

What the Arts Really Teach Our Kids

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Will right-brain thinkers rule the world? Some educators think so, and they say a strong arts education helps kids develop right-brain skills of flexible thinking and creative problem-solving.

With the school year now in full swing, take a good look at your child's course load. Are there classes offered in art, music or theater? Is your child's school one of the many across the nation that has cut arts courses or teachers to put more time and money into math, science and reading?

Each year at budget time, parents and other children's advocates pack local public hearings, arguing against money-saving proposals to cut a music teacher here, an art teacher there or, in more drastic cases, an entire arts program. Unfortunately, budget needs often win out.

Four years into the No Child Left Behind federal education reform law, studies show that arts instruction has decreased in one out of four public schools. Meanwhile, news reports chronicle school budget struggles and cuts in funding for arts education.

Beyond the obvious advantages of learning how to draw or paint, play a musical instrument or act on a stage, what are children missing when arts classes are taken away? The answers may surprise you.

More Than Smocks and Scales

Art and music classes offer much more than the ability to paint a landscape or recognize a Mozart symphony. Learning experts insist that education in the arts ensures an enriched cultural appetite, stronger analytical skills, higher achievement in other subjects and - down the road - greater success in the workplace.

Classes in fine art, music, theater and dance help children cultivate their imaginations and learn how to problem-solve, says Elliot Eisner, Ph.D., a professor of education and art at Stanford University and a leading theorist on arts education.

An arts education enriches children for the duration of their lives, teaching them curiosity, motivation and synthesis, adds educator Dee Dickinson, who heads New Horizons for Learning, a Seattle-based advocacy group with an international reach. But more than this, a solid foundation in the arts gives children a significant academic leg up.

Ellen Hart, a 25-year veteran teacher who heads the fine and performing arts department at Pentucket Regional High School in West Newbury, Mass., claims that students involved with the arts are typically at the top of their class in other subjects.

"The benefits are far beyond whether a student plays an instrument or paints a painting," Hart says. "It's an understanding, a discipline just like chemistry."

Research backs her up. A 1999 study by researchers at UCLA, titled "Involvement in the Arts and Human Development," found that up to 18 percent of students involved in band or orchestra had significantly higher levels of mathematics proficiency by the 12th grade.

And what about longer-term benefits? Daniel Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind*, contends that a strong arts education provides students with the best preparation for success in their future careers.

"To survive in 21st-century labor markets, our kids will have to do work that's hard to outsource, hard to automate," Pink says, referring to the increasing corporate trend of automating or farming out more routine job duties. "That means they'll be doing work that requires abilities that go beyond the left-brain, spreadsheet, SAT, correct-answer abilities we've long revered.

"Instead, they'll be relying more heavily on design, empathy, inventiveness and big-picture thinking," he says. "And the best way to surface and sharpen those abilities is by studying the arts - and by exhibiting

and performing as well. The arts teach students a whole-minded way of thinking, and that's what they're going to need."

How Arts Education Has Fared

The No Child Left Behind law recognizes the arts as one of 10 core subjects, but it does not include arts testing in its requirements of public schools. (Math and reading are the only two subjects with federal testing requirements, and federal education dollars to schools are tied to students' scores in those subjects.) So, critics say, less money is spent on the arts, since school administrators often channel funds to the subjects in which students are routinely tested.

Hart points out that funding for her arts programs has steadily decreased over the last five years. Fortunately, she says, a strong parents' association has stepped in to raise money and fill the gap.

Time spent in arts classrooms is also on the decline. Earlier this year, the Center on Education Policy, a national public education advocacy group, released results from its ongoing assessment of the No Child Left Behind law. While test scores have increased in math and reading, 71 percent of 15,000 school districts surveyed reported having reduced time in at least one other subject. Of that group, 22 percent said time spent in fine art and music classes was reduced.

A survey of school principals, issued by the Council for Basic Education in 2004, had similar findings: 25 percent of the principals reported decreased instructional time for the arts, particularly at high-minority schools.

Arts requirements for high school graduation vary from state to state, but are minimal overall. Many states have no arts requirement, while others require only one class.

In Texas, where students must complete one arts credit to graduate, Tom Waggoner, fine arts director for the Texas Education Agency, says that No Child Left Behind has actually put a spotlight on the arts in his state. But, he points out, the level of programming is different in each district.

"You may have one school district funding it highly, and the school district right next door might be funding it lower," he says.

What Parents Can Do

Experts agree that without access to arts programs, students suffer, particularly those who have trouble engaging in other key subjects, such as math, science or reading.

"The arts are a terrific tool for integration of the various disciplines," Waggoner says, drawing a connection between reading and theater, math and music, and science and dance.

Exposing your children to the arts may also uncover a child's hidden talent, something that Angie DeBernado, mother of Zach, 10, and Annie, 7, appreciates. "If you don't have an arts program, you'd never know if that's where your children's talents lie," she says.

Parents can encourage their children to be artistic through after-school programs and at-home learning, though these types of activities do not replace the sequential, structured curriculum that schools can provide.

John Payne, a father who runs a local music school in Brookline, Mass., says the music and theater programs at his son's public school were not enough to keep the fifth-grader engaged, so the family supplements his education with music lessons and an after-school theater group.

Working on the local level, parents and civic groups can influence a school's commitment to arts education. Raising funds, asking questions of principals, teachers and school board members, and presenting arts education ideas in a positive and consistent manner can make a difference.

"It's a constant challenge to keep pushing, insisting that arts education be important and be a focus," acknowledges Clark Strickland, an assistant dean at the University of Colorado's College of Arts and Media. Strickland also heads Denver's Arts Resource Council, which successfully pushed for a tax override in 2003 that led to that city's hiring of 90 new public school art teachers. The override included

other educational funding to aid the city's public schools, Strickland says, but "the arts education piece of it was the applause line when we spoke with private individuals, businesses and community groups. It was a strong leader in generating enthusiasm for the tax increase."

Of course, the largest independent federal agency funding the arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, has the mission of bringing art and arts education to all 50 states. Sarah Cunningham, director of arts education at the Endowment, says in-depth arts learning is a fundamental and irreplaceable part of a child's development.

"An arts education is a basic part of any education," she says, "and every American has the right to learn about their culture."

It's a statement worth bringing to a public hearing the next time your child's school district proposes budget cuts to the arts.

FLASH FACT

Young people who participate in the arts for at least three hours for three days each week through at least one full year are four times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement and three times more likely to be elected to class office within their schools, according to a recent study by Stanford University professor Shirley Brice Heath.

Resources

Books

* The Arts and the Creation of Mind, by Elliot W. Eisner, Ph.D., Yale University Press, 2004. Explores the theory that arts programs give students the ability to develop complex, subtle aspects of the mind. 0300105118

* A Whole New Mind - Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future, by Daniel Pink, Riverhead Trade, 2006. Argues that right-brain qualities - a sense of design, inventiveness, empathy and big-picture thinking - will dominate the needs of future economies.

Organizations

* Americans for the Arts - 202-371-2830, www.americansforthearts.org - Secures private-sector funding for local arts agencies nationwide and holds annual public awareness events.

* Education Commission of the States - 303-299-3600, www.ecs.org - Works to improve public education through the exchange of information and ideas and among state government and education leaders nationwide.

* The National Endowment for the Arts - 202-682-5400, www.nea.gov - Independent federal agency that promotes, supports and funds the arts and arts education.