

VTS: *Visual Thinking Strategies*

Mr. Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202



Dear Secretary Duncan,

As we know these are challenging yet inspiring times for public education. In Boston, we are deeply committed to closing both access and achievement gaps. In striving to offer the best possible education for ALL students, we seek out partnerships that support our mission of expanding excellence to every child. One of our most exciting partnerships is built around the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), an innovative arts based curriculum that offers great promise for education. I want to bring VTS to your attention because I believe it is one of the most powerful models for genuinely engaging young people and changing our perceptions about who can learn and who cannot. At the same time, the VTS method notably enhances teacher practice.

I first became acquainted with VTS in 1998 when I was Superintendent in Minneapolis and it is currently being used in over a dozen schools in Boston. VTS, which is based on decades of research by cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen, is a curriculum that engages students in lively group discussions about art. Classroom teachers are trained to ask a series of open-ended questions and to honor each student's response through paraphrasing. In a VTS discussion, students work as a group to construct meaning. They are asked to think for themselves and to learn from other's perceptions. VTS builds on our students' visual capacities. It educates them to observe closely, to ask questions, and to think more deeply about what is on the surface, and what could be veiled. Anecdote and research confirm that these kinds of critical thinking skills are readily transferable. And they are essential as we prepare our students for the 21st century.

VTS encourages a level of response and engagement that we don't always see. This kind of engagement from all students helps teachers change the expectations they have for certain learners and helps them think about each student's capacity to perform at a higher level. Because teachers become skilled at paraphrasing, they not only make each student feel successful, they have ample opportunities to introduce vocabulary, reinforce grammar and expand communication skills. Teachers frequently tell me about the positive influence that VTS has on verbal and writing skills. While this is beneficial for all students, it is particularly important for so many of our students who come from families where English is not the first language or who experience other challenges.



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I think VTS is quite profound. It has an impact on teachers' work and an impact on student outcomes. To keep America on the cutting edge of creativity, our schools must combine the dual goals of academic success and enriching young people's lives so they are engaged, so they know how to work together as a team, so they think of new answers to questions, so they see things that we might not have seen, so they understand how they may create solutions to questions for which we do not yet have answers.

I believe VTS is a vehicle that can make an enormous contribution to public education. I urge you and your colleagues to learn more about it.

With best wishes,

Carol R. Johnson
Superintendent, Boston Public Schools