

Why Arts Education Is Crucial, and Who's Doing It Best

Art and music are key to student development.

by Fran Smith

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Ballet dancers practicing in a studio

Credit: Getty Images

"Art does not solve problems, but makes us aware of their existence," sculptor Magdalena Abakanowicz has said. Arts education, on the other hand, does solve problems. Years of research show that it's closely linked to almost everything that we as a nation say we want for our children and demand from our schools: academic achievement, social and emotional development, civic engagement, and equitable opportunity.

Involvement in the arts is associated with gains in math, reading, cognitive ability, critical thinking, and verbal skill. Arts learning can also improve motivation, concentration, confidence, and teamwork. A 2005 report by the Rand Corporation about the visual arts argues that the intrinsic pleasures and stimulation of the art experience do more than sweeten an individual's life -- according to the report, they "can connect people more deeply to the world and open them to new ways of seeing," creating the foundation to forge social bonds and community cohesion. And strong arts programming in schools helps close a gap that has left many a child behind: From Mozart for babies to tutus for toddlers to family trips to the museum, the children of affluent, aspiring parents generally get exposed to the arts whether or not public schools provide them. Low-income children, often, do not. "Arts education enables those children from a financially challenged background to have a more level playing field with children who have had those enrichment experiences," says Eric Cooper, president and founder of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education.

It has become a mantra in education that No Child Left Behind, with its pressure to raise test scores, has reduced classroom time devoted to the arts (and science, social studies, and everything else besides reading and math). Evidence supports this contention -- we'll get to the statistics in a minute -- but the reality is more complex. Arts education has been slipping for more than three decades, the result of tight budgets, an ever-growing list of state mandates that have crammed the classroom curriculum, and a public sense that the arts are lovely but not essential.

This erosion chipped away at the constituencies that might have defended the arts in the era of NCLB -- children who had no music and art classes in the 1970s and 1980s may not appreciate their value now. "We have a whole generation of teachers and parents who have not had the advantage of arts in their own education," says Sandra Ruppert, director of the Arts Education Partnership (AEP), a national coalition of arts, business, education, philanthropic, and government organizations.

Yet against this backdrop, a new picture is emerging. Comprehensive, innovative arts initiatives are taking root in a growing number of school districts. Many of these models

are based on new findings in brain research and cognitive development, and they embrace a variety of approaches: using the arts as a learning tool (for example, musical notes to teach fractions); incorporating arts into other core classes (writing and performing a play about, say, slavery); creating a school environment rich in arts and culture (Mozart in the hallways every day) and hands-on arts instruction. Although most of these initiatives are in the early stages, some are beginning to rack up impressive results. This trend may send a message to schools focused maniacally, and perhaps counterproductively, on reading and math.

"If they're worried about their test scores and want a way to get them higher, they need to give kids more arts, not less," says Tom Horne, Arizona's state superintendent of public instruction. "There's lots of evidence that kids immersed in the arts do better on their academic tests."

Education policies almost universally recognize the value of arts. Forty-seven states have arts-education mandates, forty-eight have arts-education standards, and forty have arts requirements for high school graduation, according to the 2007-08 AEP state policy database. The Goals 2000 Educate America Act, passed in 1994 to set the school-reform agenda of the Clinton and Bush administrations, declared art to be part of what all schools should teach. NCLB, enacted in 2001, included art as one of the ten core academic subjects of public education, a designation that qualified arts programs for an assortment of federal grants.

In a 2003 report, "The Complete Curriculum: Ensuring a Place for the Arts and Foreign Languages in American's Schools," a study group from the National Association of State Boards of Education noted that a substantial body of research highlights the benefits of arts in curriculum and called for stronger emphasis on the arts and foreign languages. As chairman of the Education Commission of the States from 2004 to 2006, Mike Huckabee, then governor of Arkansas, launched an initiative designed, according to commission literature, to ensure every child has the opportunity to learn about, enjoy, and participate directly in the arts.

Top-down mandates are one thing, of course, and implementation in the classroom is another. Whatever NCLB says about the arts, it measures achievement through math and language arts scores, not drawing proficiency or music skills. It's no surprise, then, that many districts have zeroed in on the tests. A 2006 national survey by the Center on Education Policy, an independent advocacy organization in Washington, DC, found that in the five years after enactment of NCLB, 44 percent of districts had increased instruction time in elementary school English language arts and math while decreasing time spent on other subjects. A follow-up analysis, released in February 2008, showed that 16 percent of districts had reduced elementary school class time for music and art -- and had done so by an average of 35 percent, or fifty-seven minutes a week.

Some states report even bleaker numbers. In California, for example, participation in music courses dropped 46 percent from 1999-2000 through 2000-04, while total school enrollment grew nearly 6 percent, according to a study by the Music for All Foundation.

The number of music teachers, meanwhile, declined 26.7 percent. In 2001, the California Board of Education set standards at each grade level for what students should know and be able to do in music, visual arts, theater, and dance, but a statewide study in 2006, by SRI International, found that 89 percent of K-12 schools failed to offer a standards-based course of study in all four disciplines. Sixty-one percent of schools didn't even have a full-time arts specialist.

Nor does support for the arts by top administrators necessarily translate into instruction for kids. For example, a 2005 report in Illinois found almost no opposition to arts education among principals and district superintendents, yet there were large disparities in school offerings around the state.

In many districts, the arts have suffered so long that it will take years, and massive investment, to turn things around. New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg has made arts education a priority in his school reform plans, and the city has launched sweeping initiatives to connect more students with the city's vast cultural resources. Nearly every school now offers at least some arts instruction and cultural programming, yet in 2007-08, only 45 percent of elementary schools and 33 percent of middle schools provided education in all four required art forms, according to an analysis by the New York City Department of Education, and only 34 percent of high schools offered students the opportunity to exceed the minimum graduation requirement.

Yet some districts have made great strides toward not only revitalizing the arts but also using them to reinvent schools. The work takes leadership, innovation, broad partnerships, and a dogged insistence that the arts are central to what we want students to learn.

In Dallas, for example, a coalition of arts advocates, philanthropists, educators, and business leaders have worked for years to get arts into all schools, and to get students out into the city's thriving arts community. Today, for the first time in thirty years, every elementary student in the Dallas Independent School District receives forty-five minutes a week of art and music instruction. In a February 2007 op-ed piece in the Dallas Morning News, Gigi Antoni, president and CEO of Big Thought, the nonprofit partnership working with the district, the Wallace Foundation, and more than sixty local arts and cultural institutions, explained the rationale behind what was then called the Dallas Arts Learning Initiative: "DALI was created on one unabashedly idealistic, yet meticulously researched, premise -- that students flourish when creativity drives learning."

The Minneapolis and Chicago communities, too, are forging partnerships with their vibrant arts and cultural resources to infuse the schools with rich comprehensive, sustainable programs -- not add-ons that come and go with this year's budget or administrator.

In Arizona, Tom Horne, the state superintendant of public instruction, made it his goal to provide high-quality, comprehensive arts education to all K-12 students. Horne, a

classically trained pianist and founder of the Phoenix Baroque Ensemble, hasn't yet achieved his objective, but he has made progress: He pushed through higher standards for arts education, appointed an arts specialist in the state Department of Education, and steered \$4 million in federal funds under NCLB to support arts integration in schools throughout the state. Some have restored art and music after a decade without them.

"When you think about the purposes of education, there are three," Horne says. "We're preparing kids for jobs. We're preparing them to be citizens. And we're teaching them to be human beings who can enjoy the deeper forms of beauty. The third is as important as the other two."

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