

MONOGRAPHS

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AN ARTS MAGNET

by Joseph Golden, President and CEO
Spirit Square Center for the Arts, Charlotte, North Carolina

The invasion will begin in late August, 1993.

A vanguard of some 250 junior and senior class high school students will storm into the normally sedate and decorous galleries, theaters and studios of the Spirit Square Center for the Arts in Charlotte, North Carolina.

A monster field trip — the kind that make docents and security folk tremble? A big league form of cultural saturation to imbue a taste for the arts?

No. The 250 feisty kids will be going to school. From 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., five days a week, one of the community's major cultural facilities, located in the heart of center city's cultural district, will become a bona fide public schoolhouse. It will have all the traditional trappings: a Principal, a faculty, an assortment of classrooms.

But a traditional school it is not. It is an Arts Magnet School. And the perpetrators of the Magnet — the Board of Education and the District Superintendent — recognized that a collaboration with an existing arts resource would more efficiently, effectively and economically serve the purpose of a learning environment for uncommonly talented teenagers.

An uncommonly good piece of thinking.

Where better to study the performing arts than in a facility with three theaters, constantly in use for all manner of theatrical and musical events. Where better to study visual arts than in a facility with seven exhibition galleries that constantly rotate shows, often featuring the artists themselves on premises. Where better to study dance than in a facility with two dance studios, sprung floors and all, and the chance to rub leotards with, say, the visiting Alvin Ailey dance troupe. And where better to develop the skills of painting, ceramics, weaving, dyeing, print-making or

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sculpture than in a facility with fully-equipped studios, designed expressly for those purposes, spaces regularly occupied by professional artists and craftspersons working in those media.

Synergism — in a remarkably enlightened form.

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Spirit Square suffers — as many art centers do, but hate to admit — from a paucity of people traffic during daytime business hours. From 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., galleries, studios and theaters are morbidly barren of visitors; tomb-like, in fact.

The school district, on the other hand, having made the philosophic commitment to the magnet school concept, sees no virtue in dunning oppressed taxpayers for the enormous cost of creating, from scratch, auditoria, galleries or dance studios.

Quid pro quo.

Having a real, but specialized, public school on the premises of a multi-disciplinary arts center may seem experimental, and possibly even awkward — i.e., will damage be done to the building? (Probably, but fixable.) Will other program schedules be compromised in any way? (A lot, we'd guess, but nothing tragic.) Does a Magnet School conform to the agency's Mission? (Definitely. If it didn't, we'd rewrite it.)

Whatever stress or dislocation may occur is, we believe, worth it. This is an adventure in arts education on a grand scale, doubling the value, educationally, of all the programming we normally do in the performing and visual arts. The reanimation of the facility, the "capturing" of young minds (with all those implications for the future), the privilege of sharing in sharpening the aesthetic literacy of young people, and, above all, being energized by the volatility and exuberance of the students, will make a few trade-offs inconsequential.

Spirit Square is, incidentally, only one piece of the Arts Magnet venture. Other cultural resources, uniquely concentrated in a three-block area of Uptown Charlotte, will become part of an Arts Magnet "campus." The kids will need a library; why create one? The main branch of the County Library System is right next door, with a performing arts section already in place. Running short of classroom or theater

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spaces? A new three-theatre performing arts complex, opened in November of '92, is one block away. Need exposure to real world arts business? Four commercial art galleries are just across the street. A school with walls. A school without walls.

For the Arts Magnet student group, the theoretical and the practical will merge into a dynamic of learning that could not possibly occur in a traditional schoolhouse setting. Classroom instruction in scene design, for instance, will take on a critical relevance when the students observe, and take part in, the logistics and stress of off-loading and setting-up a touring production of "As You Like It." Handcraft students will develop a keen sense of the marketplace when they accompany the manager of the Gift Shop on a buying excursion to craft trade shows. And Magnet School productions — of music, dance or theater — will go "on the road," touring to all the other schools in the District, models of what peers can accomplish.

The concept of an Arts Magnet School — a strategy that incorporates the disciplines of basic education with intensive training in art, music, dance and theater — is certainly not a Charlotte, North Carolina, invention. They are all over the country — Washington, D.C., Cincinnati, Dallas, Milwaukee, Ft. Lauderdale, even the South Bronx.

What sets apart the Charlotte version is the remarkable partnership being forged between an existing, full-service, multi-arts center and a public school district, each fulfilling its respective educational mandates by reinforcing one another.

In the national and continuing quest to reaffirm the relevance of the arts to a community's character, the partnership is a giant step.

Will it work? Check back in June 1994.

Editor's Note: A voter referendum to approve funding for the magnet school failed by just 62 votes late in 1992, resulting in the delay of this project. The referendum will be back on the ballot within the year, and the author is confident that it will pass, with the school starting shortly thereafter.

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