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City group looks to raise awareness for arts education

by amy zimmer / metro new york

JUN 26, 2007

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MIDTOWN. Where do the arts fit into public schools when there's such an emphasis on reading and math scores?

The Center for Arts Education believes the arts are essential to a well-rounded basic education, and the nonprofit kicked off a new public engagement initiative yesterday by hosting its first government affairs breakfast.

"In the arts capital of the world, arts education should be on par," said the group's executive director, Richard Kessler.

Kessler broke down rough numbers: In 2005 there were 2,289 full-time and 299 part-time certified arts teachers. There's one theater teacher for every 7,000 students; one dance teacher for every 6,000 students; one music teacher per 1,100 students; and one visual arts teacher for every 800 students.

The Department of Education spent \$285 million on arts education last year, which represented roughly 1.7 percent of total spending, according to Kessler. Under reforms implemented by the Bloomberg administration, principals will be able to create their own arts budgets.

"We are moving in a direction to ensure empowerment for school principals and increase autonomy by giving principals more control over their budget," said DOE spokeswoman Lindsey Harr. This past year, most of the school system's roughly 330 empowerment schools — which determined their own budgets — spent more on the arts than other schools, Harr said.

Because of the move toward more autonomous schools, Kessler believes the timing is right to build awareness on developing arts programs.

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“We are certainly concerned,” said Kessler, who graduated from Beach Channel High School in 1976 before going to Juilliard. He recalled having a strong arts curriculum. “We just accepted it as ordinary. But when I see what exists in Beach Channel High School today, these kids don’t have anything close to what we had.”

State standard

The state recommends arts education comprise 20 percent of the week for grades 1 - 3 and 10 percent in grades 4 - 6. Visual arts and music must be taught to all seventh and eighth graders, and to get a Regents diploma, students must have one unit of arts credit. Harr said the city will hold schools accountable to meet the state standard.



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