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'The arts are essential: Just ask a teacher

Teachers on the front lines of education need no convincing that the arts are essential and not an extra. They already know that the arts are breathing new life into their classrooms and providing new ways for students to connect to learning experiences. They know that the best learning is hands-on. They know that when you teach traditional subjects with the help of the arts, students learn the material faster and more deeply.

And this is what parents know: The arts can be an important tool for keeping students in school, for meeting the needs of a broad range of student interests, abilities and backgrounds and for helping students master other academic skills and disciplines.

It is tough to make cuts in school budgets and even tougher to make them smartly. The Mississippi Symphony Orchestra strings program and other arts programs are easy targets but they are the wrong targets.

They are the wrong targets because they will yield relatively little in budget savings and their elimination will do enormous harm to our children and our community.

Ask for More Arts is a collaborative program between Jackson Public Schools, Parents for Public Schools of Jackson, local artists, and arts and culture organizations. This partnership includes 24 elementary schools, 20 teaching artists, and arts organizations that work together to collaboratively design and teach a series of lessons over several days culminating in artistic product or performance.

The arts helps students learn their non-art subject such as math, reading, social studies, or science on a deeper level while developing critical thinking, more positive behavior, responsibility for their work, and a love of learning.

The JPS (MSO) arts program has been one of its signature strengths - one where JPS leaders have said to kids, parents, teachers and the larger community: Despite the pressures we feel related to relentless testing, limited resources and unlimited needs; we are not going to be completely defined by all these challenges. We are going to build a school system that provides opportunities for all children by creating imaginative partnerships that deliver high-quality classroom and extra-curricular experiences for our children - and that includes the arts.

There are many ways we can build excellence into our school system and help retain students in schools - the arts just happen to be one of the best.

While we are "asking for more" from our children and teachers, we should ask the same from ourselves and our School Board and community leaders.

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