



# The A+ Schools Program: The Big Picture

## DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY

- The A+ Schools Program is a whole-school reform model that views the arts as fundamental to teaching and learning in all subjects.
- Building on the work of two pilot A+ Schools in Wilmington and Southport, NC in 1993, the current Program was initiated and managed by the Kenan Institute for the Arts from 1995-2003 when it was moved to UNCG as a Special Program within the Office of the Provost.
- The Program began with 25 NC schools in 1995 and currently includes 42 schools in 25 counties that represent the demographics of all North Carolina schools.
- The North Carolina A+ Schools Network is guided by the A+ Essentials™ created by the schools.
- The Program is jointly funded by the NC General Assembly, grants from private foundations, fees for contracted services, participating school districts, and UNCG. It has also received funding in the past from federal grants, and currently has multiple federal grant and foundation proposals pending.

## PROGRAM SCOPE AND STATISTICS

- The Program is currently staffed with three full-time positions: an Executive Director, a Program Director, and an Administrative Assistant. Other Program support is contracted on an as-needed basis.
- A+ has developed 50 master teachers and teaching artists (A+ Fellows) over the past 13 years who serve as trainers to conduct the professional development with the schools.
- A+ serves in a consulting role with initiatives in other states to establish statewide A+ Schools networks (Oklahoma A+ Schools and Arkansas A+ Schools Network) and pilot sites in school districts in Michigan, Wisconsin, and North and South Dakota.
- North Carolina's A+ Schools at-a-glance:
  - 34 Elementary schools (including 3 K-8, 1 K-6 and 1 4-6 school)
  - 6 middle schools
  - 2 high schools
  - 9 magnet schools
  - 30 Title I schools (71% of A+ Schools are Title I compared to 50% of all NC schools)
  - 26 schools have more than 2 arts positions
  - 18,000 students served
  - 1,700 teachers, administrators and teacher assistants served

## RESEARCH-BASED RESULTS AND NATIONAL RECOGNITION

- A+ conducted an intensive 4-year evaluation of the A+ initiative (Noblit, Corbit, Wilson, 1995-1999) which showed significant effects on schools, communities, teachers and students including:

- **Instructional Strategies** – Teachers changed their instructional strategies to be more engaging and experiential, which enhanced learning for all students.
  - **Assessment Strategies** – Teachers developed richer, more substantive and authentic classroom assessments.
  - **Student Benefits** – Researchers found the A+ approach to teaching equally beneficial to all groups of students regardless of cognitive development, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.
  - **School Improvement** – Schools increased their organizational capacity and shared leadership to sustain the innovation; strengthened their school identity and increased channels of communication; increased parent affiliation with the school; and expanded community partnerships.
  - **Academic Environment** – Teachers designed enriched academic environments – more ways for students to “understand” and demonstrate understanding of the Curriculum – with improved assessment results.
  - **Standardized Tests** – Test scores increased (and continue to do so) at a level equal to or greater than other schools across the state, but A+ schools were able to demonstrate this increase without narrowing the curriculum or sacrificing a balanced curriculum that included social studies, science, physical education and the arts.
- A follow-up study (Noblit, Corbit, Wilson, 2003) funded by the Ford Foundation demonstrated the sustainability and resilience of the A+ Schools Program as a whole-school reform after 8 years, unusual in the history of school reform.
  - A+ Researchers attributed the Program’s success to the unique role of the arts, the high-quality, ongoing professional development, and the creation of a Network of schools which increased communication and collaborative planning within and among those schools.
  - The Program is now nationally recognized as an effective, research-based strategy for sustainable school reform, has been highlighted in several national studies and publications, and has been endorsed by the NC Department of Public Instruction in two publications (*A Balanced Curriculum*, Elementary and Middle School versions).

#### **A+ PARTNERSHIPS AND PROFESSIONAL ENGAGEMENT**

- A+ partners with state, national and international institutions and organizations including:
  - A 4-year project with Appalachian State University to establish 7 new A+ Schools in western NC;
  - Development and implementation of an arts-integrated course for NC State University’s first cohort of Elementary Education majors;
  - Partnerships with the NC Department of Public Instruction, the NC Arts Council, Arts NC, the NC Museum of Art, the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County (MD), the Kenan Institute for the Arts, the US Department of Education, and national organizations including the Arts Education Partnership and Americans for the Arts;
  - Partnership since 1998 with Creative Partnerships in London, UK, an A+-inspired initiative.
- A+ has developed a Teaching Artist Training Model to train professional teaching artists to work with classroom teachers to integrate arts and the curriculum.
- A+ conducts annual A+ Schools “Best Practices” conferences, providing professional development for hundreds of teachers, administrators and teaching artists who work with schools.