

CHATTANOOGA CENTER FOR CREATIVE ARTS

Center for Creative Arts is a fine arts magnet school for grades six through twelve. We have had the good fortune to be involved in school reform for five years as the result of the SNS high school initiative. The last three years have been particularly productive for us as we have become more focused and thoughtful in our questions, more honest and reflective in our answers, and more willing to take risks to create systemic reform for our school. The following questions have served us well in our work:

- 1) What do we envision for our students, school, and community five years from now?
- 2) How can we work together to accomplish these goals?
- 3) How can we make arts and academics equally challenging and engaging?
- 4) How can we improve instruction so all students can achieve at high levels?
- 5) How can we continue to build on the structural and organizational changes we have in place?

What do we envision for our students, school, and community five years from now?

While the MSNS grant will be a four year initiative, it's important for CCA to build on the momentum created in our previous work. Five years from now, Center for Creative Arts will truly exemplify our vision: "Illuminating Dreams of Passion, Acceptance, Creativity, and Excellence." We will illuminate dreams by:

- scaffolding an integrated curriculum grades 6-12
- developing independent, reflective learners
- utilizing scaffolded school-wide rubrics
- assessing longitudinal student performance in academics and in the arts through a variety of strategies
- assisting students/teachers in developing personal learning plans
- using best practices as the cornerstone of instruction
- advancing all students to their maximum success
- creating meaningful student/adult relationships
- involving community partners in meaningful ways
- moving students seamlessly from fifth grade to freshman year in college
- modeling what a school for a new society should be.

Raysheequa's Story

Raysheequa got off the bus excited to be at CCA. All her life, her passion has been performing—singing, dancing, acting, and playing the piano. And now her dreams were coming true. In the two years she had already been at CCA, she had felt herself change. The transition to middle school was difficult, but her teachers had worked hard to help her gain the skills needed to be successful, from using her agenda mate, to dealing with social issues, to writing better. She would never have made it through seventh grade without her peer-study group! Now, nearing the end of her eighth grade year, she felt confident about her ability to make it in high school. She was on her way to earning 3.5 credits—with a decent GPA, too!

"I don't know exactly what it is," she had told her mother last night after rehearsal. "I mean, school is hard, but it's exciting. Like yesterday, I understood the reason we were having trouble in ballet because of the lesson in physical science on force. When our choreography group talked about it, we were able to solve the problem and now our dance is coming together. I wrote a reflection about it in English and my teacher complimented me on how I used a semicolon."

"Sounds like it's all coming together for you girl," her mother replied.

"It is, mama, it is! It's like all my dreams are coming true—I get to dance, people like me for who I am, we're always trying new things, and my grades are better than ever. I'm so glad we chose CCA for me."

How can we work together to accomplish these goals?

As a school, we have become skilled at asking pointed questions of our students, families, teachers, and community partners, using the data to serve as a catalyst for change. Focus groups, student-led conferences, school generated surveys, and standardized assessments will continue to be used as a way to engage all shareholders in the work of pushing our good school to become a great school. In the 2006-2007 school year, CCA will move our professional learning community to a deeper level by instituting individual professional growth plans and embedded differentiated professional development based on teacher need. Teachers will become reflective practitioners.

How can we make arts and academics equally challenging and engaging?

Vertical teaming will be an integral part of creating equally challenging and engaging arts and academics. These teams will meet quarterly and will be comprised of department members grades six through twelve as well as representatives from the arts faculty. This configuration will allow our school to build on our strengths and to scaffold skills. Our arts classes will fully implement juries in dance, music, and theatre with all seniors taking senior seminar, CCA's equivalent to senior projects.

How can we improve instruction so all students can achieve at high levels?

CCA took a bold risk and embarked on a year long action research project focusing on rigor. Our findings have led us to our next phase of reform as articulated in our plan. As we seek to illuminate dreams of passion, acceptance, creativity, and excellence, CCA will embark on the most difficult reform efforts to date. In order to significantly impact student learning, we must change the nature of instruction and the focus of our conversations. We will develop and use school wide rubrics in the areas of oral presentations, writing, and research. CCA will intentionally embed literacy strategies, process skills, and study skills across content areas and grade levels helping students become independent reflective life-long learners. We will implement the rubrics for rigorous teaching and learning created from our year long focus on rigor. We will provide additional instruction in math. CCA will engage our faculty in quarterly vertical planning and weekly collaborative planning for grades six, seven, and nine.

How can we continue to build on the structural and organizational changes we have in place?

CCA does an excellent job in making new students feel welcome and accepted. However, we realize we need to increase the number and quality of transition activities and support provided to sixth, ninth, and twelfth grade students throughout the school year. Currently CCA has no continuum of support for students. While we have directed studies and advisory programs, we have come to the realization that we need a well developed system of support. The 2006-2007 school year will focus on the implementation of small groups developed and implemented by the guidance office as the first phase in creating a comprehensive support system. We will enhance our advisory program more effectively to meet the developmental needs of our students in grades six through eight, transitional needs of our sixth, ninth and twelfth graders and academic achievement for our tenth and eleventh graders. Our master schedule for the 2006-2007 school year was developed based on the answer to the following focus questions, resulting in a schedule that increases course offerings for upper grades, exploratory for sixth and seventh grades, and teaming for sixth, seventh, and ninth grade with built in collaborative planning.

- 1) Is our schedule student or staff centered?
- 2) Are additional courses needed to assist 9th grade transition?
- 3) What is the goal of senior seminar/project this year?
- 4) Can we achieve 9th grade teaming this year?
- 5) How can we continue to improve ACT scores within our present schedule?
- 6) How does our schedule reflect our emphasis on rigor?
- 7) Is our goal to continue adding AP classes?
- 8) Is the present middle school schedule adequate for middle school learning?

The last and most substantial structure is a deep change in the way CCA approaches professional development. What we painfully acknowledge is that the hardest work is what we must undertake next. Until we make substantive changes in teacher efficacy and classroom instruction, we will not be able to take the next step forward as a school. Without increased accountability and greater professional learning, we will continue to make peripheral changes that do not get at the heart of the matter: the learning that happens in the classroom. In order for us to become a school that models what a school for a new society should be we must move our professional learning community into greater effectiveness. We are implementing differentiated professional development based on self-assessment of the "Rubric for Rigorous Teaching: How Does the Teacher Nurture Rigorous Learning?" Teachers will be organized into small learning groups based on their own professional needs. Each teacher will be asked to develop his/her own professional growth plan with stated goals and measures for evaluation. We feel this radical shift will not only create a change in the types of conversations in which teachers are engaged, but will reflect what is meant by job embedded professional development while creating reflective practitioners. Our vertical and collaborative teams will further sharpen the emphasis on instruction by routinely examining student work using protocols as found in critical friends groups. These professional development strategies are paramount as we work toward systemic reform at CCA.