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Duncan praises D.C. preschool-for-all policy during visit to Brightwood Education Campus

By Emma Brown, October 29, 2013



Education Secretary Arne Duncan paid a visit Monday to the District's Brightwood Education Campus, where he observed a classroom of 4-year-olds who took turns gleefully banging on a drum for each syllable in their names.

The visit was meant to highlight an effort to use art to teach young children early concepts in science and math. And it was part of Duncan's [broader campaign](#) to sell the Obama administration's preschool-for-all initiative.

The District offers public preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds, regardless of income — a step beyond the \$75 billion federal program Duncan is pushing, which would provide grants to states that enroll 4-year-olds from low- and moderate-income families.

"D.C. is way ahead of where the country is trying to go," Duncan said.

The children in the Brightwood classroom were coached by Laura Schandelmeier, an artist who is visiting weekly for about four months, teaching lessons that use dance and music to reinforce science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) concepts.

Schandelmeier's visits are sponsored by the [Wolf Trap Foundation](#), which uses federal grant funds to send artists focused on math and science into 17 early childhood classrooms in the District — and dozens of classrooms in Maryland and Virginia. The goal is to show how arts can be used to strengthen STEM education for young children, and to leave classroom teachers with lessons and strategies that they can use throughout the year.

Wolf Trap is in the midst of researching how the initiative is affecting student achievement. But Brightwood teacher Kalpana Kumar-Sharma, who has been partnering with Wolf Trap artists for a decade, said it's clear: The arts help students internalize abstract engineering concepts, from patterns to inclined planes.

"It's just like magic, the way they learn, the way they open up," she said. "It's amazing."

Advocates pushing to improve STEM education often focus on high school and occasionally on middle school, said Lester Lyles, a Wolf Trap board member. "But everyone is missing early childhood," he said. "That's where you infuse the idea that science, technology and math are fun, not something to be afraid of."

Duncan followed his classroom visit with a roundtable discussion about how to scale up efforts such as Wolf Trap's so that art and science become commonplace in early childhood education in the District and around the country.

Joining him were national advocates of arts education and a number of local figures: Chancellor Kaya Henderson, Washington Teachers Union President Elizabeth Davis, D.C. Council Member Muriel Bowser (D-Ward 4) and State Superintendent of Education Jesús Aguirre.

Bowser said that the District has seen improvements in local schools, and "now we want to see them faster and everywhere." Mary Lord, a member of the State Board of Education, echoed that sentiment.

"We have a common vision of what excellence and quality look like, and now, like many school districts, we're struggling with the equity part," she said.