

ARTISTIC ENDEAVORS: Arts can't fall victim to tight school budgets

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Back to basics.

Tighten the belt.

Accountability.

And testing, testing, testing.

In the underfunded boot camp that American education has become, the arts seem to be everything we hate.

In today's classrooms, we like our facts cold and hard, lined up with precision and ready to be checked on a standardized test. The arts are perceived as soft and fuzzy, sometimes messy to teach, always difficult to measure.

“To be or not to be?” What kind of question is that?

It's a question that can help to turn fact-memorizers into successful human beings.

At least, that's the argument made by the authors of “Creating Pennsylvania's Future Through the Arts and Education,” a new study from the nonprofit Education Policy and Leadership Center.

The study begins by citing the kind of fact that would warm the heart of any statistician: The national wealth generated by the so-called creative sector now accounts for \$1.7 trillion annually, as much as the manufacturing and service sectors combined.

That doesn't mean we have more actors and musicians than we do bankers, lawyers and factory workers. It means that today's top careers require more than rote knowledge. They require problem solving, imagination and improvisation. They are less about doing the same thing over and over, and more about figuring out how to navigate an ever-changing future.

Math can help a student do that — not simple arithmetic but problem solving.

Science can help do that — the kind of science that requires students to sift through data and test hypotheses.

But nothing does it better than the arts. Harvard researchers identified ways of thinking that the arts teach with power and precision. They include:

Envisioning: learning to picture mentally what cannot be directly observed, to imagine complex or future situations.

Engagement and persistence: learning to tackle a problem, focus on a solution, create a plan to achieve it and persevere against obstacles.

Teamwork: learning to work with others, accepting criticism to improve one's own skills and the greater effort.

A 12-year UCLA longitudinal study, cited in the Pennsylvania report, followed 12,000 high school students through age 26. It found that students with intensive arts education in middle school and high school, on average, had higher test scores, attended college more frequently and stayed in college more often. And the results were true for poorer students as well as wealthier ones.

For example, the study found that 37 percent of low-income students with a rich experience of the arts earned bachelor's degrees. Only 17 percent of low-income students with little arts education earned a B.A.

Yet the Pennsylvania report found the arts under attack in public schools — a victim of tight budgets and the relentless perception that the arts are the “frills” of the school day.

Nationally, there was a steady growth in the number of students who studied the arts from some 25 percent in 1930 to 65 percent in 1982. Yet despite the fact that our economy depends more than ever upon the kind of collaborative, creative problem solving embodied in arts education, there has been a steady decline over the past quarter century.

By 2008, fewer than half of the nation's high school graduates had studied the arts, and arts programs have been slashed even further in the past four years as the recession has hit school funding.

Of course, the recession isn't going away and school districts need to make tough choices.

The good news is that the Pennsylvania report identifies several low-cost or no-cost ways to encourage arts education.

At the state level, lawmakers and educators have already identified arts education as a core subject.

Yet in developing new graduation standards, it's not yet clear if the arts will make it. Without a Keystone Arts Exam — and it's kind of tough to make “to be or not to be?” a multiple choice question — school districts will always be tempted to cut or eliminate arts education so they can teach to the test.

This new report from the Education Policy and Leadership Center only reinforces what research has shown time and again: The “soft and fuzzy” arts teach the kind of hard-to-learn skills that our children and grandchildren need to compete in the 21st-century workplace.

Lawmakers should demonstrate that they're the smart ones. They need to make certain that school districts are required to teach the arts and rewarded for doing so with more than polite applause.

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