certain that arts and culture was designated as part of the core curriculum, and the state went on to develop standards and assessments for the arts — that was a big victory for all of us in Oklahoma.

**Elizabeth (Libby) Burmaster** — As a policymaker in the days of No Child Left Behind, I see the great importance of ensuring that we have breadth and depth in

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the curriculum and that, as Sandy said, the arts aren't shortchanged.

From a personal standpoint, my mother was a musician and a music educator and so I, of course, was involved in music and drama growing up. I went on to major in music in college, teach at the elementary and middle school levels and become a high school choral and drama director. That was where I really saw the link between the arts and academic achievement. Here were students who were truant in their other classes, who were not achieving academically at all, but who were excelling in my courses. And I began fighting for the idea that there's a better strategy, quite frankly, than expelling kids and suspending kids. This is really an issue of engagement.

That's what led me to move from teaching into administration and what led me to the superintendency: my belief that the key to keeping kids in school and ensuring that they graduate is to engage them, give them a chance to develop self-esteem and a feeling that they are a part of something greater than themselves — all of the things that the arts do.

**Tom Horne** — I think one of the unwanted and unintended consequences of the testing environment we live in is a tendency of schools to narrow the curriculum to what we test, and so I've been fighting an across-the-board war against that. I describe my initiatives as better schools, better teachers, better curriculum — and when I talk about better curriculum, I'm talking about making sure we have a well-rounded curriculum.

In almost every speech I give, wherever I go, I talk about the arts, and I say, first of all, that a student who has not learned the deeper forms of beauty has not received an education. I like to quote a letter that John Adams wrote to his wife Abigail in which he said, "We study war and politics so that our children can study business and commerce so that their children can study literature and the arts."

So I believe in and I preach learning arts for their own sake, but we also have lots of evidence that students who are immersed in the arts do better academically than students who aren't. The most recent study of interest, I think, is one in which WestEd, our regional educational laboratory, studied eight elementary schools in Tucson with the same demographics, four of them with a very rich arts program and four with just

the regular program. The study showed the kids in the schools with the rich arts programs were way ahead in their academic scores. For some reason we don't quite understand, it had a special resonance for our Latino kids, who were 55% higher in their language scores.

So in the schools that had the rich arts program, we were closing the gap and in the schools that didn't, we weren't. On that basis, I used \$4 million of No Child Left Behind money that I had some discretion over, and put it all into arts programs in high-poverty schools.

**Herbert** — Before we move on, I should point out, because our readers may not be aware, that Superintendent Horne is a classical pianist and plays regularly with a chamber-music ensemble. Is that personal artistry part of what drives you?

**Horne** — Well, yes, what I really wanted to be was a piano player, but I wasn't talented enough, so I became a politician instead.

**Herbert** — I'd like to hear more about using the "bully pulpit" of the superintendency on behalf of the arts in education. Give us a quick sketch of the messages you've developed, the audiences you've targeted and the strategies you've used.

**Burmaster** — I think one of the messages that has been extremely effective is linking the arts and arts education to economic development because that is the biggest challenge in our state. We're trying to save our rural communities, we're trying to attract high-skilled jobs to replace all the thousands and thousands of manufacturing jobs that we've lost. And we're continually hearing from the business community that our kids don't have the skills to compete in the global economy.

When I talk to business groups, I say, let's focus on what you tell us you're really looking for: problem solvers, critical thinkers, people who have good interpersonal skills and who can communicate and articulate. Then I say, well, look to the students who are engaged in arts activities, and you'll see that they indeed have those skills. Where else in the curriculum do you have that real demand to master the art of subtlety — to recognize those small differences that can make a very big difference — and to take risks, creative risks? So our message has to be — and I think the business community really understands this — that the arts are not a luxury, they are essential.

As for strategy, in Wisconsin we have a large number of statewide organizations — the Alliance for Arts Education, a state dance council, professional associations representing music, art and drama teachers — which I feel very fortunate to be able to bring together — and that coalition has been successful. We also work very closely with our governor, as well as the legislature and the state arts board.

**Garrett** — I agree with Libby — the time is right for recognition of the arts as an essential ingredient of our educational system, and that’s certainly something I emphasize in all of the materials and messages I present to the public.

The business community is particularly aware of and concerned about the challenges that lie ahead for our nation, and very much support the emphasis on creativity and critical thinking. In Oklahoma, we have a strong business-education coalition, and a state arts council that provides great support for the education community. We’ve also focused on involving higher education as a partner, so that we’re sure our colleges are making the arts an integral part of teacher-preparation programs.

We bring people into schools to demonstrate their skills and be a model for students — not just artists in residence, but also people in the community who would love to share their artistic talents and what they know about the arts. We have a Summer Arts Institute that allows students to spend two weeks with nationally known artists and really get into their craft, whether it’s photography or music or writing or dance. And in the fall, we use that same institute for weekend professional-development retreats for teachers.

Our progress in Oklahoma over the last decade is very much tied, I think, to the support we’ve built in the state legislature and the formation of a bipartisan arts caucus. Seventy percent of our funding comes from the state, and it’s critical that legislators be cognizant of the importance of the arts, and don’t deliberately target them for cuts. So you have to develop a plan for creating a dialogue with legislators, and for keeping them as informed and involved as possible.

**Herbert** — Can you give some specifics?

**Garrett** — One of the things we do is give them disaggregated data each year, so every legislator will know how many music teachers they have in their district,

how many arts teachers they have in their district — and when the tough decisions come about, we hope that they will retain those teachers.

We also have a state superintendent’s arts awards ceremony for high school seniors every spring in this magnificent setting, a town that was the first capital of Oklahoma, a place that most students and their families don’t get to visit very often. We invite legislators to attend the ceremony so they can meet and congratulate students from their district and the other winners.

**Herbert** — Libby and Tom, how would each of you rate the progress of your efforts to make support for arts education a higher priority at both the state and local levels?

**Burmester** — I think that in Wisconsin we have good state policy related to arts instruction. We require arts educators to be licensed. We have some very good teacher preparation programs. We have good curriculum guides in all the arts areas — dance, drama, music and visual arts — which were developed by arts educators and are used by teachers in the classroom. And, as I said, the collaboration among the state’s arts organizations is strong. So I think that in all those areas, there has been good progress.

The problem is that our state is so challenged across the board in K-12 funding that, every budget cycle, we find that we are just fighting and fighting to hold onto what we have. And that means, every year, school districts are cutting their budgets and arts opportunities are being whittled away. That’s what we’re hearing throughout our state — that the arts are indeed challenged because of funding. And the problem isn’t even at the local school board — you know, the advocacy groups will come out and they will fight for it. But it just gets down to the fact that our state is suffering in school finance.

**Herbert** — So, it’s that old adage that the arts are the first to go. What can education leaders do to break that old habit?

**Burmester** — Well, they’re not always the first to go, but they’re a lower priority now that everything — everything — is challenged beyond what is perceived as mandatory core curriculum. And so each community is struggling with this and that’s why the business partnerships and the community relationships — things like artist-in-residence programs — are so important. Those



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are the people who are saving some of these arts opportunities in our schools because we just don't have the state, local and federal funding to pay for what's required by those entities.

**Horne** — You know, in Arizona, we have a recall going right now against the school board in a district that cut back on its arts programs. I think people really want the arts in their schools, and the problem is administrators or governing boards who are overreacting to the testing pressure that they have.

When I became superintendent, one of the first things I did was to create a new position, an arts advocacy position, in the department. The person in that position, Lynn Tuttle, is facilitating the rewriting of our arts standards and she does a lot of other things, but her primary role is to be an advocate for the arts. So when a district is thinking about cutting back on the arts, she is there to make the case — to give them the evidence — that kids who are immersed in the arts do better on their tests than those who aren't.

**Burmester** — Tom talks about creating a capacity for advocacy, and that's something we've tried to infuse into our entire operation and every discussion we have. Our director of content and learning, for example, who oversees all curriculum-learning standards, is Mike George, who has been a national leader in the arts.

I think you have to seize every opportunity as a leader to surround yourself with creative individuals — people who think from multiple perspectives, who know that there is more than one answer to a question and that there are many, many questions to ask. Those are skills that people in the arts have, and they can really make a difference in the way we think and the way we work together.

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