

Task & You Shall Receive: Wisconsin's Forces for 21st Century Arts Education

New, critical support for arts education is mounting from business, government, and education. Wisconsin leaders are capitalizing on these opportunities in unparalleled ways.

By Karin Wolf, Arts Program Administrator, [Madison Arts Commission](#), City of Madison, Wisconsin

On a cool Wisconsin evening in early September, dozens upon dozens of people gathered at the Promega Corporation's world headquarters in Fitchburg, WI, to honor a distinguished guest on the occasion of his 91st birthday. Promega Corporation has offices in 12 countries and is a worldwide leader in innovative biochemistry and molecular biology technology. Though their special visitor was someone who was carefully selected to be an inspiration to employees, he was not a

famous scientist or leader in biotech sales. In fact, his success did rely on a finely tuned understanding of chemistry and a knack for business, but that is not why he was invited.

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The 91-year-old photographer Pedro Guerrero was being honored for his ability to capture the boldness of the inventive spirit. Promega's Director of Exhibitions, Daniel Swadener, curated an exhibition titled "Pedro Guerrero: Beyond Frank Lloyd Wright" and invited Guerrero to

attend the art opening cum birthday bash. The exhibition showcased some of Guerrero's most soul-capturing photographs of artists such as Louise Nevelson and Alexander Calder, as well as the work Guerrero is best known for—his iconographic images of Frank Lloyd Wright.

On the overview page of the company's website, Promega claims to "provide its employees with an outstanding work environment designed to foster innovation and creativity." The openings and



exhibitions are undoubtedly part of their strategic plan to recruit, inspire, and retain the best employees. The added community benefit of the exhibitions Promega holds in their Wisconsin headquarters is the validation these events offer to those in attendance, people like George Tzougros, the executive director of the Wisconsin Arts Board,

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who believes strongly in the importance of putting some “steam” into the curriculum. STEAM is Tzougros’ witty twist on the acronym STEM, a collaboration that exists among science, technology, engineering, and math. “When you insert the arts,” Tzougros quips, “you get STEAM.”

Promega’s obvious understanding that, “the arts are not a luxury, they are essential,” as State Superintendent of The Department of Public Instruction Elizabeth Burmaster is often quoted as saying, was exhibited in the subtext alongside Guerrero’s artwork. The photographs demonstrated more than the creative acts of an outstanding photographer. They also conveyed meanings beyond that of the innovative genius Guerrero documented in his subjects. Because of the context of their placement on this successful biotech company’s walls, Guerrero’s photos of some of the most avant-garde 20th century artists evidenced the interconnected relationship between art, science, creativity, and innovation upon which Wisconsin’s leaders know their 21st century prosperity depends.

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Tzougros was one of the many arts administrators who attended the Guerrero opening. In addition to directing the Wisconsin Arts Board, he also serves as an appointee to the Wisconsin Task Force on Arts and Creativity that was formed in March of 2008 by Lieutenant Governor Barbara Lawton and Superintendent Burmaster. When asked about the recent upsurge of arts education related task forces in Wisconsin over the last couple of years, Tzougros swept his hands towards the large crowd and said,

“Look around you. It is about this. It is about convergence. The needs of the 21st century creative economy and the strong leadership in place to make sure those needs will be met.”

Indeed, Wisconsin is graced with strong arts leadership at many a critical helm. Americans for the Arts recently recognized Lt. Gov Lawton with a Leadership Award for her work advancing the arts at the state level. Wisconsin also has a powerful arts education champion in the State’s Superintendent of DPI, who recently led a Wisconsin delegation to the National Endowment for the Arts sponsored “Education Leaders Institute” to bring a national focus to the importance of arts education.

Last spring, these two high-ranking state officials, Lawton and Burmaster, came together to announce the formation of a statewide task force charged with creating policy recommendations aimed at ensuring that Wisconsin schools produce tomorrow’s talented workforce.

“Creativity and innovation will be the cornerstone of Wisconsin competitiveness in the years ahead,” Lawton said. “We must make strategic investments now to ensure Wisconsin has the bright innovators and entrepreneurs we need to drive our state forward.”

[\(View a short clip of their announcement.\)](#)

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Respondents are asked to address any of the following questions, "Where do you most clearly see the value of creativity today? How can development of children's creative capacities be integrated across disciplines in the curriculum? What kind of partnerships initiated by private and nonprofit sector interests will help meet a community's need for expanded arts and creativity in education? Can you describe a successful classroom or workplace program that teaches art and/or develops creative capacities?"

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While on the state-wide level, an impressive array of cross disciplinary professionals, work jointly to address the topic "Thinking Creatively, Working Globally: The Role of the Arts in Building a 21st Century American

Workforce," Wisconsin's two largest cities, Milwaukee and Madison, work to solve arts education issues specific to their respective districts.

Regarding the focus on arts education that Tzougros identified as a "convergence," Executive Director of Arts Wisconsin Anne Katz said, "It's an exciting time for arts education in Wisconsin, locally and statewide. This groundbreaking and exciting work means more opportunities to educate every Wisconsin student for the 21st century world."

In January of 2007, the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) School Board called for the establishment of the Madison's Fine Arts Task Force. Katz, and Barb Shrank, a business consultant and community activist, who has on numerous occasions successfully led efforts to save Madison's orchestral strings program, were elected co-chairs. They and the other appointed members of their committee were entrusted with responding to three charges: 1) Identify community goals for MMSD K-12 fine arts education 2) Recommend five ways to increase participation of minorities and low income

students 3) Make recommendations regarding priorities for district funding of fine arts.

The task force worked hard for more than a year to collect and analyze data aimed at rooting out the existing obstacles that might prevent a student in Madison's public schools from receiving a quality arts education. The MMSD Fine Arts Task Force members and staff met with focus groups and individuals, and analyzed the results of an online survey that more than 1,000 community members responded to.

Early examination of the data they collected produced some troubling findings about the state of arts education in Madison schools including:

- 1) The steady decline of financial support and quality K-12 arts education in MMSD since [No Child Left Behind \(NCLB\)](#) was enacted;
- 2) A lack of evidence that planning and research informed past budgetary, programming, and scheduling decisions affecting MMSD's fine arts program;
- 3) Inequity in the access students have to resources from school to school;
- 4) The community perception that district leadership does not appreciate the importance of arts education;
- 5) Declining morale among teachers who feel disconnected from the decision-making process; and
- 6) Community arts organizations and individuals who expressed frustration about wanting to help support the arts but lacking the opportunity to do so.

On the bright side, the co-chairs of the MMSD task force have met with Daniel Nerad, Madison's new school district superintendent, and are encouraged by his deep understanding of the important role of the arts in a 21st century education. Reportedly, he expressed eagerness to engage the community in addressing the task force's findings once they are presented to the school board in October. Both Katz and Schrank believe Nerad is committed to ensuring that the task force recommendations are brought to life.

When released, it is expected that MMSD Fine Arts Task Force recommendations will outline how, given the constraints of restricted

budgets and the testing mandates of NCLB, MMSD schools can provide an equitable arts experience that will encourage the complex thinking necessary to prepare all students for the future.

The MMSD report will suggest ways to improve collaboration internally, by better utilizing the expertise of the teachers and administrators. It will emphasize the importance of rallying local support through open dialogues with parents and other members of the community, facilitating partnerships with arts organizations, and increasing private-public fund development (see the Milwaukee Arts@Large model). The report will also suggest the district increase the use of revenue from alternative federal and state sources, among other solutions, to restore cuts to arts education, and to sustain the arts programs that are in place now.

As the Madison Fine Arts Task Force started winding down their work this summer, maverick educator and Milwaukee Public Schools Board President Dr. Peter Blewett initiated the Milwaukee Public Schools Board Advisory Committee on Arts Education as a capacity building effort to ensure the largest urban district in the state can offer quality arts instruction to their students. The charge of the MPS Advisory Committee is

- 1) To develop community support for arts education in the city of Milwaukee;
- 2) To assess arts education programs within MPS and its strategic plan;
- 3) To build capacity for hiring more certified arts educators;
- 4) To assess MPS's capacity to build and sustain partnerships with community agencies;
- 5) To examine models that may help the board meet these goals.

The MPS project is rallying key movers and shakers in Milwaukee's arts, education, business, and philanthropic communities, and challenging them to set a new course for arts education in Milwaukee. Blewett is the first to acknowledge that "[MPS's] problems are vexing," particularly because of the economic disadvantages many residents of the district face, but like so many of Wisconsin's leaders, he believes that the solution is in providing creative educational opportunities for students.

As the results of Wisconsin's various task force's on arts education become clear, it is evident that many of the people in the state grasp the importance of arts education for their children's futures. It is also apparent that the prescriptive methods of teaching to tests have in fact disproportionately disadvantaged Wisconsin students from lower income families whose schools have expanded reading and math at the expense of the arts, but who do not have the resources to compensate for those poverties of education elsewhere.

Many believe help is on the way however, because as Tzougros said, right now Wisconsin is experiencing "convergence." Katz unknowingly defines the term when she sums it up, "It's thrilling to have top elected state officials like Lt. Governor Lawton and Superintendent Burmaster leading the way in arts education, with invaluable assistance and input of arts, education, business, and civic leaders, and, on the local level, parents, school board members, teachers, and administrators who want to see kids succeed."



With a background in arts project management, research, writing, and educational programs, Karin Wolf serves as the Arts Program Administrator for the [Madison Arts Commission](#) in the Department of Planning and Community and Economic Development for the City of Madison, Wisconsin. She manages the city's arts grants, runs the gallery spaces, stewards the city's permanent collection of art, and handles the administration of new public art projects. Prior to this position, she served as the Special Programs Coordinator in the Community Outreach Department at the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design, where she created award-winning programs for educators and K-16 students in art, design, and technology. She has worked as an educational assistant at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, teaching, docenting, and assisting the Curator of Education.

She has a M.S. in curriculum and instruction from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and undergraduate degrees in history, history of cultures, and Afro-American history. She is a longtime supporter of the arts and arts education, and has been involved with many community organizations in establishing exhibitions, educational programs, film festivals, temporary art, and permanent public sculpture projects.