

Weston Public Schools Art Program Review

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Weston Public Schools K-12 Art Program Review

The Weston Public Schools K-12 Visual Arts Program Review Visiting Team, in response to the cordial invitation of Chris Fehl, K-12 Art Program Director, Weston Public Schools, spent three intensive days working closely with the system's K-12 Art staff, school administrators, support staff, students and parents as part of a comprehensive peer review of Weston's K-12 Art program and practices. The team read materials prepared by the Department, met with representatives of all constituent groups, observed classroom instruction, and looked at student artwork. There were six educators on the visiting team: Diana Woodruff, George Ratkevich, Ann Berman, Kirk Goetchius, Jessica Chin, and Barbara Milot. They generally worked in pairs or trios (one small group for each of the schools: elementary, middle and high school) reporting their observations, commendations, and recommendations.

The Visiting Team found the self-study document written by Chris Fehl and the art staff to be incredibly informative and helpful. It was a thorough and honest report that demonstrated the art staff's commitment to their work as they continue to explore and implement best practices in the field of art education. The self-study made clear that the Art Department did considerable research and reflection in order to examine their current practice and plan for the future of their program. It was noted that the Art Department is looking to balance the teaching of skills and ways to document assessment of student performance with an open studio atmosphere that gives teachers freedom in structuring their courses and their classroom procedures. This report is submitted in the spirit of the Art Department's self-study with the goal of "providing the best possible art experience for all Weston students."

As part of the review, the Visiting Team had three public forums to hear from various groups: a parent group, a group of middle and high school students and a group of Weston teachers from various schools and subject areas. Parents were clear in voicing their support for the art teachers at all levels. They spoke of the excellent art instruction and the palpable sense that the art teachers cared about individual students and their work. Several parents mentioned the sense of direction and inspiration that their children found in their art classes. The general sense was that the art teachers provide a warm and inclusive environment for their students. The parents did have some suggestions for the program that have been incorporated into the text of the report and the Visiting Team's recommendations.

At the student forum, the middle and high school students praised the art program, recognizing their teachers as dedicated and caring professionals. Students mentioned specific ways that the art teachers helped them follow their interests in the art classes. High school students noted that their teachers work with them on independent studies and special projects. At both levels, students felt that the art courses offered gave them a good range of choices. When asked about

courses that they would like to see in the art program, students suggested a high school woodshop and a metals course that included welding. Similar ideas came up at the parent forum. It seems that more courses in 3D art forms and construction methods would be welcome additions to the Weston Art Program. The Visiting Team also had the chance to speak to students informally during the classroom observations. The strong support (and appreciation) for the art teachers and art program was as apparent in these conversations as it was in the student forum.

I. CURRICULUM

Overview

The Visiting Team was impressed with the student work on display throughout the District. This work is evidence of the rich learning experiences and excellent instruction found in the Weston Public Schools K-12 Art Program. The student work on display and the classroom visits made it clear that the Weston art teachers have designed a substantive art curriculum that combines a foundation of basic skills with choices for the students as part of the creative process.

The respectful and collegial working relationships of the K-12 Weston Art Department is notable. The K-12 art teachers are truly a team, aware of each other's styles and strengths and amenable to working towards an even stronger department and a better learning experience for their students. There seems to be a willingness and ample time to coordinate curriculum, given that the K-12 art teachers meet twice per month, and the high school staff has a block for common planning time built into their schedules. Dedicated meeting time allows the art teachers to share what is being done at each level and to plan the sequence of curriculum content and learning goals. It would be most helpful if the teachers could use a good deal of that time together to share ideas and to plan the vertical sequence of curriculum and learning goals. This process has begun, and much has been accomplished in the past year, but further work is needed in the development of a unified, sequential plan for the curriculum across grade levels and courses, tied to the Massachusetts Arts Curriculum Framework Learning Standards and organized by units focused on art concepts and learning goals rather than by individual projects and activities.

In the Self-Study, the Art Department recognized the need to better articulate the K-12 scope and sequence of art skills and art exploration. The Visiting Team believes that the Weston Art Department has all the ingredients for a stronger, more coordinated documentation of their program. In fact, the weakness seems to be in the documentation (curriculum maps, syllabi, course expectations, etc.) and therefore in communication to those outside the program, rather than in the philosophy itself. For example, in the curriculum map documents given to the visiting team, the units of study in many of the grade levels or courses are listed by project, rather than by concept or unit. There are also major differences in how certain categories of information, such as learning goals or embedded skills, are interpreted by different teachers. The curriculum

maps need more consistency from course to course in the information provided. In order to communicate better to parents, the school, and the community at large the great value of the education that art students are receiving in Weston's art program, the big picture of "why" needs to be better articulated and the learning goals more clearly identified in the curriculum documents.

The Department would benefit from having a standard template that identifies the overarching goals, essential questions, and common assessments as well as the specific skills, content, and assessment for each unit of study that is listed in the present maps. With a revised format, the maps would serve as a true outline of the concepts and learning that occur in that course, and would also provide art teachers and the director of the Department with a sense of the commonalities and connections between the courses. Such a document would make it easier for new teachers to see ways to align the learning of one course with that of another. The curriculum maps could also communicate the ideas and concepts of the K – 12 art curriculum to other teachers, to administrators and possibly to parents. Much of the same information might be presented to students in a more condensed manner with commonly formatted course expectations or syllabi. These syllabi should be organized to communicate the concepts listed in the map to students in a clear and concise manner. Ideally, the format for the curriculum map and that for the syllabus would be common across all subjects in the system, or at least within the schools.

Elementary Curriculum

The teachers in the elementary schools, Woodland, Country and Field, have a well-articulated and coordinated curriculum that addresses the State standards and provides a stimulating, materials rich experience for the students. The K – 5 art teachers share ideas informally and in regular Department meetings to insure sequential continuity. The Visiting Team observed students across the grades to be actively engaged in the creative process. They were invested in thoughtfully designed art projects and using appropriate skills for different assigned tasks

The progression in art at all the K-5 schools is developmentally appropriate and students are well prepared for upper level classes by the time they reach middle school. Early elementary lessons are more skills based, and this allows students to explore a variety of materials, tools and techniques. Developmentally, in the early elementary grades, students need to "play" with mark making and gain confidence in their abilities and we observed this in every elementary classroom we visited. The upper elementary lessons encourage more in-depth exploration and allow for more choice and creative problem solving. This natural progression works well, and builds on the student's store of previous knowledge. In addition, the teachers were very caring, encouraging, and helpful in gently guiding students on to the next step. In all instances, students were reminded and motivated with the idea that art is connected to the world around them. We observed students at various elementary levels actively participating in reflective discussions

about their art projects. Teachers regularly took the opportunity to pose questions or challenges that caused students to implement creative solutions within their artwork.

Elementary students are enabled to place their art-making activities into a larger cultural and art historical context. We observed this directly in a 3rd grade native American pottery class at Country School, and found many cultural and historical connections addressed within the grade level standards and plans for all elementary grades. It is obvious from reading these teacher-created documents that a lot of planning and thought went into creating rich lessons that embrace culture and history. The self-study emphasizes that connecting student art to different cultures, history, people, etc. enhance and help to develop a student's empathy. Continuing to reference and emphasize these things can only improve the quality of the student's learning experience.

We observed elementary art educators referring to and exhibiting artist's work when introducing their lessons and motivating students. In the hallways of the elementary schools we also observed many examples of artist-inspired projects. Additionally, elementary students in Weston are fortunate to have the opportunity to work with and observe contemporary artists and poets working in their schools. Though planning for these types of programs is often time-consuming, we hope that these artist-in-residency programs will continue as the experience is invaluable to the child and no greater connection to the role of contemporary art in society could exist. It was also mentioned that at one time, teachers took elementary students on field trips to the DeCordova Museum. These field trips no longer take place as the DeCordova cut their education program. We support the suggestion of some parents that elementary students have the opportunity to take more field trips.

In the classroom observations, it was clear that the art skills were developed sequentially in scope over the course of the year and in sequence from year to year to allow for the extension of an artistic vocabulary for each student. In the curriculum maps, however, we would have liked to see more in the clarity of skills progression and the reasoning for the order of lessons/units of study listed in the curriculum map. The skills and projects listed are valuable and well thought out, but does one skill naturally lead to another? Do the skills build on themselves each week? By building upon previously learned skills, the skills are then practiced, reinforced, and become second nature to the child. It may be that the current curriculum map format does not make the progression of art skills clear and that the existing map might be better designed to show this progression.

Middle School Curriculum

The art courses that middle school students are able to choose from are developmentally appropriate and excel in challenging students to be creative and to learn new skills. The curriculum is filled with open-ended challenges that give students experiences that are authentic to studio art practice. A course such as *Design & Construction* is rigorous and intensive in

content yet it is flexible enough to allow students to work alone and in groups and at their own pace.

In these middle school classes students are encouraged to think critically, to examine why an image, object or product fails, and to solve open-ended problems. Visiting Team member, Jessica Chin noted that this approach is very similar to the engineering design process used to develop a new product. In all the courses observed during the review, the middle school art teachers stressed the importance of the creative design process. Another strength of the program is the way that technology is integrated seamlessly into the middle school art courses. We observed teachers and students working with a variety of digital tools and media in what seemed to be a regular part of the classroom practice. We found much evidence that students are being encouraged to be resourceful thinkers, to solve problems (some of which they devise themselves) and to make meaning. They are asked repeatedly to employ critical and creative thinking skills, and to evaluate their own work and that of their peers. Projects are designed to capture students' imagination and to move them forward through a sequential scaffolding of artistic skills

We had the opportunity to speak with a number of middle school students during their classes and in a student forum. The students were unanimous in their enthusiasm for the *Design & Construction* course. In the classroom, they were able to demonstrate programs such as West Point Bridge Builder and Google Sketch Up. The students used these programs to develop their ideas in the planning process before the construction of straw built bridges and wooden houses. Students were able to articulate the importance of planning, drawing, and virtual modeling prior to the build process. As they discussed their working process, students demonstrated an understanding of the relationship of a virtual model to the final physical model.

In reviewing the curriculum documents, there is some mention of art from other cultures and historical periods but no sense of how students are taught explicitly to consider their work in a larger context nor did we have the opportunity to see evidence of this in the classroom visits. While acknowledging the strengths of the *Design & Construction* course, we wondered about opportunities for individual expression in this middle school art course. Are there ways to teach the same skills with more attention to the expressive possibilities in the student work? The Art Department is encouraged to develop additional courses such as those suggested in the self-study (Artists' Books/Book Making, Self-Portraits) and to incorporate more looking activities (such as Visual Thinking Strategies) and art historical information into the courses.

High School Curriculum

Weston's high school art students have opportunities to think critically, creatively, and to solve problems within the curriculum. Based on observation, the progression and degree of challenge in the high school art program are clearly evident and developmentally appropriate. Students at all levels in the high school are able to take art classes. Because of the skilled instruction from

the art teachers, students are encouraged to think creatively and abstractly as they are challenged to solve problems. The sequence of the lessons being taught appears to be logical and appropriate. Students voiced their ability to make connections between one lesson and the next.

During a forum with high school and middle school students, students shared that teachers in Photography and Graphic Design used online resources to introduce students to the work of artists working in those fields. In an observed Graphic Design class the teacher did show students exemplars of different alphabet design styles to inspire students' work. There seemed to be limited evidence of students placing their art-making activities into a larger cultural or art historical context during the high school classes we observed. In the brief classroom observations we did not have the opportunity to see the introduction to a new project and witnessed little reference to art history in the middle school or high school. From the student work on display, and from the work in progress observed in the classrooms, it appears that there is integration of contemporary art and art historical topics into lessons but it is not made explicit in the curriculum maps or course documents. In addition to including reference to and discussion of masterworks and contemporary art work in course documents, blogs and websites, teachers could also include this information in wall text accompanying the displays in the school.

II. INSTRUCTION

Overview

The Visiting Team was impressed by the passion and expertise of the Weston K-12 art teachers. Across all levels and schools the art teachers foster an atmosphere of creative exploration and experimentation with materials and ideas. In the teacher forum, teachers of other subjects spoke of the art teachers' enthusiasm for collaboration and making connections across disciplines. It was mentioned by their colleagues, and observed by all members of the Visiting Team, that the art teachers work continually to give their students a rich, authentic art experience. In all schools we observed students making aesthetic decisions as they created work that was personal and meaningful.

At all schools, the Visiting Team noted the high level of engagement seen in the art classrooms. The behavior of the students we observed and interviewed attests to the art teachers' ability to set and maintain high standards for appropriate classroom behavior and performance. Students were respectful and responsible both as individuals and as class groups demonstrating respect for their environment by maintaining the rooms well. In Ceramics, we saw how thoroughly students cleaned up with very little prompting. In all classes, the great majority of students seemed to be enjoying themselves and they remained focused throughout the class.

Elementary Instruction

The elementary art teachers create lessons and curriculum that are thoughtful, dynamic and inclusive. The teachers present their lessons using a variety of modes, including: verbal directions, active demonstrations and written instruction. They bring students together on the floor or at a table to discuss the day's lesson, objectives, and goals. By the end of these introductions/ demonstrations students were obviously eager to start the project. During the work period, we observed students steadily working and intent on their projects. All were on task, comfortable, and concentrating on creating. The teachers were observed providing individualized instruction as needed. At the Country School we observed students who had finished their projects, (usually a very trying time in any classroom) independently picking up their personal sketchbooks and continuing to work. This scene truly illustrated that all students were engaged in learning and art making for the entire period.

The elementary art teachers strike an effective and intentional balance between teaching skills and fostering creativity. In the classroom observations students had opportunities to ask questions during the introduction of a project, during the process and during reflection time at the end of the lesson. Students shared ideas at these times as well as amongst themselves during the art making process. The elementary teachers at all schools create an environment of creativity, curiosity and trust.

Although we did not have the opportunity to see any true collaborative work in the elementary classroom observations, we can state that the students definitely felt comfortable sharing and engaging with each other during the art making process. When walking around the classroom, we observed the students discussing their work excitedly, many using the newly taught vocabulary and terms. Upon entering the Field School, we were drawn to a beautiful display of artwork based on Van Gogh's sunflowers. We were later informed that this had been a collaborative art project with many students working together to create one piece. It is evident that collaborative learning is taking place in the elementary schools.

Middle School Instruction

The classes observed by the Visiting Team were all studio work sessions with the art teachers supervising students at different stages of the projects and assisting individuals and small groups as appropriate. All teachers were enthusiastic and encouraging in conversations with students. The students at work were focused and obviously invested in their art projects. They were clear on the objectives for the various projects and eager to explain their working processes, indicating a high level of engagement. Students appear to have sufficient opportunity to work collaboratively as the classes functioned as open studios while students worked individually, in pairs and in small groups. We saw students collaborating informally as they discussed their work and technical processes. In the *Design & Construction* course students were working in groups to test their bridge constructions.

We did not see an introduction to a topic or a critique/reflection activity and cannot speak to the instruction in these situations. In a review of the curriculum maps, the eighth grade drawing class lists regular critiques on student work; there is no mention of this for other courses in the map. If it is a significant element in the middle school art classes, it should be better documented. If it is not, more exposure to the art of various cultures throughout time would help students place their own art-making activities into a larger cultural and historical context.

In all of the courses observed, the middle school art teachers strike a balance of instruction in studio skills and an atmosphere of open exploration that fosters creativity. In the classroom visits, we observed students sharing ideas, asking questions of the teachers and discussing their work with peers. The middle school art teachers make explicit the underlying links between art and engineering. We hope that this is expanded into a discussion of career opportunities in applied design fields. The students at Weston Middle School were vocal in their enthusiasm for the art courses, the art teachers and the opportunities they have to be creative in their artwork

High School Instruction

One of the major strengths of the program is the positive working relationships that the art teachers have developed with the students in their classes. The program and the teachers get high marks from the students and their parents; this was reinforced over the three-day review in numerous conversations with students as they voiced their trust in and appreciation for their teachers. In the classroom observations, the Visiting Team saw the teachers conducting their classes with enthusiasm and concern for their students' progress.

Providing high-quality work that engages students and enables them to learn what they need to succeed in today's world is essential. If the traits of engaging student work are understood as the following (according to Dr. Phillip Schlechty's book, *Engaging Students*): personal response (allowing for more than one right answer), clear/modeled expectations (i.e. the student knows what success looks like because of teacher demonstration, etc.), emotional/intellectual safety (encouraging intellectual and, in this case, artistic risk-taking), learning with others, sense of audience, choice (giving the student meaningful options), novelty and variety (the learning experiences are unusual or unexpected), and authenticity (connections are made to experience or to prior learning), then the combined curriculum and instruction of Weston's middle and high schools illustrates how the art teachers are clearly working to create engaging work. All students were either compliant or fully engaged in the learning process during the classes we observed. Many students are clearly self-directed, and we witnessed a number of students who entered the classrooms during their study/free periods to work on projects.

Although the Visiting Team did not witness any formal critiques during the classroom observations, reflection, discussion and critique seem to be used in formative ways by the art teachers at all levels. The quality of the student work on display and the conversations heard in

the art room (student/student and student/teacher) support this observation. Photo 2 and Photo 3 list regular critiques in the curriculum maps but there is no reference to critiques in the other courses, nor in the course blogs or websites. We suggest that the importance of the critique, and of discussion of art in general, be stressed in course documents, websites and blogs. This would indicate to those outside of the Art Department that dialog and critique are critical components of the art-making process. Not only does students' understanding of their work help to enlighten their peers and the instructor on their methods, motivations, successes and struggles, but it also helps the presenting artists to substantiate and defend the work that they have created. There is arguably nothing more gratifying for a student than successfully being able to explain, and defend, the work he or she has made.

From our observations, a major strength of the program is in the teaching of skills, but students are also afforded opportunities to develop their creative thinking and problem-solving skills in the middle school and high school. Students voiced their appreciation of the flexibility of teachers in letting them veer from the original directives of lessons when they have promising ideas that take them in different directions. It appears that this happens more in the upper-level courses.

Creativity is the act of bringing something into existence that is genuinely new, original, and of value either personally or culturally (<http://creativity-innovation.metiri.wikispaces.net/Rubric>). According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities, creative thinking can be defined as both the capacity to combine or synthesize existing ideas, images, or expertise in original ways and the experience of thinking, reacting, and working in an imaginative way characterized by a high degree of innovation, divergent thinking, and risk taking. If creativity is characterized by fluency (generating ideas through brainstorming), uniqueness/originality, risk-taking despite mistakes and possibility of failure, inquisitiveness, flexibility/adaptability, intrinsic motivation, tolerance for ambiguity, willingness to explore a full range of options, and self reflection, then the art teachers in Weston's middle and high schools have set up an environment that promotes true creativity, encouraging all of the above through the supportive environment they have created, their own flexibility, adaptability and concern for the individual students, their lessons, and their grading criteria, which, for the most part, is based on personal investment.

III. PROGRAM DESIGN

Overview

The Weston Art Department program is a fluid, organic and diverse program that has provided a creative environment for students to grow and explore their creative and imaginative side. The 'open studio' environment, as referred to in the Self-Study enables students to work freely in an unstructured but directed setting. On the whole, and given the logistics of course scheduling, there appears to be adequate time given to exploratory art from kindergarten through high school.

The middle school scheduling provides students with an intense experience of four periods per week that challenges them to think critically and analyze artwork beyond superficial observational. The high school art courses are more directed and specific with longer class periods. The art courses and the art faculty encourage students to try and fail as part of the process of creating. The promotion of risk-taking and the luxury of failure is apparent across all schools and grade levels indicating the philosophy described in the Self-Study. Overall, the WPS art program design provides students with a range of art mediums and experiences to support individual artistic growth. The excellent exhibitions of student artwork in the various schools are evidence that the student work from the art classes is well celebrated and displayed for everyone's enjoyment.

Elementary Program Design

Weston's art program is exemplary when it comes to time allotment for elementary art classes. One hour for an art class allows the students to engage and concentrate on their work for a serious block of time. Compared to other towns, Weston truly understands the importance and value of this time for the student. Having 60 minute art classes for grades 1-5 allows the student to remain engaged in art making without the worry of clean up and transition time coming too soon. Students can actually delve deeply into the creative process and have authentic learning experiences. Elementary school principals support the art program and the art teachers by scheduling specialists first and grouping same grade classes together as much as possible. This is extremely helpful for the art teachers as they are able to plan more complex art processes for their classes when they have fewer different types of preps each day.

Middle School Program Design

Sixth grade students take a general art course as one of their four arts courses in the year. Seventh grade students have a choice of art electives (*Visual Art, Design & Construction, Robotics, Dance and Music*). In eighth grade students have even more arts options (*Scene Study, Acting & Improvisation, Art/Architecture, Drawing, Digital Photo, Design & Construction, Sculpture, Video Journalism, Dance and Musical Theater*). Because of the options built into the middle school curriculum, students are able to take control of their learning, making it more student-centered and specific to their interests. Based on our observation, the middle school's quarter rotation enables students and teachers to experience multiple art courses (4) per academic school year. We noticed that these classes allow teachers the flexibility and freedom to structure courses in different ways. For example, in *Design and Construction* students will complete two in-depth projects (a bridge building project and a house-building project) versus the sculpture course where students are working on a single project for nine weeks. The existing design, with a basic art course for sixth grade students and more course options as they progress through seventh and eighth grade, appears to work well. The middle school students at the student forum made specific mention of their enthusiasm for the program design.

High School Program Design

The 76-minute block scheduling works quite well for studio classes. Students did not seem rushed, and most were engaged throughout the entire class period. Longer blocks are beneficial for giving instruction and allowing time for students to work with materials. This amount of class time should not be reduced.

We see the potential for overburdening the teacher in the school's system of combining differently leveled sections within a discipline in the same block (such as Graphic Design 1 and 2, for example), or in adding independent studies wherever they will fit. It has been stated that this is only after the teacher approves the independent study, so it is supposed that the teacher can handle the extra responsibilities that will come with teaching multiple lessons in a single block. Some students expressed concern at not being able to get into art courses they wanted. Parents in the parent forum also articulated this concern. One of the issues was singleton classes, another was graduation requirements in other content areas.

Based on the classroom observations and the curriculum documents, career guidance and portfolio preparation is limited to students in upper level art classes. With the exception of Graphic Design I, which has a discussion of graphic design career awareness, the introductory art classes do not include any discussion of creative careers. It was mentioned a few times during our visit (by a teacher, the guidance head and a student) that at least one of the art instructors helps prepare the portfolios for students planning on majoring in art at the post-secondary level. The student seemed appreciative and welcomed the support of this teacher. Another option may be to train students applying for art programs to take their own photographs for their portfolios. This is an authentic learning experience that will come in handy for those students throughout their life.

In discussions with students and parents it was evident that the high school art teachers do everything possible to provide students with opportunities to study art at advanced levels. To build community and dialog among advanced art students, the Visiting Team suggests that the Department develop an advanced art course (perhaps Advanced Placement). This would further the respect of the visual arts within the school community as it encouraged advanced students to bounce ideas off one another, to offer more rigorous and personal critiques, to create richer learning environments, and to help each other grow and develop deeper, more personal work. It must be said that we did not have the opportunity to visit the Art 4 class, where this may already be occurring.

The Visiting Team believes that the High School art program would benefit from an incorporation into a student's final GPA, particularly if the Department develops an advanced art option. This integration into the GPA would equalize the importance of art with other academic subjects such as math, science, and English. Finally, as stated in the Self-Study, further integration such as a capstone project across all subjects that allowed and encouraged students

that focused on the interdisciplinary aspect of a common project or common goal could benefit overall student development growth.

There is also room for an advanced art course and art history or humanities that could be team taught by interdepartmental faculty. As mentioned earlier in the report, parents and students would like to see more 3D and hands-on choices (woodshop, metal shop, welding, sewing) in the High School art electives.

Despite the many artistic disciplines offered at the high school, we did have a concern, also shared by some parents, that some of the classes in the even wider array of offerings at the middle school level did not have equivalents in high school. Students who have a wonderful experience with a particular medium or artistic discipline might not be able to build on their learning in that discipline. We understand that there is a risk of spreading the high school's art department too thin, but this is something to consider in the future if the population (or the demand for art classes) grows.

IV. FACILITIES & EQUIPMENT

Overview

The K-12 art program in the Weston Public Schools is well funded. Support for the program from administrators, the school board and the community is evident in the District's art classrooms/studios and in the equipment and supplies available to teachers and students. In most cases art classrooms are near the front of the school or centrally located so that art is a visible part of the school community.

Elementary Schools

The elementary schools have beautifully designed and well equipped art rooms. Each room has a Smart Board, ample storage space/closets, great light, plenty of windows, and its own kiln room. Many high schools in the area would envy the facilities and amenities in these elementary art classrooms. We can see no downside to these rooms, only the maximizing of a student's creativity.

The elementary classrooms are well equipped with projection technology and laptops. We observed the use of technology primarily to provide inspiration and samples for a given project as well as providing background information for historical context. Every elementary school we stepped into had an abundance of art displayed on the walls, in display cases, painted on windows, and hanging from ceilings. On entering each school there is no doubt that children inhabited the space and that they are treasured and celebrated. It is very obvious that the arts are valued by the entire school including administrators and non-teaching staff.

Middle School

Students have excellent access to technology, facilities, and equipment at both the middle school and high school. The middle school art rooms are large with good light from a wall of windows and the rooms are connected to allow free workflow from room to room. Workspace with large tables and storage space appear to be adequate for the size of the classes. Middle school students have use of iPads for the academic school year and the art teachers integrate technology into their instruction in all courses. It is used to support traditional art media and techniques and to explore ways that art and technology merge in new media. It was mentioned in the Self-Study that the air quality in the middle school art rooms is not good. Better ventilation and air conditioning will make the rooms more functional for various studio processes.

High School

The facilities and equipment at the high school are excellent for a public high school. Students are offered an array of courses from photography to ceramics to graphic design to film study. There seems to be no shortage of equipment to support instruction and student learning in these courses. Weston High School has a plethora of iMac computers available to students for their use as well as school licenses for top programs such as those included in the Adobe Creative Suite. These technology resources allow students to learn new technology skills and to expand their artistic and creative skills.

The art classrooms are very well equipped with the appropriate technology, general instructional technology and that are used for specific courses. Teachers appear to be comfortable utilizing Smart Boards and digital projectors within the classroom. The technology is seamlessly integrated into teacher instruction as well as student use in completing assignments. The computer labs offer students in the *Graphic Arts*, *Animation*, *Photography* and *Filmmaking* courses access to iMacs, graphics software, scanners, photo-quality printers, and large format printers. These courses, in fact, are heavily reliant on the technology.

We were impressed with the amount of display space in the high school and middle school. The large display areas on the walls and the three-sided free-standing displays in the middle school lobby afford teachers and students the opportunity to display a good deal of work at any one time, and the proximity of many of these display spaces to the art rooms can make it easier to change displays regularly.

In both the middle school and high school, the department can really be billed as an Art & Design department, since it has broadened the scope beyond the traditional fine arts and now includes darkroom and digital photography, animation, graphic design, and filmmaking. It seems that Weston's future visual art and design program is heading towards more focus in

creative problem solving incorporating technology and digital tools to support and enhance traditional studio art.

V. COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY

Overview

In the meetings with specific groups from the District (students, parents, teachers, principals and administrators) there was unanimous praise for Chris Fehl's leadership of and advocacy for the art program. The elementary, middle and high school art teachers and their respective programs are valued by all constituents and recognized as integral to the Weston Public Schools community. Classroom teachers and teachers from other disciplines stated specifically that the art program and art teachers are valued for all they contribute to the community. Parents of students at all levels spoke of the care and commitment shown by the art teachers. They stated their support for the Department's focus on students' engagement, creative exploration and responsiveness in their art courses.

The Visiting Team was able to meet with Patrick Kelly, of the High School Special Education Department during the three-day visit. Mr. Kelly considers the art teachers and the program a valuable environment for a variety of special needs students at WHS. Because of the open studio atmosphere, the students are able to gain independence in their art classes. Although it is based on narrative information rather than the number of enrollments (as mentioned in the Self-Study), it is clear that students from the special needs program are well-served by their art classes. The definition of "diversity criteria" as listed in the charges and as it applies here is bit unclear. There is little to document the Art Department's discussion of other diversity criteria issues in education such as gender, race, sexual orientation and religion.

Elementary Schools

In the parent forum, all parents showed much support for the art program and its teachers. They made special mention of the elementary teachers' ability to make each and every child feel special and valued. Although the Visiting Team met with parents/community members for only a short time, it was obvious that there was confusion surrounding the elementary art curriculum and its intent. While parents had much praise for the teachers and their caring, encouraging and supportive teaching methods, not one parent knew for certain the source of the curriculum concepts and projects. One parent expressed that there was a lack of continuity ("choppiness") to the curriculum, while many other parents expressed their belief that the art curriculum was directly tied to the classroom teachers and their curriculum. Integrating art into other subject areas is a widely used pedagogical practice appropriate to elementary school art as long as the art content remains primary focus in the art classes. This needs to be addressed, perhaps in an overarching district wide mission statement, or a school-based art mission statement.

The Visiting Team discussed this in depth after the parent forum, elementary school visits and teacher forum. It appears that that interaction and coordination with regular classroom teachers happens quite a lot although the art teachers usually propose the interdisciplinary projects. This might contribute to the parents' lack of clear understanding as to the progression of art content in the art classes. In addition to an art program mission statement, the revised curriculum maps mentioned earlier in the report could clarify the scope and sequence of the art content in the elementary art program. We support the elementary art teachers' initiative in developing interdisciplinary art project but recommend that teachers and the Department develop ways to make the knowledge, skills, and enduring understanding taught in the art classes clearly visible in curriculum documents, wall text accompanying displays of student work, and on school and art classroom websites.

Middle School and High School

The websites can be a great repository for all course expectations, curriculum outlines, lesson plans and grading criteria, useful as a method of communication for students, parents and teachers alike. There is a "home base" web site for the art department, and this can be utilized for conveying to parents and the community such information as departmental philosophy, the value of the visual arts and art-making, and the department's program of studies. Weston has an excellent art program, and it would do well to communicate the value of that program and the visual arts in general to the wider school community – its rigor, relevance, and application. A well developed website can promote the learning that takes place in the arts and illustrate how the thinking skills in studio art are beneficial to the general education of the student.

Currently, there are no course expectations (syllabi) handed out to students at the beginning of the semester. We have been informed that this is one of the charges of the department. The teachers seem clear on what they want students to know and be able to do. We are unsure if the majority of students are clear on what they are *learning* during a particular lesson or why it is important. In our meeting with students, they felt that the grading was fair, and they believed that the majority of their grade was based on effort. When asked, students seemed to know what was expected from them for each assignment/project. Teachers described specific project criteria that were more important for getting student projects to a finished state rather than for grading. Grading was, as the students believed, primarily based on personal investment, and such characteristics as ambition, consistency and risk-taking. In our meeting with parents, there were no concerns about the fairness or clarity of grading. We interpret this as support for the Department's assessment of student performance based on engagement, exploration and responsiveness to critical feedback. In examining the curriculum documents and course websites/blogs, we found little indication of what constitutes a "good", for example, compared with an "average". More detailed, descriptive explanations, guides or rubrics would be beneficial.

Weston's art teachers across all grade levels seem to reach out to other departments, and this is much appreciated by the faculty at large. Several projects described by art teachers and other members of the teaching staff that illustrated the art faculty's willingness and enthusiasm for working with other departments or in other disciplines. The sentiment was widespread, and the Art Department was commended for it by a number of parties. We encourage all involved in these interdisciplinary activities to be aware of the artistic and creative learning that is likely occurring as well. Rather than the visual arts being seen in these collaborations solely as a way to illustrate the concepts taught in academic subjects, teachers and students can look for ways to strengthen the understanding of art concepts, technical skills, and skills such as creative problem-solving and risk-taking. One example involved biology students engaged in building muscles onto replicas of human skeletons, using clay with the help of the ceramics teacher. This is a fantastic learning experience, as the physicality of the process no doubt strengthens the science students' understanding of origin and insertion points of the muscles, and how muscles are layered over each other and work together. It can also be used by sculpture students, or drawing students in the art courses, to gain a better understanding of those same concepts during a unit on figure drawing (where an understanding of the structure of the human body is critical to convincing and realistic results), perhaps with the help of the biology students as tutors. With this two-way collaboration, students in both disciplines would benefit even more from the experience.

Weston Visual Arts Program Survey

A report on results from the *Weston Public Schools Art Survey* (June 2013) was provided in the materials to be reviewed by the Visiting Team. The survey was offered to students and parents online to solicit feedback on a variety of issues about the K-12 visual arts program. The survey asked questions about students' interest in art, students' experiences of their visual arts classes, parents' impressions of their children's experiences with visual art classes, and the overall sense of the visual art program. Unfortunately, the format and results of this survey did not articulate its stated purpose. Although there was much quantitative information, we did not find it to be useful in understanding the effectiveness of the program nor how students and parents feel about the WPS K-12 art program. All of the qualitative feedback was from parents with little qualitative feedback from students. In the report, the substance of the feedback was presented in a paragraph with items separated by bullets. Any qualitative information would need to be better organized and visualized to reflect the true nature and substance of the respondents' comments. The survey would have to be designed primarily by the art teachers with a particular purpose in mind in order to elicit valid and usable information.

Despite our response to the existing survey, acquiring valid survey information could be an important step in examining the art program. We think that the Art Department is in an ideal position to use a more contemporary elicitation technique such as Metaphor Elicitation Technique rather than a "traditional" survey format. With further refinement of the survey

elicitation questions and other potential elicitation techniques involving imagery for qualitative information, the survey data can be extremely useful for contributing to the future of the Weston Public School's art program.

Conclusion

The members of the Visiting Team thank Chris Fehl, Ms. Amber Bock, Dr. Cheryl Maloney, the K-12 art teachers and all the teachers, principals, staff, students and parents who helped us in this review. We hope that our efforts will support the Art Department as it sets goals for the future of the K-12 art program.

Respectfully submitted by the Visiting Team:

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COMMENDATIONS

Curriculum

There is strong skill development in the art courses at all levels. In the middle school and high school, first year courses begin with more structure and subsequent courses discipline allow for more and more independence. The content of common high school courses taught by different teachers is well coordinated.

The art teachers at all levels plan challenging, complex learning experiences for their students. The K-12 art curriculum is well designed, substantive in art content and aligned with the Arts Curriculum Frameworks Learning Standards. At all levels the art teachers emphasize creative exploration and student choice.

There is much evidence of creative problem solving at all levels. Collaborative processes and projects are particularly noted at the middle school. Technology is integrated as appropriate (for instruction and for student work) into the art program at all levels.

In the high school, the level of student independence, particularly at more advanced levels, allows for experimentation, exploration, and truly independent student-directed study. High

school teachers demonstrate willingness to allow the time and resources for students to develop their own learning objectives as they work.

At the middle school and high school grading is based primarily on personal investment and characteristics such as consistency, ambition, risk-taking and responsiveness to feedback. Middle school and high school students feel clear on how they are being graded, or at least believe they are being graded fairly. Parents also seem clear on the grading policy (or are unconcerned).

Instruction

The Art Department is comprised of caring, dedicated professionals, sensitive to the needs of their students. The Weston K-12 art teachers bring passion and expertise in their respective areas to their classrooms.

The art teachers at all levels are enthusiastic in initiating collaboration with colleagues and making connections across disciplines. It was mentioned by their colleagues, and observed by all members of the Visiting Team, that the art teachers work continually to give their students a rich, authentic art experience.

Across all levels and schools the art teachers foster an atmosphere of creative exploration and experimentation with materials and ideas. In all schools we observed students making aesthetic decisions as they created work that was personal and meaningful.

The students at the middle and high school levels gave heartfelt, articulate support to the art program and teachers. The students obviously respect and trust their art teachers and care about the work they do in the program. High school students are confident that the art teachers try to tailor their art education to student interests as much as possible.

Program Design

Sufficient time is devoted to art at all levels (60 minutes at the elementary and middle schools, 76 minutes at the high school).

The class sizes at all levels are generally good. There seem to be no complaints, but smaller class sizes would allow for more individualized instruction, which would be advantageous particularly in the technical courses.

For the size of the middle school and high school, students have a good selection of courses from which to choose. The Department demonstrates flexibility in scheduling students at the high school to better serve the needs of individual students

Facilities & Equipment

In all Weston schools the facilities are excellent, with spacious art rooms, good storage space, and wall space for displaying student work both in and outside of most classrooms. Supplies to implement the curriculum are clearly adequate.

Communication and Community

The K-12 art teachers are truly a team. They like working together and have arranged a number of dedicated professional development opportunities to grow as educators and artists. Shared planning time is built into the block schedule at the high school, and the K-12 art staff meets twice a month, which allows for much planning and coordination between grade levels.

The site visits to other districts (documented in a concise and helpful manner), are evidence of the art teachers learning from the larger community of art educators. Make these a regular part of the teachers' professional development.

The artwork of students (and art teachers!) is prominently displayed in all schools. Centrally located display areas are an important part of each school's environment. An annual art show illustrates the comprehensive nature of the high school's art program – It is a true culmination of the art program, and is highly valued/praised by students, parents, teachers and administration.

The administration expresses strong support for the program, and the art teachers feel they are supported by the rest of the school and the community. The art department receives highly favorable reviews by students, parents and teachers at large.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Curriculum

At all levels:

Refine the curriculum maps for each course, beginning with courses that some teachers have in common. Focus on the purpose of the learning for each course and each lesson and communicate those reasons in the curriculum maps and syllabi.

At all levels:

Develop common assessments that are based on the same essential questions and learning goals for common courses. Develop a more descriptive common framework for assessment, a general grading criteria that is easily understood by students and parents and included in course documents (explanations, guidelines, or rubrics).

Instruction

Middle School and High School

Provide written feedback on student work (summative assessment) – clarity on why students received the grades they did.

Middle School and High School

Balance the development of technical skill-building with developing and evaluating meaningful, sophisticated content through formal discussion, brainstorming and writing. There seems to be a need for regular peer reviews through critiques, and sometimes through writing, to extend learning.

Program Design

High School

Develop an advanced art course (perhaps an Advanced Placement course) that would warrant inclusion in a student's GPA.

Consider the addition of Art History, or a team-taught Humanities course co-taught by art, music, and academic teachers.

Continue to develop interdisciplinary projects that emphasize the artistic benefits of the interdisciplinary projects, rather than using art solely to illustrate points of the other disciplines.

Communication and Community

Make use of the many art museums and sites in the area with more frequent field trips for students at all levels.

Continue to develop ways to communicate the value of the visual arts to the wider school community via web sites, web galleries, syllabi and newsletters.