



Educators charge arts lag under No Child Left Behind

by [Chris Roberts](#), Minnesota Public Radio

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No Child Left Behind, the massive education reform act that President Bush signed into law in 2002, is up for re-authorization this year. The program has garnered praise in many circles for bringing more accountability to public schools. But some say it elevates certain subject areas at the expense of others. One subject critics say the act has "left behind" is arts education.

St. Paul, Minn. — Arts educators say No Child Left Behind, or NCLB, deserves credit for being the first national legislation to designate the arts as one of five core learning areas. The problem, says Mike Hiatt, is NCLB's tight focus on math and reading proficiency. Hiatt is director of professional development and research at the Perpich Center for Arts Education in Golden Valley. He says NCLB requires schools to test students in math and reading only.

"What is tested is what's supported," he says. "And we're seeing a real shift in resources, in a variety of ways, that is impacting the arts along with a number of other subject areas."

Hiatt says schools are so concerned with making the grade in math and reading that they'll pull resources away from the arts, physical education and foreign languages to make it happen. Hiatt knows of one western Minnesota district that used to have a three-teacher music program. When the elementary teacher retired, he wasn't replaced.

"That school district took the resources of that elementary general music teacher, devoted it somewhere else, primarily in reading remediation, and turned to the choral director and said, 'You are now K-12,' and picked up an additional 300 to 400 students," Hiatt says.

According to the Minnesota Music Educators Association, there's been a 6.5 percent decrease in the number of public school music teachers in the state since 2000. Many elementary schools now offer arts programs for just nine weeks out of the year. Nationally, arts education time in the classroom has dropped 22 percent since No Child Left Behind was enacted.

While there have been no cutbacks in arts programs at such schools as Como Park High in St. Paul, teachers there have felt the impact of NCLB. Carole Whitney, Como Park High's choral director, says the parents of today's high school students have little in common with their kids when it comes to arts education.

"I have lots of parents say, 'Oh gee, I was in both choir and band when I was in high school, why can't they do that?'" Whitney answers their question: "Because the requirements are just too great."

Whitney says today students have time for either an art or language class but never both. The biggest change she's noticed since NCLB went into effect is the students' lack of preparedness for high school-level music classes. Many have had no prior school experience reading music.

"They should have seen notation before, this shouldn't be a complete surprise," Whitney says. "Maybe they're not good at it, but many of them have not had any exposure whatsoever."

Federal education officials have been hearing these complaints for several years now. The Department of Education's Doug Herbert says there's good reason for No Child Left Behind to maintain its current emphasis on reading.

"A lot of doing the arts successfully, in terms of the standards Minnesota and other places would expect, requires them to read," he says.

But Herbert says the department is not giving districts permission to disregard the arts as a core subject area under NCLB. To the contrary, he says, the act encourages them to find ways to make the arts a priority. Herbert acknowledges NCLB has had what he calls negative unintended consequences on arts education in America.

"We're trying to overcome these unintended consequences, he says, "and I think in some cases it's helping. But there's a lot of school districts out there in which this message needs to

be heard."

What the Department of Education can't do is require districts to provide a certain amount of arts instruction.

"It's up to them," Herbert says.

To Congresswoman Betty McCollum, DFL, St. Paul, that sounds like passing the buck. McCollum says too many of the NCLB standards amount to unfunded mandates, and that has to change when the bill is re-authorized.

"The biggest challenge is having the President committed to put the dollars in that he did when he first brought forward this nationalized testing that he's doing to make sure that school districts aren't having to cut courses like art and music," McCollum says.

Most arts educators don't object to testing. In fact, they want performance measures across a broader range of NCLB's core learning areas, the arts included. The Perpich Center's Mike Hiatt says NCLB has set national standards in virtually every curriculum, which is an expensive proposition. He says the country has to decide whether it's willing to pay enough to ensure that those standards are met.

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