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### **Erosion of Arts in Public Schools in the United States**

For the last two decades the study of the arts has been systematically disappearing from our public school systems under our very noses. This is unfortunate since the study of the arts provides more than just drawing, painting and music skills for our students. The study of the arts teaches kids to be more tolerant and open, promotes individuality, increases self-confidence, helps them in articulating a vision and teaches them to think creatively. The elimination of arts from our public school systems and the lack of school programs is a very controversial subject for some in the academic community. The threat of the erosion of the arts for our children is daunting but luckily attention has been drawn to the problem and key organizations and academics are beginning starting to fight back.

The beginning of the Public Education System began in the 1840's, was highly localized and available only to the wealthy. A group of prominent citizens, among them, Horace Mann of Massachusetts and Henry Barnard of Connecticut, believed that all children should have access to the benefits of learning and made public the issue of separating learning by class and/or wealth. Their argument was that education would create great citizens, unite society and prevent crime and poverty. Through their efforts, free public education was available to all American children by the end of the 1900's, hence the beginning of the curriculum of basic math, english, history, science and art, otherwise known as the Liberal Arts Education. ("A History of Public Education in the United States" p1).

In the past twenty years, however, there has been a growing trend of education

institutions eliminating art study programs in American public schools across the country and leaning more toward a focus on technical education. Our society has recently moved towards the view that business skills are a valid curriculum element needed for students to survive in the work environment, and art is a subject to be relegated to the world of the elective; important but certainly not imperative in the educational development of our children. Historically, before the age of technology, the common liberal arts education focused on teaching the student to be well rounded, with no major focus in any field. The idea of this philosophy was to provide students with an education that would address a complete curriculum of learning that would develop the whole student physically, culturally and practically. It was deemed at this period, pre-1980, that the purpose of education was to develop a complete knowledge base of ideas to prepare the student for society in the best possible way. “Because the liberal arts span the domains of human experience, they afford the best foundation for the diverse challenges that confront us in this rapidly evolving world.” (“Academic Atrophy” p9). In the modern era of educational reform critics feel that the liberal arts philosophy does not address essential needs of a student entering the work force. They have presumed a greater emphasis is needed on communications and basic practical skills such as technology and science. However, public school scores were declining at a steady rate. In 1983, a federal report titled, “A Nation At Risk” was the catalyst for change. This report determined that the scores in public schools showed very low academic achievement in public schools and suggested that American students were out performed on international academic tests by students from other industrial countries. (“The History of Public Schools in America”). This resulted in states taking more responsibility and involvement in changing the trend in declining test scores for their states.

As a result, new theories of education curricula, including the Federal “No Child Left Behind” policy, (NCLB), stress practical education and have begun to give cultural arts subject’s minimum priority. The NCLB was made into law in 2001 and was described by President Bush as “the start of a new era in American public education”. He went on to say that this was a new path of reform and a new path of results. The purpose of this new policy was to force states to be held accountable for improving student achievement. While these school districts are accepting billions of dollars in federal aid, the enactment of NCLB would now allow federal authority over states and local schools to impose new requirements for annual testing. Although the mood was upbeat regarding this new policy, the eventual outcome may not have had the effect the creators were aiming for. What created the downward trend to eliminate, or at least decrease the number of art programs in our public schools? According to the experts of the Arts Education Fund: “The arts are designated as a ‘core academic subject’, however, implementation of the NCLB has led to the erosion of arts education in the schools.” (Arts Education Fund, p1). Trends in modern philosophy of education seem to indicate that education is training for work. Most significantly, the government program of (NCLB) seems to support this view: “A report from the Center for Education Policy concludes that, since the enactment of NCLB, 22% of school districts surveyed have reduced instructional time for arts and music.” (Center on Education, p.xi). This is confirmed by the data from a sample of teachers and their teaching process: “About three quarters of all principals reported increases in instructional time for reading, writing and mathematics; similar proportions reported increases in time for professional development in these three areas. (“Academic Atrophy“, p7)

The emphases shown in communication skills and mathematical aptitude by the NCLB

show a leaning towards work skills and a separation from arts education. Without question, the development of a positive economy is a priority for politicians in present-day America. The problem is that too much emphasis in modern programs of education has been directed towards the simplistic attitude that the arts have no direct influence on the social acumen of students as it relates to preparation for the work force. As it happens, evidence exists to disprove this point of view:

School districts are finding that the arts develop many skills applicable to the ‘real world’ environment. In a study of ninety-one school districts across the nation, evaluators found that the arts contribute significantly to the creation of the flexible and adaptable workers that businesses demand to compete in today’s economy. (Arts Action Fund, p3)

There is also proof that art provides more than just a rudimentary surface knowledge:

The arts make a tremendous impact on the developmental growth of every child, leveling the ‘learning field’ across socio-economic boundaries. ... Students who participate in the arts outperform those who do not on virtually every measure. (Center on Education, p. xi)

Although rapid technological advance and the need to keep up with this modern trend seems to have left some candidates for the work force behind, there is no reason for educational reformers to presume that only specifically related educational subjects will fill the need for change in education. Will the teaching of the arts in public school continue to be at risk with our present government policies?

There are indications that instruction in the arts in our schools is regaining

support. A significant number of informed groups and educators are protesting the diminishment of school arts programs and making their voices heard: Americans for the Arts; Arts and Education; Educators for Social Responsibility; Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development; National Association of State Boards; National Art Education Association. These are just a few of the organizations supporting a greater consideration for the teaching of the arts in our schools. These organizations are helping to foster a needed commitment to students who can benefit from art programs. It is true, too, that overwhelming majorities of our States have agreed to improve their consideration of the arts in our schools. "... 49 States have adopted standards for arts learning."(Arts Action Fund, p2). The process of implementation for government action grinds even slower than the wheels of justice, and is subject to the priorities set by its legislators, but all measures of accepted change eventually find their way into law and regulation.

The debate over the target of education will continue into the future as critics and educational theorists seek an acceptable format for the education of our youth. At present, the trend is towards linking schooling to the social prize of continued economic growth. Whether this trend will prove fruitful in the future, is hard to tell; as is the extent of the damage created by the systematic reduction of arts programs such as fine arts, music and history. Even the current president of the United States has voiced an opinion on the importance of the arts:

The arts enhance our lives, stimulate our creativity, and allow us to express our emotions, thoughts, and aspirations through countless forms of artistic expression.

Through the humanities we learn about ourselves, and about the important

contributions of those who came before us.

Across our country, people of all ages convey their values and their beliefs through artistic and intellectual works. These creative efforts communicate the ideas that shape lives. As we face the challenges of a new era, the arts and humanities will be vital to a future of innovation, opportunity, and hope.

As tools for learning, the arts and humanities have a positive impact on our children's cognitive development, their confidence, and their motivation. During this month, I encourage all citizens to participate in activities that celebrate our rich artistic and intellectual heritage, and to learn more about the artists and scholars whose work continues to enrich our society, our Nation, and the world.”

[George W. Bush 2002]

A strange speech coming from the president whose administration was responsible for bringing the NCLB to the forefront. Although the slogan, “No Child Left Behind” is moving and politically powerful, more thought should have been put into the consequences and, most importantly, the motives behind this organization. Though the initial plan may have been to improve the education system for our children, the end result is alarming in it’s all encompassing shift to a controlled agenda of what a few feel is “relevant” curriculum. However, disregarding the negative, there is a positive side to this entire issue. As a nation of parents, teachers and politicians, we have identified that there is a problem and steps are being taken to address both the problems of low tests scores and the lack of art programs. This is a good first step in any process that needs reform.

Although the picture for the establishment of the arts in our schools, in spite of the reassurance given by President Bush, may look bleak, all is not lost. With the help of the numerous organizations upholding the importance of arts education, including a current massive add campaign involving entertainment performers producing public ad campaigns to promote the importance arts programs in schools and the new data that show the importance of these studies on all academic achievement levels, there is a new wave of believers promoting the importance of the arts. As we continue to improve on the educational process, hopefully, we will take the best of the study of practical sciences, incorporate the best from the liberal arts educational system and blend these elements together to create a strong foundation of learning for our children.

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