

## **Maryland High School Artists: A Juried Exhibition. Opening Talk, Sept. 20**

I would like to welcome you all here today and bring you greetings from Arne Duncan, our Secretary of Education, as we celebrate the work of some of Maryland's most creative young artists. My name is John Easton and I am the director of the Institute for Education Sciences here at the Department of Education. The Institute is the department's agency for education research, evaluation and statistics. We evaluate educational programs, like charter schools and teacher professional development programs. We collect and analyze hundreds of statistics – from how much money schools spend to how many students earn degrees in college. We award grants to researchers who study how to improve student achievement through better tests, curriculum and teaching. And we administer tests, including the National Assessment of Educational Progress, often called the Nation's Report Card. My own professional training—in educational measurement, evaluation and statistical analysis – exactly matches our work.

So you must wonder what a number cruncher like me is doing here addressing a group of talented young artists and their teachers and families?

When I learned about the exhibit I was encouraged to read the artists' statements, so I came right over and did that and was immediately struck by the expressive language in these short statements. I thought of a big project of ours

at IES called Reading for Understanding where the leading reading researchers in the country gathered and talked about the importance of oral and written expression for developing critical academic skills. Students who can express their points of view -- and debate and defend them -- are developing important skills. These skills will help them grasp and engage in the dense written materials required in college and in the professional world. You young people who wrote, *“this allowed me to create smooth texture and subtle shifts of value”* or *“this composition required deep thought and effort, in order to make it engaging to others”* or *“By overindulging in details, complexity, and pattern, I mirror man’s overindulgence and excess in tangible luxuries”* are certainly developing cognitive skills that will serve you well in school and beyond.

But even more important than these academic skills, I believe that the arts on their own are essential to meaningful, thoughtful lives. Arts are not frills, luxuries, or extras, but instead are a fundamental part of the range of human experience. They provide us with needed fulfillment and opportunities to understand ourselves and our relationships to others.

Nearly 20 years ago I stumbled into a community art center back in my Hyde Park neighborhood in Chicago and signed up for a 10-week ceramics class. I became fascinated—and quickly obsessed—just learning how to throw. To say that I persisted and persevered is putting it mildly and I know that you too have

learned to keep at it until you get it right. I loved sitting at my wheel, slowly and painfully learning how to make pots. First was to make them on center and more-or-less symmetrical, then not too heavy, then graceful, then strong, then graceful AND strong. As the subtleties grew so did the technical challenges. But as those of you who make pottery know, throwing is the easy part. The hard part is glazing, which requires incredible thought, concentration and care. How do I match the right glaze to this form? Will this glaze break when it's thin, change color when it's thick? How can I accentuate that curve? Bring attention to the delicate lip? Use contrasting glazes to make an unexpected and new whole? Finally, how do these pieces express me and my understanding of the world?

So let's go back to this exhibition. I said that I was struck by the artists' statements and the thought that went into them. But even more so I was struck by the beauty of the work and the influence of that beauty on the artists and the viewers.

Let me end with some more quotes from the statements: *"I portrayed myself as stuffed with yarn to show that my thoughts and feelings are a part of me and without them I would be empty."* *"The socks are so unexpected, therefore dominating the scene and showing Sam's true character."* *"Art has transformed my life and made me believe that anything is possible, allowed me to open my mind and be free to express myself."*

Here is the real value and beauty of this work, helping us to know ourselves, express ourselves, and engage others in that process.

Keep at it.