

OP ED

Don't Cut Fine Arts More than Other Academic Subjects

By Robert Floyd

Renée Zellweger might have won an Academy Award without the theater courses she took at Katy High School. And it's possible that Norah Jones may have won multiple Grammy Awards even if she hadn't attended choir classes at Grapevine Junior High School. But in each of these cases, and in countless others, a quality fine arts education in Texas public schools is at the foundation of their success.

Fine arts courses in our schools enable students to develop their interest and talent in the arts at an early age, and every student benefits from fine arts courses, even when their future career successes are outside of music, acting, dance, or art.

In a state where high-stakes testing drives decisions on funding, staffing, and instructional minutes, fine arts programs are frequently a target when school budget cuts must be made. With the legislature and school boards dealing with budget shortfalls of historic proportions, there is already evidence from districts across the state that fine arts programs are on the chopping block.

These programs often suffer because of a misguided perception that the arts are an extracurricular, non-essential part of education. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth.

Fine arts is part of the state-required curriculum that all school districts must offer from elementary through high school. Fine arts classes that meet during the school day are inarguably curricular by nature and by law.

As State Sen. Florence Shapiro, Chair of the Senate Education Committee, said in a press conference last week: “Fine arts courses are just as essential as every other part of the required curriculum. In fact, fine arts courses are becoming increasingly critical in preparing students for the 21st-century workforce.” During the last legislative session in a joint briefing to the House and Senate, best-selling business author Dan Pink advised legislators that the 21st-century workforce belongs to creative right-brain thinkers for whom the arts are a cornerstone of their development. Within that briefing, a NASA ISS systems engineer, an IBM master inventor, and an AT&T executive echoed Pink’s convictions.

While it’s clear that business leaders value arts education, the more than 1.4 million students enrolled in middle and high school fine arts courses today speaks to the fact that these programs are also valued across the state by students and parents. Elementary music, art, and theater teachers serve tens of thousands of students daily and are among the most dedicated and passionate teachers in our Texas classrooms.

Research studies also continue to offer resounding conclusions about the importance of arts education. In 2008, the Dana Foundation released a comprehensive study, “Learning, Arts, and the Brain,” that for the first time reported a causal relationship between rigorous study in the arts and improved cognition. And a November 2010 *Scientific American* editorial that was headlined “Hearing the Music, Honing the Mind” stated, “Music produces profound and lasting changes in the brain. Schools should add classes, not cut them.”

Finally, the Texas Cultural Arts economic study released in 2009 entitled “20 Reasons the Texas Economy Depends on the Arts and the Creative Sector” found an undeniable connection between support for the arts, a vibrant creative sector, and a strong economy. To

quote that study, “During tough economic times it may seem intuitive to cut arts and culture initiatives, but these are the very projects that can help the economy recover.”

Before school districts or the legislature propose wholesale cutting of fine arts programs to solve what is admittedly a critical public education funding crisis, they should remember their responsibility to educate the whole child. Because fine arts courses are academic and a vital component in delivering the well-rounded education required by law, they should not take a disproportionate share of staffing and budget cuts.

As former Texas congresswoman Barbara Jordan so eloquently stated in 1988, “The arts, instead of quaking along the periphery of our policy concerns, must push boldly into the core of policy. The arts are not a frill.”

Robert Floyd is Executive Director of the Texas Music Educators Association and chairs the Texas Coalition for Quality Arts Education.

Media contacts:

John Bender: 512-626-5949

*Robert Floyd: 512-452-0710, ext. 101
Texas Music Educators Association
7900 Centre Park Drive
Austin, TX 78754*

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