

Our Children, Our Future



Education Fact of the Week:

Passionate About School: Impact of Fine Arts and Extracurricular Activities on Student Success

While the Legislative Conference Committee on SF 171 and SF 172 is working to come to agreement on the per pupil funding increase for schools, we think a reminder about the importance of some critical activities at school might help. The very activities on the chopping block include fine arts, extracurricular activities, student clubs and programs that help students stay passionate about and succeed in school.

People have often wondered if students in fine arts and activities succeed in school because of their involvement in those activities or if successful students are more likely to self-select into fine arts and activities in the first place. A chicken and egg question; which comes first?

The Fine Arts / Academic Achievement Connection

A research review titled [Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development](#), by the Arts Education Partnership, reviews 62 studies on the relationship between the arts and academic and social development. In [Connections between Education in the Arts and Student Achievement Perspectives on Relevant Research](#), Grantmakers in the Arts in 2002, summarizes the findings of the research review:

“Critical Links makes the case for a great many links between learning in the arts and student achievement. In a summary essay, Catterall catalogs them. Each discipline is connected to significant outcomes. For example, in the visual arts, there are findings about how drawing supports writing skills and how visualization training supports interpretation of text. In music, researchers found strong connections to spatial reasoning and math, and between instrument instruction and SAT scores. Dance instruction was connected to fluency in creative thinking and to reading skills. Drama in the form of dramatic enactment was connected to story comprehension, character understanding, and writing proficiency, and is shown to be a better way for students to process a story than teacher-led discussion. Multi-arts programs, as you might expect, had multiple connections: to reading, verbal, and math skills, and to creative thinking.

Similar connections are present between arts learning and social and emotional development.”

Closer to home, an [Iowa Public Radio Story](#) last February reports on the success of infusing fine arts into the curriculum in low performing schools. Three years ago, Findley Elementary, Des Moines Public Schools, became one of eight schools in the country to test a new program called Turnaround Arts. The President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities developed this initiative for low performing schools. In 2011, Findley was ranked in the bottom 5% of Iowa schools. Now, an independent study says math proficiency has increased by 17%, reading has improved by 52%, and there has been a 35% reduction in disciplinary referrals at this once troubled school.

What about Extracurricular Activities?

Educational Leadership, ASCD, published an article by Doug Reeves, renowned researcher from the Leadership and Learning Institute, titled [The Learning Leader / The Extracurricular Advantage](#).

“To create the most positive classroom environment possible, education leaders must consider not only what happens inside the classroom, but also everything that affects students throughout the day. Extracurricular experiences are an important ingredient in this recipe.” Reeves article is about Woodstock, Illinois, one high school with an experience showing a concerted effort to increase extracurricular offerings and participation can contribute to school-wide academic improvement.

The article points out some amazing results in Woodstock: “Here are the results of Ninth grade failure rates in math, science, social studies, English, and physical education are all down substantially, with math failures down almost 40 percent in a single year. The school is producing more National Merit honorees than ever before and, in the past five years, has doubled the number of students taking and passing advanced placement exams, even as the percentages of low-income students, minority students, and English language learners have increased. The graduation rate, at 88 percent, is the highest in 10 years. Discipline has also improved; fighting incidents have dropped to one-half the number of the previous year.”

Reeves states, “One clear, measurable change that took place simultaneously with Woodstock's improved outcomes was a dramatic increase—more than 400 percent in five years—in student participation in extracurricular activities, including athletics, academics, ethnic identity clubs, cultural groups, and many others. When asked about his strategies for increasing student involvement in extracurricular activities, (Principal) Tafoya told me, *If we have six or seven students interested in something, we'll start a new club. We want students to find a reason to get up and come to school. Whatever trips their trigger is what our teachers and administration are willing to do.*”

Now is the Time:

The Education Coalition calls on our Legislature and Governor to compromise and get the cost per pupil set for the 2015-16 school year. We encourage the legislature and the governor to keep working together until they agree on a number for the 2016-17 school year too, so we do not repeat the delay and scenario planning schools must endure this year.

Schools need sufficient notice to anticipate revenue, make timely staffing decisions, and thoughtfully plan to invest funds wisely for student learning. ***Iowa schools need sufficient funding to keep providing and even increase opportunities for students in fine arts, extracurricular activities, across the curriculum and especially at the middle school, and whatever “trips our students’ triggers” to generate the passion, enthusiasm and skill set our students need for success.*** The future of Iowa’s students and our state’s continued success depend on a solid investment in the priority of public education.

Brought to you by the joint efforts of Iowa Association of School Boards, School Administrators of Iowa, Iowa Area Education Agencies, Iowa State Education Association, the Rural Schools Advocates of Iowa, and the Urban Education Network of Iowa in support of adequate and timely school funding.

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