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St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

April 10, 2006 Monday
THIRD EDITION

SECTION: EDITORIAL; Pg. B9

LENGTH: 746 words

HEADLINE: **Want better test scores?** Take band Studying music, dance and art improves learning in all fields of study

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BODY:

School districts in the St. Louis region span the spectrum when it comes to arts education. In the area of music, for example, some schools offer students the chance to participate in choir, band, orchestra and other musical instruction. Other schools don't even have a part-time music teacher.

The federal No Child Left Behind Act lists the arts as a "core academic subject," yet some districts seem to believe they can only make significant progress in improving standardized test scores by cutting or eliminating school arts programs.

They're wrong.

Recent educational research offers strong evidence that quality arts education programs are not just a "feel-good" part of the curriculum. The reality is, there's a strong relationship between participation in arts education and improved scores on such standardized tests as the SAT; indeed, the more arts instruction, the stronger the connection to higher test scores. You can see the effects on student achievement in many areas:

Mathematics

Students who receive musical instruction show increased aptitude in mathematics and improvement in spatial reasoning skills. Several different studies indicate that high school students who took music classes and participated in ensembles (band, for example) scored higher on standardized mathematics tests. One study found that middle school students who participated in instrumental ensembles were twice as likely to perform at the highest levels in math as students who took no music classes.

Researchers theorize that musical education supports mathematical skills because it includes careful training in rhythm, which emphasizes proportion, patterns and ratios.

Reading and Language Arts

Studies at Columbia University indicate that arts instruction supports student skills in verbal and written expression, including creativity and elaboration. Other research has found that drama and music classes are particularly effective in improving reading comprehension and writing abilities.

Cognitive Skills

Arts instruction also aids the development of reasoning ability and problem-solving. Music training for young children improves memory. High school students who studied dance scored higher than non-dancers in originality and abstract thought. Arts activities -- particularly those that involve performance -- promote self-confidence, along with the skills required for conflict resolution, collaboration and empathy.

Motivation to Learn

Participation in arts education lowers the risk of students dropping out of high school and stimulates the motivation of students in special education classes. And arts education programs increase collaboration among teachers, parents and the community.

In some studies, arts education had even greater positive impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds than on other kids. When it comes to music instruction, the advantages seem to apply across the board: from preschoolers to high school students regardless of academic aptitude, racial/ethnic background or socioeconomic status.

To have these positive effects, however, quality arts education programs need to be available to students consistently as a seamless curriculum element with academic content. Once-a-year performances or short-term after-school classes won't do it.

There's another societal benefit: A recent study by the RAND Corporation concludes that the most promising way to develop future audiences for the arts is to provide well-designed arts programs in our nation's schools; the vast majority of adults who are involved in the arts now were initially exposed to them as children.

To protect arts education from elimination from school curricula in our region, students, parents, educators, arts organizations and local leaders have to work for its survival.

Parent-teacher organizations, school boards, school and district administrations and public and private funders at the local, state and national levels need to understand that arts instruction isn't a luxury. To the contrary, it is acknowledged as a core academic area that boosts student performance throughout the school curriculum.

We cannot allow the arts to be "left behind."

Leslie Scheuler of St. Louis evaluates arts education programs across the country for Philliber Research Associates, a national consulting firm. She also is the founder and president of Música para los Niños ("Music for the Children"), a volunteer organization that supports children in music schools in Honduras, Central America.

NOTES: ARTS EDUCATION OTHER VIEWS