



National A+ Schools Conference

Conference Overview: The first A+ Schools National Conference was held in Greensboro, North Carolina December 4-6, 2006. The three-day interactive conference was part of a two-year project to document and present the development and evaluation of the A+ Schools Program since its inception in 1993. The Conference title, *Frog Ballet: The Art and Science of School Re-form*, was inspired by an arts-integrated unit of study designed and implemented by three middle school teachers in an A+ School. (Please see the Conference Program.)

The Conference, and the post-conference documentation in progress now, were designed to increase national awareness of and accessibility to the A+ Schools Program beyond the initial North Carolina, Oklahoma and Arkansas programs. The conference also provided an opportunity to look at the past, current and future role of the arts in education and school reform from many perspectives, which will be reflected in the documentation.

Conference Design: The Conference, which was designed by a ten-member National Planning and Advisory Committee using the A+ model of engagement and collaboration, was organized around four strands—research, education leadership/practice, funding and policy. Sessions were designed to look at what we've learned over the last ten years about A+ and similar arts-based programs. Sessions included: researcher presentations and dialogue with other strands; what the research looks like in practice; and targeted conversations to make sense of our learning and propose an agenda for the future.

The design of the conference was carefully planned so that “A+-ness was evident”, as stated by Eric Booth, nationally recognized dramatist, teacher, and writer, who skillfully facilitated the Conference proceedings. A section in the Conference Program, *Documenting the Conference Process*, invited participants to engage in specific roles in shaping the content of the Conference and reflecting on the proceedings. This “constructivist” approach successfully captured the unique perspectives and experiences of the participants, which influenced what happened at the Conference as well as the documentation in progress and the agenda for the future.

Participants and Presenters: While the 125 participants at the Conference represented the four strands targeted by the Conference, the majority of attendees were from the “Leadership/Practice” and “Research” strands. Funders primarily represented public funding agencies and while local, state and national policy makers attended, they represented only a fraction of the attendees.

The opening keynote speaker, Sir Ken Robinson from the Getty Center, inspired the audience with his message about the need for arts in education. The closing keynote speaker, Governor Mike Huckabee, encouraged participants with his commitment to advocate for arts in education through his work as governor of Arkansas and as chair of the Education Commission of the States. Conference general sessions and breakout sessions were facilitated by A+ researchers, Fellows, principals, and teachers with support from parents and community partners.

Reflections from the Conference: Conference participants completed “Daily Reflections” forms assessing each day with open-ended comments. Based on a preliminary summary from one of the researchers, participants felt that “the desired dialogue had happened and connections were made.” Additionally, participants reported that specific foci were decided upon for further work (individually and in groups): desire to broaden the conversation and to expand the program; growing state to state collaboration; parent communication; enriched assessment; and general optimism about the applicability and implementation of

A+. Participant “Reflections” were extremely positive each day with the majority stating that this was the most engaging and informative conference they had ever attended. The researchers from all three states agreed.

Preliminary Conference Results: The Conference and planning process marked transitions in a number of ways. There was recognition of the unique partnership comprised by the three states while noting similarities and appreciating differences. The Conference allowed A+ participants from the three states and from pilot A+ schools in other regions of the country to forge a sense of identity—a sense of belonging to a significant community of success and inquiry that now has a national focus. All of the researchers from the three states established a new “network within the larger A+ Network” and the collaboration has continued beyond the Conference. The Conference was also characterized by a surge of energy from the participants about advocacy and dissemination. There were delegations from several new locations (Wisconsin, Oregon, Florida and districts in North Carolina and Arkansas) which resulted in post-Conference communication and follow-up to establish new A+ pilot schools or add A+ schools to existing state networks.