

Arts Education As Opportunity: An Interview with Deputy Chancellor Dr. Marcia Lyles

By Kira Raffel, Director of Public Engagement

Dr. Marcia Lyles, New York City Schools Deputy Chancellor for Teaching and Learning has risen through the ranks of the New York City Department of Education to become the chief official in charge of curriculum and teaching policies. A life long New Yorker, Dr. Lyles is one of the few high ranking DOE officials to have gone through the public school system both as a student and educator. She has lived or worked in every borough and has been a teacher, assistant principal, program administrator and district and regional superintendent. On January 9, 2008, I visited the NYC DOE headquarters at the Tweed Courthouse in downtown Manhattan for a precious few minutes with this busy new Deputy Chancellor to discuss the state, role and future of arts education in our schools.

The Visit to Tweed

As the former Education Policy Analyst for Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, walking in to the central New York City Department of Education office otherwise known as Tweed was something I had done many times before for Panel for Educational Policy or legislative meetings. In those instances I had been ushered in and out of the assigned meeting room with little notice of the day to day goings on at Tweed. But as I entered the Chancellor's Office expecting to see a corner office marked off for Dr. Lyles, I was greeted by two familiar faces – Chief Family Engagement Officer Martine Guerrier and her Chief of Staff Melissa Harris. Though excited to see each other, we spoke in low tones so as not to disturb the dozens of people – including Dr. Lyles – sharing the bullpen. It was surprising to see NYC DOE staff of all levels sitting in the same open area with absolutely no sense of hierarchy.

Melissa showed me to the spacious conference room where I would wait for Dr. Lyles. Countless meetings were already taking place around me – the openness was again astounding. At the table next to me was Chief Accountability Officer James Liebman speaking with a staffer. Martine was meeting with a parent just a few seats away. I couldn't help but feel like I was back in the student lounge in my old

high school, where multiple study groups buzzed about simultaneously.



I had worked with Dr. Lyles on a few occasions during my days with the Brooklyn Borough President's office. We met to discuss progress in Region 8 and other issues. Dr. Lyles struck me then as a serious woman who had the heavy weight of a struggling region on her shoulders. The Dr. Lyles I found now seemed to have a new lightness and optimism about her and was genuinely happy to meet with me. What could have been interpreted as a rushed and distracted atmosphere was in fact welcoming. Unfazed by all the groups around us, Dr. Lyles and I spoke frankly about arts education in the context of equity, her chief concern.

Dr. Lyles joins the Chorus

Her dedication to equity stems from her own experience in the NYC public school system and the disparity in expectations from one school to the next. A smart and savvy student, Dr. Lyles was constantly skipping class at Benjamin Franklin High School in Harlem school while remaining a top student. It took one mistake for her aunt to find out about these absences and transfer her to Jamaica High School in Queens, over an hour away. Suddenly she was challenged in a new way because, as she recounts, high expectations were made clear. For example, students at Benjamin Franklin were only required to complete one semester in the arts in order to graduate. That one semester was a patchwork of teasers – a few weeks of visual art, a few weeks of music, some theater thrown in, etc. At Jamaica High, however, young Marcia was surprised to learn her arts credits did not transfer. The cursory level of instruction at her previous

school was not sufficient to fulfill Jamaica's requirement for instruction in a single discipline taught thoroughly and sequentially. So the future Deputy Chancellor found herself in chorus, but refused to give me a sampling of her repertoire.

Having experienced such a disparate range of expectations between schools, Dr. Lyles does not believe these chasms still exist systemically. "We have a stronger sense of equity and an understanding of the need for a well rounded education, a complete education," she said, adding that there is an expectation for all students to receive quality arts instruction and that the arts are not something that can be relegated to learning only at home. Her reference to arts education as part of a well rounded, complete education was especially encouraging: it is an imperative we at CAE base our work on!

The Impact of Arts Education

We also discussed the place of arts education in the day of a child who brings to school a host of external issues or is severely instructionally behind. The arts give students "more opportunities for success, satisfaction and accomplishment," she stated, reaffirming her stance on its essential place in education. "The arts aren't fluffy. They engage students on a different level. Some principals understand that more than others."

It became very clear that Dr. Lyles has used the arts to help her understand what motivates each child and therefore enable success. As a teaching student, in standing before the Board of Examiners to acquire her teaching license, she presented ideas for integrating arts into English classes through things like screenplay analysis and playwriting. The Board questioner assumed she had an arts background but she was quick to correct him and explain that, while she considers herself very inartistic, she knows how to reach a child and give him or her reasons to come to school.

This instinct for creative ways of achieving success with students was fostered under her superintendent mentor, Dr. Arthur Greenberg, who currently serves on CAE's Board. She recalls working with him in that

way one recalls a favorite teacher. “He was an expert on human nature and leadership. He always managed to bring ideas out of me and I find that to be the most powerful way of teaching.”

Identifying Arts Opportunities

With Dr. Lyles’ understanding of the importance of arts education, naturally I wondered what her plans were to enhance and support it. “I just got the applications for the National Endowment for the Humanities yesterday!” she enthused, referring to the new “Picturing America” initiative which uses art as a catalyst for the study of American History for K-12 curriculum. Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein had gotten wind of the program and

sent it to Dr. Lyles for serious consideration and she is already at work applying on behalf of 1400 schools. Dr. Lyles is also working with a recording industry organization to build links between some of the City’s Career and Technical Education schools to expose students to some of the behind the scenes jobs, much like CAE’s Career Development Program model. Dr. Lyles also sees opportunities for partnership with CAE, especially in identifying which schools and students are being served and which are not.

For Dr. Lyles, education is about equity, high expectations and evidence in every school that students are engaged in

thinking about their futures. She points to arts education as a key component in getting children to see things differently and thereby widening their opportunities for the future.

While our time together may have been short, I came away from our meeting feeling optimistic about the future. While CAE may not always perfectly align with some of the ideas coming from Tweed, we are all working to ensure the best possible education for New York City children and I am confident that there remains lots of promise for making the arts part of every child’s education in the near future.