

“Sentenced to the Arts” Program (STTAP)

Kids paint murals, recite original poetry, study dance forms from around the globe, and emcee major art shows. Known as the “Sentenced to the Arts Program,” (STTAP) it is anything but typical government. It is innovative public policy that is showing positive results.

Seven years ago, program administrators from inside the Jackson County and City of Kansas City governments decided to bring something to the Kansas City area that very few governments had even thought about, let alone attempted. The vision: Jackson County COMBAT (Community Backed Anti-Drug Tax) would administer and oversee an innovative arts program for Jackson County’s adjudicated, (or court sentenced) youth. This program would engage these youth in expressive therapy through community service and arts education. Artistic expression would allow the youth to channel their emotions in a constructive way. The increased accountability would reduce repeat offenses and criminal behavior, while improving self esteem, the visionaries said. With continued success and increased public awareness about the Sentenced to the Arts Program, STTAP has proving itself to be more than just another ‘arts and crafts’ program.

Every year Jackson County COMBAT hosts the *STTAP Culminating Event* to showcase the achievements and the artistic talent of the program participants. The *Culminating Event* is attended by more than 200 people who come to experience more than 500 pieces of still art including sculptures, paintings and photography, witness live performances of voice, international dances, poetry readings, and musical instruments. The evening is the program’s top event and is popular with the community and local dignitaries.

STTAP has bragging rights, and they are eager to tout them. Evaluations by the Criminal Justice Department at Central Missouri State University have found dramatic increases in self esteem, self discipline, communication skills and positive attitudes among participants. Youth who took part in the STTAP program had a 75-percent decrease (from 4 to 1) in court referrals and a 35-percent decrease in the number of serious offenses. Grade point averages among participants increased a full letter grade. In 2005, Cypress Research Associates conducted an independent evaluation of STTAP. When asked what they liked about interacting with the artists, young people repeatedly talked about the sense of respect the artists gave them—a concept highly honored, particularly by young men living in residential facilities. What was once a vision is now reality.

What makes this program so successful? Artist mentors and program experts agree, it is fundamentally important to involve each youth in an art form that interests them. STTAP is committed to matching the youth to a professional artist partner who specializes in the art form the youth is most interested in. STTAP has a consortium of local artist partners ranging from Hip Hop artists to sculptors who work with the youth throughout their sentences.

Today, this successful program stands with only a handful of others like it anywhere in the country. Sentenced to the Arts is now in its seventh year with grant funding through the Missouri Department of Public Safety. Last year more than 700 Kansas City area youth participated in either Phase I or Phase II of the STTAP program.

Phase II, the Internship Program, has a slightly broader scope than Phase I. Phase II provides adjudicated and at-risk youth between the ages of 14 and 21 with the opportunity of a paid internship with individual artists, arts organizations, and entertainment venues.

The future looks even brighter. The program is currently expanding the third phase of STTAP, called MyARTS. The MyARTS Center is located inside a warehouse in the heart Kansas City's Crossroads Arts District. MyARTS will provide the adjudicated and at-risk youth, upon completion of his or her sentence, with a paid apprenticeship with a professional urban artist/designer to create and sell art products. The program will include training on entrepreneurship, business law, accounting, marketing and even research. MyARTS will cultivate the skills that create power and opportunity for the youth artists. The responsibility of paid employment will promote their own economic development and open doors of opportunity.

STTAP, once seen as an abstract and therapeutic approach to juvenile delinquency, now impacts the criminal justice system in a concrete way. This isn't just paintbrushes and wet clay; clearly behaviors are modified when therapeutic components are integrated into an overall program. Specifically, this "artsy" program decreased the need for behavior-related court referrals and increased educational achievement significantly. And here's something that even the number crunchers can enjoy: it is less burdensome on the taxpayer to fund these types of programs than it is to bear the cost of increased court and jail time. It is predicted that the program, over the long term, will have building and construction implications as well. If court referrals for our youth continue to decline, adjudicated youth will leave court custody quicker and the need for more facilities will decrease. Now that doesn't sound very abstract.

Programs like STTAP, which have captured the notice of national policy makers, have brought arts education for at risk youth to the forefront of national policy initiatives and debates. Efforts like the Sentenced to the Arts Program are becoming models for social policy.