



Arts Education in Maryland Schools Alliance

Imagination Conversations in Maryland:  
Nurturing the **Imagination/Creativity/Innovation** Continuum

Arts Education in Maryland Schools (AEMS) Alliance

In partnership with Lincoln Center Institute

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# Imagination Conversations in Maryland: Nurturing the **Imagination/Creativity/Innovation** Continuum

## **Introduction:**

Civic, business and education leaders including President Obama and Governor O'Malley have highlighted innovation as critical to the future success of our young people and our nation in the increasingly competitive and complex global economy.

The Lincoln Center Institute (LCI) has been hosting a national series of "Imagination Conversations"<sup>1</sup> to elucidate the centrality of what they call the **imagination/creativity/innovation continuum** in building capacity for innovation. It is their intent that these conversations will inform education policy and practice nationally.

The AEMS Alliance has been invited to lead Maryland's participation in and contributions to LCI's Imagination Conversations.

Conversations about imagination/creativity/innovation were initiated in Maryland two years ago at the Learning, Arts, and the Brain (LAB) Summit sponsored by the Johns Hopkins University (JHU) Neuro-Education Initiative, and continued in October 2010 at the JHU Brain Science Institute Science of the Arts Speaker Series.

In response to the invitation from LCI, AEMS has extended and expanded on those earlier conversations in a number of ways:

- AEMS has conducted an online extension of the conversations held with teaching artists, arts teachers and artist/teachers in preparation for the LAB Summit and partnered with JHU in extending the conversations from the October Science of the Arts event through an online discussion conducted on a platform created by the JHU Brain Science Institute.
- During February 2011, AEMS hosted breakfast conversations, which engaged Maryland innovative leaders from across sectors including business, public policy, the sciences, technology, education, and the arts. Interviews are ongoing with additional key leaders.
- On June 9, 2011, the annual AEMS CAFE (Cultural Arts For Education) Conference will be devoted to the Imagination Conversations with plenary and smaller group discussions around the imagination/creativity/innovation continuum.

These conversations are already shaping new thinking about the role of imagination in education and stimulating research ideas.

In conceiving and planning the Imagination Conversations in Maryland, AEMS seeks to inform local, state and national education policy and practice at two levels:

- To contribute to the Lincoln Center Institute's series of state conversations, which will culminate in LCI's national conference in July, which will feature an action plan for

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<sup>1</sup> <http://lciweb.lincolncenter.org/imaginationconversation/>

policy makers, educators and community activists to put imagination at the forefront of our school curricula.

- To identify and build support for strategies for local and state policy and practice to nurture the imagination/creativity/innovation continuum in Maryland.

The context for the conversation is timely. The President's 2011 State of the Union Address highlighted innovation and education as priorities. Education policy is in flux at the Federal level. There is growing concern that NCLB's heightening the impact of standardized testing is diminishing the capacity of educators to build the creative thinking needed to innovate.

In Maryland, the Governor focused on innovation in his 2011 State of the State Address as well as in other settings. Further, this discussion is critical in the context of state and local reform efforts in education driven by Maryland's Third Wave of Reform, the Federal Race to the Top Program, the move toward National Curriculum Standards, and required state curriculum, all of which are affecting state and local policy in profound ways. If imagination, creativity and innovation are deemed to be of value, then education policies should clearly and concretely reflect that fact. There needs to be thoughtful analysis of how that value should be reflected in expectations for student outcomes and educator effectiveness measures as well as other kinds of decision making affecting resources for education whether fiscal, human, or time in the day. It is hoped that the Imagination Conversations will be useful for education in the workplace and other settings as well as in public education.

Maryland is a national leader in education as well as in other sectors; the Imagination Conversations initiative aspires to contribute to and extend that leadership.

### **The Structure of the Conversations:**

In each case, the Imagination Conversations were framed by stating the goal of identifying and exploring strategies for building the capacity for imagination/creativity/innovation in educational settings.

The Conversations focused on these three questions:

1. What is the role of ***imagination/creativity/innovation*** in our own domains?
2. What conditions and strategies nurture ***imagination/creativity/innovation*** in our work?
3. ***What conditions and strategies best nurture imagination/creativity/innovation in education?***

In addition to helping frame the questions, LCI gave us additional direction as follows:

*To provide a thread of consistency across the many national conversations that are taking place, we are using the following definitions for imagination, creativity, and innovation, which we see as sequential and interrelated in practice:*

**Imagination:** *the capacity to visualize new possibilities - for thought, action and/or the use of materials*

**Creativity:** *engaging the imagination to conceive, express, or produce something highly original*

**Innovation:** *engaging imagination and creativity to produce an advance in a field of activity.*

In practice, the formulation of imagination/creativity/innovation as a continuum proved invaluable. We focused on strategies supporting this continuum without trying to dissect which facet a particular strategy affected. Those understandings were implicit for the most part.

**This Report includes:**

- Executive Summary with reflections and recommendations garnered from all of the Imagination Conversations in Maryland.
- Part 1: Conversations with Maryland's Leaders in Innovation:
  - A compilation, which merges the five small group conversations among Maryland's leaders in innovation held at breakfasts on February 8 and 21, 2011.
  - Summaries of each of the five group conversations.
  - Notes from an interview with an individual leader in innovation.
- Part 2: An online conversation among Maryland arts teachers, teaching artists and artist/teachers.
- Appendices: relevant documents.

## **Executive Summary: Reflections, and Recommendations from the Maryland Imagination Conversations**

Important themes have emerged in the Imagination Conversations in Maryland starting two years ago at the JHU LAB Summit, and the JHU Brain Science Institute's October 2010 Speaker's series conference on the Science of the Arts, and continuing through the Imagination Conversations with Maryland's innovative leaders in February 2011 and the online conversations first with arts education professionals and subsequently extended across sectors.

The first major theme is the growing understanding of neuroscience and cognitive science research that points to the arts as central to brain function. That is, sensory-based art activities engage emotional as well as motor, intellectual, and memory centers in interconnected ways. It is clear that humans are "hard-wired" for the arts. This means that the arts are essential to the whole child and that they support learning in many powerful ways. There is momentum in Maryland toward achieving a deeper understanding of the role of the arts in learning by linking brain-research discoveries to innovative approaches in education in and through the arts. While the gatherings around neuroscience and the arts were broadly conceived, much of the discussion focused on imagination, creativity, and innovation (ICI) and the capacities of ICI are one of the areas that is attracting interest for research. Effective partnerships with research institutions such as the Johns Hopkins University, the University System of Maryland, and the field of arts education hold great promise in this arena.

The second major theme is the extent to which leaders across sectors—business, public policy, science, technology, education, and media—identify developing strategies to heighten innovation within their fields as well as building the capacity for it through education as absolutely critical.

Further there is strong congruence on how ICI is understood among sectors. The report captures the ways in which that plays out across fields through responses to questions about (1) the role of ICI in their domains; and (2) what conditions and strategies nurture and sustain ICI. There are certain commonalities:

- Explicitly valuing ICI.
- Establishing a culture of ICI and elevating innovative practices.
- Seeking individuals with heightened capacity for ICI with skills such as communication, collaboration, resilience and critical thinking.
- Creating open environments whether spatial, temporal, social, that encourage cross silo, collaborative efforts. In practice this means moving away from traditional hierarchical structures.
- Understanding that ICI and "thinking out of the box" involves flexibility, agility, opportunism, risk-taking and using failure in order to learn and responsiveness to and relishing of change.
- Artists and arts educators described strategies for ICI in their own work as artists, which they draw from in working with students. These include exploring multiple approaches, connecting the disparate, "disabling defaults" in their minds to escape what they already know in order to discover the new, flipping things,

using serendipity (mistakes sometimes) to enhance ICI. Important for ICI are: understanding process, flexible time and space, trust, listening and being open, wondering, having a spirit of inquiry, envisioning, using metaphor, non linear ways of thinking, understanding the relationship of emotions and memory to creating narratives and conveying ideas.

- Getting an effective balance of accountability and discovery through open and continuing evaluation, reflection and adjusting of thinking and practice.
- Nurturing and sustaining ICI is conscious and deliberate. The structural, organizational and strategic conditions to nurture and sustain ICI are created very purposefully.
- ICI requires the commitment and direct involvement of leadership and broad ownership as well.

Participants in the conversations were thoroughly engaged in listening to one another and learning about ICI strategies from other sectors. In some cases the discussions were quite nuanced. One interesting discussion that emerged was the very conscious innovation taking place at institutions of higher education. Through the conversations and a subsequent interview with the President of UMBC, practice at that institution is highlighted as a snapshot of what ICI can look like at the university level. Inasmuch as institutions of higher education in Maryland work closely with PK-12 schools (our Governor is committed to P-20 efforts), sharing values, culture, strategies, and practices of ICI presents an opportunity for PK-12 to extend its conscious efforts to strengthen ICI.

The most extensive section of the report addresses the question: ***What conditions and strategies best nurture imagination/creativity/innovation in education?***

Significantly, most if not all of the commonalities cited above apply as aspirations for the innovative practice of education across disciplines, which in turn will nurture ICI in students.

There was consensus that ICI should be valued, that a culture of ICI should be created across PK-12 education, and that capacity for ICI should be nurtured in students at all levels.

The report includes descriptions such as those from the leadership of City Neighbors Schools and the Lucy School, who give clear insight into how ICI strategies and conditions can be operationalized in school settings. Comments by school system leaders as well as the State Superintendent reflect strategies for innovative practice and the importance of creating a culture of ICI at those levels as well as identifying critical issues that need to be addressed.

Points of particular interest include:

- Consensus that innovative practice, by definition, cannot be cookie cutter or rigid. Understanding that a rigid system cannot produce innovative thinkers among teachers or kids and requires leaders to be tolerant of ambiguity and risk-taking.
- Arts Integration is expanding in Maryland and is seen as offering a very effective pathway to creating schools that embody the values of ICI and nurture that in students. Arts Integration is emerging as a trend in middle schools as well as elementary schools in Maryland. While in many cases it is an individual school initiative, there are school systems that have identified arts integration as a systemic goal.
- Innovative practitioners in the arts can lead in creating ICI culture in schools, including disciplines beyond their own.



- STEM education has been identified as a priority in education nationally and is linked with goals for innovation. Interestingly, some of the most successful STEM programs in Maryland are STEAM programs; the arts provide the critical dimensions of ICI through experimentation, discovery, and critical thinking; this embraced at the higher education level in some of the most innovative programs such as those at UMBC cited in this report.
- As noted above, ICI has been a clear goal in higher education. But at the other end of the spectrum, early childhood practice also has actively embraced ICI culture. Ways in which EC practice and ideas can inform K-12 education merit exploration.
- While the value of ICI is widely acknowledged, there are issues around establishing the credibility of approaches in the context of accountability in education under current and emerging federal and state policy mandates. While there is concern that some aspects of ICI are difficult to measure, educators in the conversations from arts education and arts integration schools countered that in the context of arts education and arts integration, there is constant measuring and assessment, which teachers, schools, and school systems use to assess student achievement in the arts and to measure the quality of programs. Further, they are confident in the relevance of their assessments and evaluations in enabling them to expand student capacity in ICI.
- The Conversations reiterated and expanded on findings in neuroscience and cognitive science that had been shared at the JHU LAB Summit and the JHU Brain Science Institute's Science of the Arts conference.

#### Recommendations from the Imagination Conversations for Strategies to Nurture ICI in Education

- Ensure that corporate Maryland as well as education, community, and opinion leaders fully understand the critical connection between nurturing imagination and creativity in education and building capacity for innovation in students.
- Articulate the vital role of arts education in developing ICI.
- Recognize the value of ICI and reflect that value in policy and practice in instruction and accountability across the curriculum as well as in the arts.
- Identify models of ICI culture in schools and school systems and elevate them so that more educators and parents understand the value of ICI to students now and in their futures.
- Develop and implement a research agenda focusing on studies about ICI along the spectrum from neuroscience and cognitive science and controlled studies in classroom settings to evaluation of instructional practice. It is particularly important to study practices such as arts integration that are successfully building ICI in order to inform scale-up of viable models. This would flow naturally from what has already started with the LAB Summit and the BSI Science of the Arts Conference.

- Recognize and support the role of teachers in supporting ICI. To the extent that teachers model creative thinking, they are most inspiring in enabling students to be imaginative and in building ICI culture in their schools. Teachers need to be trained to be creative, to value creativity explicitly, and to enable students to see themselves as creative agents whose individual capacities for imagination and creativity are very important. To the extent that teachers model creative thinking they are most inspiring in enabling students to be imaginative.
- Build the capacity of teachers to integrate skills and content across arts disciplines as well as across other content areas as a way to help students gain understanding of complex ideas while nurturing their creativity.
- Make the intersection of art and technology a nexus of creativity. Teachers working in the arts disciplines need to be trained in all the ways technology can extend student creativity and, likewise, teachers in technology need to be trained in the ways that the arts are terrific ways to understand and apply technology creatively. Technology should be considered a creative enterprise directly linked to the arts.
- Infuse ICI in teacher pre- and in-service training as values and ways of thinking to be transmitted to students as well as to be used in effective teaching. Share the thinking emerging from the Imagination Conversations with AEMS Deans' Roundtable and HEAT (Higher Education in the Arts Task) Force to inform their work.
- Focus on sharing creative practices among teachers that purposefully bring the ICI Continuum to students in meaningful ways.
- Inform Teacher/Program evaluation based on student growth. ICI should be factored into student assessment and in turn teacher and program evaluation tools. Portfolio Plus, which is under development for the fine arts, affords a useful model. This links to the current work being done at the state and local levels under Race to the Top and Maryland's Third Wave of Reform.
- Engage the public—reach parents, community leadership, scientific and business sectors and the general public. The Ultimate Block Party (September 2011) will afford an initial opportunity. An article by Susan Magsamen from the JHU Brain Science Institute who is one of the founders of the Ultimate Block Party articulates the relationship of the event to child development including the nurturing of ICI. It is Appendix A.
- Conduct ongoing conscious analysis of opportunities to intersect ICI across all aspects of education. Include facilities, curriculum, instruction, teacher training, community outreach, out-of-school programs, Early Childhood, etc.
- Inform and engage business, higher education, and public policy leaders in ICI initiatives in PK-12 schools. Draw on their insights and perspectives to better align instruction with the need for an inspired and innovative citizenry.
- Set and reach the goal of raising the quality of ICI in arts education opportunities for students in Maryland and make transparent the transformative impact of the arts on students' capacity to imagine, create and innovate.

These Imagination Conversations affirm strategies already under implementation in Maryland in arts education. In addition, they have paralleled the development of policy recommendations over the past two years. The January 10, 2011, Presentation to the Governor's Educator Effectiveness Council (Appendix B) reflects this in the description of work already underway and additional policy recommendations in the context of the State's Race to the Top Initiatives. Of interest is that the fine arts were invited to make this presentation because the ongoing work in the field is regarded as a model for other subject areas and specifically for the non-tested areas. The work of the arts education field in the state in the area of assessment in particular is viewed as thoughtful and innovative.

The Imagination Conversations have proved to be most valuable in engaging community leaders from many sectors in an exploration of ways to support the imagination/creativity/innovation continuum in education. Further, the conversations have led to deeper understanding of the unique and powerful role of arts education in nurturing the imaginations of our children, thus enhancing their capacities as creative and innovative citizens.

*The contributions of all of the participants in the Maryland Imagination Conversations thus far are deeply appreciated.*

