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School of Education

UW-Madison's Halverson reveals 'How the Arts Can Save Education'

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Erica Halverson notes with a smile that she is sometimes referred to as the “arts in education lady.”

And that makes sense. For more than 25 years, she has brought the arts into schools in various forms as a performer, teacher, and now a professor and researcher with the UW-Madison [School of Education \(https://education.wisc.edu/\)](https://education.wisc.edu/).

While it's not uncommon for proponents of K-12 arts instruction to cite research that shows studying the arts in school helps students perform better in so-called core subject areas like math and reading, that's not Halverson's focus. Instead, her experiences as a teaching artist and researcher has led her to advocate for utilizing the arts — performing, visual, and multimedia — in a way to fundamentally rethink what good learning, teaching, and curriculum can be.

Halverson provides a blueprint for such efforts in her soon-to-be released book, [“How the Arts Can Save Education: Transforming Teaching, Learning, and Instruction.” \(https://www.tcpres.com/how-the-arts-can-save-education-9780807765722\)](https://www.tcpres.com/how-the-arts-can-save-education-9780807765722). She presents a bold plan for saving education with an arts-based approach to teaching and offers new models for learning that embrace the social, cultural, and historical assets that kids bring to the classroom.

“The pandemic and its disruption to schooling has offered us the unique opportunity to reevaluate our values around education,” says Halverson, who chairs the highly regarded [Department of Curriculum and Instruction \(https://ci.education.wisc.edu/\)](https://ci.education.wisc.edu/). “I think it's time to turn off the accountability machine driving education that runs on standardized test scores.”

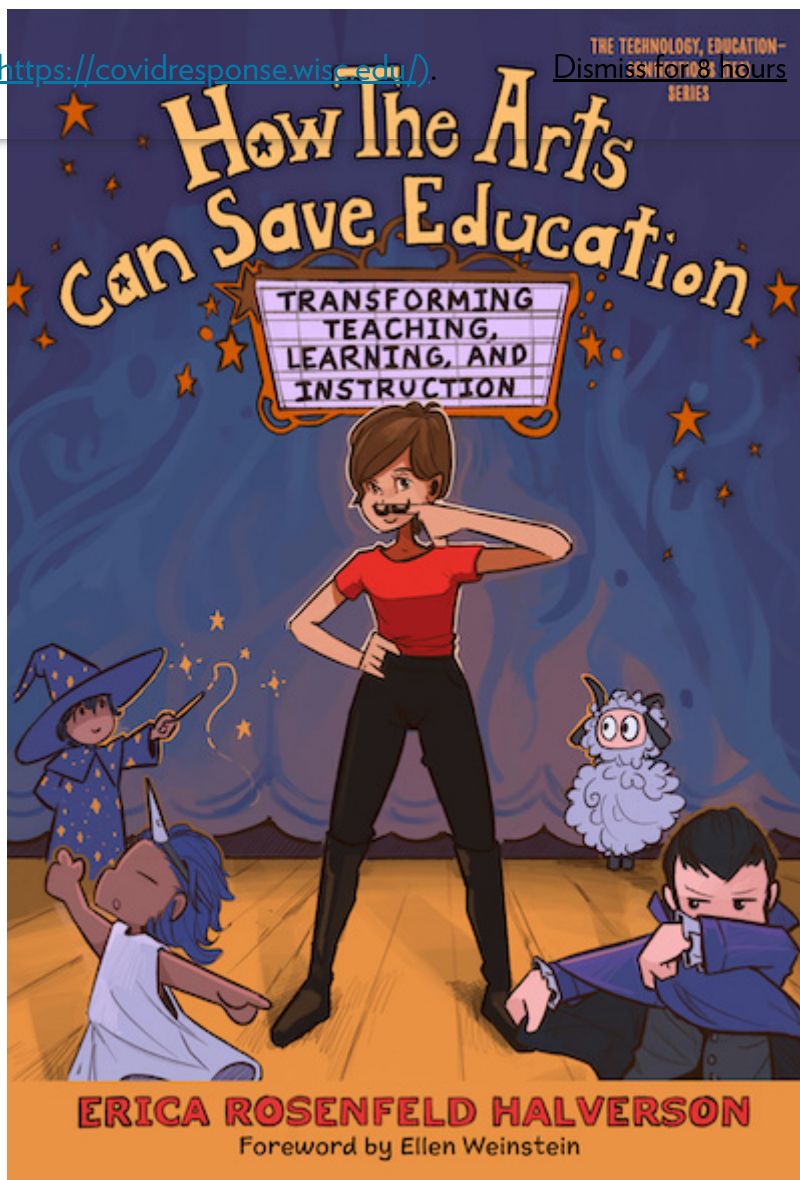
Halverson argues that now is the time to redesign current learning environments that evidence has shown don't work for too many kids.

“It’s time to question the reductionist approach to schooling we’ve taken,” says Halverson. “Instead of new ideas, people tend to double down and say, ‘We just weren’t doing the right reading interventions,’ or ‘We need to add more math to the curriculum.’ But we can do better and offer new models for learning. I hope this book can put the spotlight on the value of arts in education.”

For close to two decades, Halverson has been examining topics related to how people learn in and through the arts, across a range of art forms, with a focus on the performing arts. In 1998, she co-founded the Chicago-based nonprofit Playmakers Lab (originally called Barrel of Monkeys), a creative arts group that teaches creative writing to children in elementary schools — and turns their work into performance pieces.

Halverson joined the faculty at UW–Madison in 2006, and in 2015 she helped launch a Madison version of the Playmakers Lab, calling it Whoopensocker. The program, a part of the UW Community Arts Collaboratory (<https://place.education.wisc.edu/youthprograms/uw-community-arts-collaboratory/>), sends teaching artists into elementary classrooms and after-school programs to engage students in writing, performing, and other forms of active learning.

Over the spring and summer of 2020, Halverson adapted the in-school residency program into an online format with both asynchronous videos and activities, and synchronous time with the teaching artists. Materials were made available in both English and Spanish so that emergent bilingual students would have the opportunity to express themselves creatively.



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Halverson

During more typical times, the Whoopensocker teaching artists and students meet in person to explore creativity, aspects of theater, and creative writing. The students are given journals and instructions before breaking into small groups to begin creating more stories with the Whoopensocker team. These meetings are once per week, for 90 minutes, over six weeks. At the end of the six-week program, the teaching artists turn several of the students' writings into vaudeville-style plays or musical numbers, which are then performed for the whole school.

Halverson says she has witnessed repeatedly where kids who engage in creative writing and performances are unlocking the knowledge, skills, and identities that they bring to school. As one example, Halverson notes how many of the schools she has worked in have a large percentage of students who are English language learners.

“Research tells us that by bringing language and experiences together, we can better cement language learning,” she says. “So when the students are writing and singing and performing their work, it’s a very different experience than putting pencil to paper. In the arts, learning outcomes are emergent and collective; we expect students to bring their histories and experiences with them to come together to create something original.”

In her book, Halverson outlines an arts-based approach to teaching that focuses on risk-taking as the most important aspect of a successful classroom. She explains how being wrong is not something that is typically encouraged in schools — but stresses how no one can learn if they are not willing to be wrong. Similarly,

kids won't be willing to fail — and learn from an experience — if they don't take a risk.

Learn more about UW's [COVID-19 response \(https://covidresponse.wisc.edu/\)](https://covidresponse.wisc.edu/).

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“Modeling how to take risks, and how to respond in ways that keep the flow of ideas and learning going, is one big way to build the arts into everyday teaching and learning,” says Halverson. “It’s the single most important teacher move in the arsenal of creating a productive learning environment, whether it’s an arts-based environment or a traditional classroom.”

Halverson is hopeful that the age of accountability — induced in large part by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 — is losing some momentum. As schools start to rethink what’s possible for all students during this new normal brought on by the pandemic, she is hopeful that profound change is ahead.

“We are increasingly aware of how learning outside of school provides life-giving opportunities for our most vulnerable kids,” says Halverson. “The arts — dance, theater, music, the visual arts, and multimedia — offer us a way to imagine a future for education that is inclusive, culturally sustaining, and just plain joyful.”

Learn more

Halverson will be taking part in two upcoming events to share more about her new book.

- **Oct. 23, 12 p.m.** — “How the Arts Can Save Education,” a presentation from Erica Halverson at the [Wisconsin Book Festival \(https://www.wisconsinbookfestival.org/events/how-arts-can-save-education\)](https://www.wisconsinbookfestival.org/events/how-arts-can-save-education). This event is being held at Madison’s Central Library, Community Room 302.
- **Nov. 10, 6 p.m.** — A Virtual Conversation with Erica Halverson, author of “How the Arts Can Save Education,” and Ali Muldrow, an educator and president of Madison Metropolitan School District’s Board of Education. For more information, including how to register, visit [this A Room of One’s Own web page \(https://www.roomofonesown.com/event/virtual-conversation-erica-rosenfeld-halverson-author-how-arts-can-save-education-and-ali\)](https://www.roomofonesown.com/event/virtual-conversation-erica-rosenfeld-halverson-author-how-arts-can-save-education-and-ali).



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