

EDUCATION MATTERS ARTICLE: The Importance of Arts Education in Schools

In previous Education Matters articles, what comprises the basics in education was discussed. While literacy, the ability to read, write and communicate and numeracy, the ability to understand and use numerical concepts, are very important to becoming successful citizens, it was also acknowledged that health education plays an integral role in helping students realize their full potential. It is difficult to become a lifelong learner on improper nutrition or poor physical and mental health.

Arts education needs to be added to those basic building blocks of learning. Arts education refers to education in the disciplines of music, dance, theatre and visual arts. There is overwhelming research that supports arts education in schools. Studies have shown that when students have arts in the curriculum they are twice as likely to graduate than those that do not, and three times more likely to win attendance and academic awards. Music education has been directly linked to higher standardized test scores in numeracy and visual art education has been shown to have significant impact on standardized test scores for literacy. Brain research indicates that the arts develop neural systems that produce benefits which range from fine motor skills to creativity and improved emotional balance. The arts enhance the learning process in subjects that require complex cognitive and creative pathways such as mathematics, science and language.

Even with all of this overwhelming support of arts education, music, art and drama are often the first courses to be cut in schools when facing budgetary concerns. The premise being that after school programming and parents can provide this type of education. While this often happens with more affluent, aspiring families, low income families' children often do not get exposed to the arts. Arts education in schools make a more equitable education for financially challenged students which is important as our national focus has become on equal opportunities for all and success for all learners.

But the fact that arts education supports academic learning is not the only reason for its importance. In this technology age, when information and content is the domain of computers, society places more importance on people with human abilities that cannot be mechanized. It is vital to know how to use information quickly, creatively and cooperatively. Workplaces demand students to understand problems, make plausible arguments and "think outside the box". "Students need to be thinkers, possess people skills, be problem solvers, demonstrate creativity and work as a team member. The arts provide all of these." (Jensen 1999)

The arts also allow for opportunities for social justice and exploring difficult social issues. Appreciating different people's viewpoints and discussing them are fundamental to understanding music, theatre and other art forms. This in turn makes more empathetic and tolerant students.

Tom Horne, superintendent of public instruction in Arizona, says it best. "When you think about the purposes of education, there are three. We're preparing kids for jobs. We're preparing them to be citizens. And we are teaching them to be human beings who can enjoy deeper forms of beauty." Arts education in public schools is integral to all three goals.

Submitted by:

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