

Music and Art are Instrumental in a Healthy Education

By Greer Galloway

Schools around the nation are cutting programs and in some cases closing their doors in desperate attempts to balance their budgets. Notoriously, the first programs to be dropped are often music and art. In some school districts, these programs have been reduced to the bare minimum simply to satisfy parental demand, while in other districts they exist in name only, or are no longer to be found at all.

School administrators are under the intense pressure of national regulations and parental anxiety for the children in their care to be competitive in the job markets and economies of the future. When school funding and teacher salaries depend on the performance of the students in subjects like math, language arts, and science, it makes perfect sense (at first glance!) to focus the limited resources of the school on these “academic subjects,” and to relegate what many consider to be the “icing on the cake subjects” such as instrumental and vocal music, visual arts, drama, movement arts, and physical education to the realm of “extracurricular activities” which students take up on their own time and often at their own expense.

However, a growing body of research shows that music and art actually help learning happen faster and better. Rather than taking time away from more academic subjects, music and art classes actually shorten the time needed for those subjects while improving comprehension and retention and thus reducing the need for later remedial classes. Indeed, it may be that by making sure music and art are integral to a school’s curriculum, time and resources will be saved in the long-term!

Consider these data: when students engage in even 5 minutes of vigorous movement before being exposed to new information, their brains are more receptive to the new information improving retention and comprehension. When students are exposed to music, especially the complexity of classical music, communication between the two hemispheres of the brain increases which allows a higher level of integration of the newly learned material into the student’s existing body of knowledge. When students are actively involved in producing this music, the effects are magnified. Students who have the opportunity to draw or paint after receiving new information are able to process this information better and are able to recall the information more quickly and accurately when required. Teachers experience this daily, and the research to support their experience abounds. (See, for example, the work of the HeartMath Institute, Dr. Laurel Trainor’s work with McMasters University, or the body of research that has grown out of the pioneering work of the Leiners of Stanford University.)

So, if the research clearly shows the brain’s functioning improves when it is involved in music and art, it may be that music and art should be the first programs to receive increased funding and additional periods during the day as a means of increasing math, science, and language arts performance! Countries like Japan, Hungary, and the Netherlands rank near the top in science and math scores internationally, and yes, they each make music and art integral parts of their elementary school curricula.

Just imagine sitting through seven hours of lectures five days a week for nine months. Sure, there is a chance to eat lunch and go outside for fifteen or thirty minute stretches, but these breaks end up being mainly a way to get fresh air and wake back up. Now imagine a day where a brief period of vigorous exercise wakes up the brain so it is open and receptive to learning. This is followed by information presented on a scientific experiment or a new mathematical concept. Given a few minutes to draw or paint or sculpt after receiving this new knowledge now gives you the chance to integrate it into your existing body of information and to “process it.” Perhaps during this time, you have some insight into how the scientific experiment you just observed might have influenced the people and communities who first conducted it years ago or maybe a question arises about how it could be used in an invention today. Now, this is real learning!

Unfortunately, in most cases, the research showing that music and art actually help learning happen faster and better have not been taken to heart in the public school curricula of this country. The public education systems of many countries around the world and indeed many independently funded schools in our own country do continue to recognize the importance of these subjects. Our own local Boulder community is fortunate to be home to a number of Waldorf schools where music, art, and movement are key elements of every single class, whether it is science, geometry, algebra, history, or language arts. In these schools, administrators, teachers, parents, and students alike believe that no lesson is complete without an element of music and art included in it. For example, children in a Waldorf elementary school do not use textbooks...they make their own –complete with all the information they are learning and beautiful drawings to illustrate the material! Children in a Waldorf high school understand how the instrumental music they play uses the mathematical proportions they have learned, and they are able to use the music (or the drawing, or the play in which they are acting, or the song they have written) to express the alarm or despair of a certain period of history or to express the excitement they experienced during an engaging science experiment. These students are acquiring the scientific, mathematic, and language skills hoped for in our country’s public schools, and they are learning to apply this knowledge in beautiful, creative, artistic ways as a result of their musical and artistic experiences.

A directory of Waldorf and other independently funded schools in the area, many of which are committed to keeping art and music a central part of their curricula, can be found online at www.acischools.com. In time, and with the ongoing encouragement of concerned, engaged parents, our country’s public schools may also take the research to heart and restore art and music to their rightful place as a central part of the learning process.