Helping City Schools Bring a Taste of the Arts to Students

BY ABBY GOODNOUGH

After a long morning of drills in reading, third graders at Public School 156 in Brownsville, Brooklyn, spent an hour last Friday afternoon in the studio center of flamenco music. Their small hands spiraled and their stepliners thumped as a professional dancer, Andrea Del Conte, guided them through stumps and whirls in a classroom with mirrored walls and glossy floors.

Dance is an indispensable part of the curriculum for all 150 students at P.S. 156, along with music, art and creative writing. Poems paper the school walls, parents sew costumes for special dance performances, and teachers casually point students to daily artistic experiences linked to the subjects they are studying. Flamenco, for example, ties into social studies and language arts lessons on the history and culture of Spain.

The school has developed a comprehensive arts program not on its own, but in partnership with the city. New York City's nonprofit cultural institutions whose employees have advised the teachers helped write the curriculum and frequently visited the classrooms to teach students about different art forms.

For the last two decades, schools like P.S. 156 have increasingly turned to the city's universities, concert halls and museums for lessons in art, music and dance. They began to do so in the 1980's, when the city's near-bankruptcy eliminated hundreds of arts instructors. Now, cultural institutions such as the New York Philharmonic and as small as neighborhood dance troupes have become a permanent part of the city's educational landscape. Even though the city is investing in arts education again, the institutions are playing a greater role than ever, not just giving occasional performances or tours as they once did, but helping schools retool their curriculums to integrate art, music and dance into every academic subject.

The universities are becoming more involved not just to improve arts education, but out of self-interest. They want to cultivate future audiences and squeeze potential donors at a time when improving public education is considered an especially pressing and lucrative cause.

Carnegie Hall spends close to $1 million a year training teachers to use music in the classroom, putting on concerts for schoolchildren and sending teaching materials to 22 schools across the city for seven visits per class over a school year. The Roundabout Theater sends teaching artists to 60 classrooms in the city in 10 years each. Those artists teach students about reading, writing, directing and acting in plays as part of their language arts and social studies curriculums.

And artists from Lotus Music and Dance Studios, which works intensively with six schools across the city, including P.S. 156, teaching students about the music and dance of different cultures.

The enthusiasm for such programs is striking at a time when city schools are under intense pressure to prepare students for increasingly rigorous standardized tests. But while Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani and Chancellor Richard H. W. Carranza have given schools the freedom to focus on reading and math, they have also increased the arts education budget by $130 million since fiscal year 1997, providing about $1,000 an art and music teacher and 1,100 public school libraries.

The keenness is not enough to bring the arts into every classroom, but in this flush economy, private foundations are joining cultural institutions in spending money on arts education partnerships. Most notably, the philanthropic Olana W. Annenberg pledged $13 million to New York City schools in 1993 for academic offerings in the arts in a matching-fund program that is to total $26 million. So far, 61 schools have received grants, most of them $75,000 a year, to develop programs with nonprofit institutions.

"The question now is whether to teach the arts, but how to put them at the core of everything a school does," said JoAnn Hedrick, executive director of the Center for Arts Education, which oversees the Annenberg partnerships.

Even with the infusion of money and the enthusiasm of cultural institutions, progress in arts education is slow. Some institutions report tensions with teachers who say the programs occupy too much of their time. And so far, only the most motivated schools are truly integrating the arts into their curriculums, a process that requires extra work and money and a willingness to change teaching styles and methods drastically.

At top, fourth graders at P.S. 156 in Brooklyn practice flamenco dancing as Andrea Del Conte, above, of Lotus Music and Dance Studios, instructs them.

Getting help to work music, art and dance into the curriculum.

Palmades, N.Y. "We still need to teach the basic skills, but students today need an education that recognizes a much wider range of intellectual abilities and ways of communicating," said Ken Robin- son, co-chairman of the conference and a professor of arts education at the University of Warwick in England.

Despite the booming economy, most arts organizations charge schools a fee for their expertise, ranging from a few dollars per student for a single lecture or performance to upward of $20,000 for one period of 50 minutes. Ms. Robinson said that Lotus is paying about $40,000 this year to incor- porate dance into the school's curricu- lum.

At P.S. 156 last week, the principal, Martha Rodriguez-Torres, was appr- oaching a teacher at an aide who were learning steps with the young flamenco dancers. "We then walked down to the ball to offer encouragement to fifth graders writing poems and me about things that comfort them — part of a project on Native Americans that uses the help of another cultural group, Teachers and Writers Collaborative.

"Come on, Dennis, let me find the idea flow through you!" she told a boy who had put down his pencil after writing one line. And she clipboarded when another student read a poem that began, "Oh dresser drawer, you smell so good with your aroma of fried chicken ."

Mrs. Rodriguez-Torres said that reading and math scores at P.S. 156, while still relatively low, have improved since the school won an Annenberg grant two years ago that has allowed it to work closely with cultural groups and teacher training by several teaching artists.

"It takes so much extra work to start something like this," said Verano LaBlue, the arts education specialist at Lotus Music and Dance Studios, which is paying $150,000 to work with the school.

"We are still halfway through the year," Ms. Rodriguez-Torres said. "But we are seeing more improvements than I thought last year.

"Our reading scores have improved every year, and I can say that our children are starting to enjoy reading," she said. "That's a big improvement."

One way of getting families to value the arts as much as they value math is to measure student progress with traditional assessment tools, and New York State has started doing so by introducing standards that outline what students should learn through arts instruction. But too many art teachers are impatient with a consultant who is trying to measure the effectiveness of the Annenberg pro- grams, said educators still are not sure how to assess a student's grasp of such "immeasurable" subjects as music and painting.

"We are not going to be taken seriously, they have to be held account- able in the same way that other disciplines are," said Ms. Rodriguez-Torres. "But we are still some distance from figuring out the best way to do that."