

File: Arts Education

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TALKING IT OVER

BY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

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In New York City's Community School District No. 25, one of the first actions that Superintendent Arthur Greenberg took after he started in 1990 was to visit every school and ask community members what would make their children's education stronger. The answer he got surprised many people. Over and over again, parents repeated the same refrain: "This is New York City, cultural mecca of the world. Where are the arts?"

On Thursday, Feb. 5, 1998, Cincinnati, Ohio, was buried under the heaviest snowfall ever recorded. In the suburb of Wyoming, Superintendent Ted Knapke canceled school, and visiting researchers figured they would have to reschedule their evening town meeting on arts education. But they were wrong. More than 150 citizens drove or walked through falling snow on mostly unplowed streets and sidewalks to talk with them.

School administrators from Park Ridge, Ill., where I went to school from kindergarten through 12th grade, report: "We are as serious about building the imagination as we are about nurturing the intellect." Since its founding in 1902, the district has supported a comprehensive arts program that today includes more than 40 different art classes. Before graduating, all seniors are tested in dance, music, theater and visual arts.

The district's fine arts curriculum guide notes that the speech and drama courses "teach students where to look and what to look for in gathering support for an idea. They also help students learn to give, to accept and to follow constructive criticism; listen courteously and critically as others speak; become more logical, more direct and more creative in organizing thoughts for presentation; learn to control the fear of speaking or performing before an audience, and, as a result, become more confident people."

If this is what the arts teach, shouldn't they be a part of every student's school day? And yet, when school systems find their budgets shrinking, aren't art classes the first to go?

The importance of the arts in education is not a new idea. It was Plato who said, "I would teach children music, physics and philosophy but, most important, music, for in the patterns of music and all the arts are the keys of learning."

During World War II, advisers urged Winston Churchill to cut Great Britain's arts budget. He's reported to have responded, "Hell, no. What do you think we're fighting for?"

Even today, though, I know many people who consider the arts a luxury. Research done primarily at the University of California at Irvine demonstrates that exposure to music at an early age not only sparks children's creativity but also improves their spatial skills, helping boost their scores on math and verbal exams.

Last year, the National Center for Education Statistics tested America's eighth-graders in academic subjects, including art. The results were discouraging. That is why last September I issued a nationwide call to action to put the arts back in every school in America.

This week, I traveled to New York to visit Community School District No. 25 and to release the first national study examining successful arts programs in school districts across the country. This two-year study was undertaken by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and the Arts Education Partnership, with private support from the GE Fund, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and Binney & Smith.

Called "Gaining the Arts Advantage: Lessons From School Districts That Value Arts Education," the report profiles 91 districts in 42 states, including Community School District No. 25, Wyoming, Ohio, and Park Ridge, Ill., in order to help other educators understand what it takes to make the arts a vibrant and meaningful part of every student's school day.

Researchers identified 13 critical factors in the successful implementation of arts programs, including active and supportive school boards, superintendents, principals and teachers. But, according to the report, "the single most critical factor in sustaining arts education in the schools is the involvement of influential segments of the community -- parents, families, artists, arts organizations, businesses, and local civic and cultural leaders and institutions."

The arts have been an integral part of every society. As Superintendent Greenberg discovered when he learned that students in his district represented more than 100 countries and spoke 95 languages, the arts are a bridge between cultures -- a unifying spark for learning.

There are 52.7 million children in America's schools -- more than ever before. If we don't act now, too many of them will graduate without ever painting a picture, playing a song or being exposed to the dramatic arts. It's up to every one of us to help bring the arts back into our schools so that all our children have the tools to compose a brighter future.

If you're interested in finding out more about "Gaining the Arts Advantage," you can visit the President's Committee on the Arts and the

MUSIC AND ARTS EDUCATION

What has the administration done to promote music and arts education in our schools?

I've been supportive of arts education for the past seven years:

- Supportive language in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act have been used by arts education advocates to gain funding and advocacy support in communities all around the country.
- Despite the expense of the groundbreaking test format, the arts were retained in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (though, because of the expense, not as broad a population was tested). Those results, released in the fall of 1998, revealed that students did poorly in the three areas of responding to works of art, performing and creating but that instruction made a difference, underscoring the point that the arts are not the province of a gifted few.
- The President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities has released two reports highlighting successful in-school and out-of-school programs for students in the arts.
- The National Endowment for the Arts partnered with the U.S. Department of Education in 1994 to create the Arts Education Partnership, which now supports and directs the work of arts education study and advocacy on a national level.
- National Standards in arts education were begun under the Bush Administration but presented to Secretary Riley in 1994.

How do you think that music and arts will help children receive a better education?

- Research has shown that involvement in music programs can help improve children's early cognitive development, basic math and reading abilities, self-esteem, SAT scores, self-discipline, ability to work in teams, spatial reasoning skills, and school attendance.
- Students involved with music education are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college, and are less likely to be involved with gangs and substance abuse.
- These positive effects are true for all students; however, the effects are even more significant for low-income students than for high-income students.
- As we continue to move into this information age, the teamwork skills and discipline learned in music and performing arts, the ability to work in visual media, and the communication skills learned in the arts, are critical to building a strong workforce.

How did music influence the President growing up?

How can parents help make sure their kids are getting a good arts education?

- A recent study of arts education programs found that active community involvement in school district programs is the single most important factor in sustaining arts education in the schools. (The study was conducted by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, which is chaired by Mrs. Clinton, and the Arts Education Partnership.)
- Parents can call their children's school(s) to find out more about their art and music programs, talk with their children's teachers to let them know they support arts education, join or form a group of parents to show concern and support for arts education, and attend school board meetings to demonstrate that support. Outside of school, they can also reinforce how important art and music are in such ways as listening to music at home, taking children to art museums, and encouraging children to do art projects of their own.

What did you and Mrs. Clinton do as parents to help make the arts an important part of your daughter's education?

What would you encourage the next administration to do to support arts and music education?

- We should continue to urge parental involvement in schools – parents are really able to see how their children respond so positively to involvement in art and music programs.
- We need to make information on model arts programs and new research on the effectiveness of arts education available to educators.
- We also ought to support our National Endowment for the Arts and Department of Education in these efforts.

Arts education is expensive, and school budgets are tight. With such pressure now to raise student achievement scores, why should schools make art and music education a priority?

- As discussed above, arts education can help student achievement in other subjects as well. Plus, studying the arts also offers students a way of thinking unavailable in other disciplines. Just as a well-rounded education includes education of the body through physical education, a balanced education needs to include the study of the arts.