

**Testimony of Nikki Rittling**  
**Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions**  
**“ESEA Reauthorization: Meeting the Needs of the Whole Student”**  
**Thursday, April 22, 2010**  
**10:00 AM**

Good Morning.

Chairman Harkin and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today to talk about efforts at my elementary school to ensure a rich curriculum for our students.

My name is Nikki Rittling and I am the physical education teacher and team leader for the Integration Team at Wonderful Willards Elementary School on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Willards is set in a farming community which lacks a variety of cultural and arts experiences nearby. 7 years ago, as a targeted Title I school Willards also struggled with low test scores in reading and math. For these reasons, the school’s administration challenged the teachers to implement an arts integration program. We happily took on that task. Since then, we have implemented a successful arts integration program which has been identified by both The Arts Education in Maryland Schools (AEMS) and The John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts as a Maryland School of Distinction. Because we are only a preK-2<sup>nd</sup> grade school we don’t have quantitative data, but we have seen our test scores rise. We are now consistently in the top 3 in our district and the only targeted Title I school at the top of the ranks.

So, what does it all mean? We define arts integration as the seamless blending of arts area objectives and content area objectives within the same lesson where natural connections occur. The four basic arts forms that we focus on are; visual art, music, dance/movement and drama. The components embedded into our program meet our students’ educational needs, cultural needs and demographic needs; while helping to differentiate instruction. The teacher and student work cooperatively to embrace creativity, innovation, high level thinking and risk taking. The students are safe and comfortable in an environment which values them as a lifelong creative learner. Not only do we explore the various art forms and how to integrate them, but we also examine how they impact children’s motivation, learning, comprehension, development of critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

As the only full-time specialist, excitement for this type of teaching and my familiarity with most dance/movement standards, I was appointed as the Willards Integration Network (WIN) Team Leader. The WIN team plans and provides professional development opportunities and also facilitates school-wide arts activities. As the team leader, I am responsible for any number of things including writing grants, sharing to help other schools in the district begin their own programs, and providing professional development. Getting together as a team is as important in sustaining our program as is the tremendous support of the leaders in our school and district.

For the students, this not only means there is daily integration of arts into the curriculum but also to experience an artist in residence. In a residency, artists work cooperatively with the classroom teachers

to align their art form with the core curriculum. As a school we also study a country each school year. Last year, we experienced the culture of South Africa and currently we are celebrating India. At the conclusion of our country study, all students participate in a year-end celebration where the students use the arts and sciences to build a parade with floats, costumes, banners, music and dance as they travel through the community sharing their knowledge. When studying South Africa a group of students played South African rhythms on drums while other students performed South African Gumboot dance. At times, it is natural to combine the cultural study with the arts. This provides students with a tremendous amount of knowledge. In learning about China the students used interpretative dance to share facts about Chinese culture. The students were charged to individually develop movements using long strips of fabric to match these facts and dance them to Chinese flute music. Because the students were able to work successfully and meet all expectations for the task, they performed this for our school community and about 100 visitors.

In addition to the support of our school leaders, the success of the program also rests on continued and varied professional development. Within the school building, the WIN team hosts monthly teacher workshops to help provide strategies to integrate. An example was a recent workshop during which teachers paralleled visual arts, writing and language arts to create a story mural. Providing on-going professional development also pushes teachers to integrate weekly and sometimes daily. Other professional development has been for groups of specific subject-matter teachers within the district and collaborations with teaching artists and university professors. We have also participated in intensive 5 day workshops at the Maryland Artist Teacher Institute each summer, which helps to provide our school team the tools to plan for integration in the coming school year.

Arts integration has impacted our entire school community and school environment nurturing the whole child. For those students who have been in the school for 4 years, I am often awe struck by their creativity, innovation and willingness to take creative risks. Over time, the students have trained themselves to think in an alternate way, to think independently and to learn beyond a text book. Arts integration has impacted the teachers and my own teaching. As the students take risks in learning and creativity the teachers do too. With the implementation of our program 7 years ago, teachers and their teaching were renewed. I find that teaching in this way challenges me, helps me to stay current and vary my teaching.

Willards Elementary has come a long way in the 7 years of the arts integration program, all for the benefit of its students. We are proof that you can provide a rich curriculum while still focusing on the important academic needs of our students. I again thank you for the opportunity to share our story with you and welcome any questions that the Committee may have.