

***Keeping Music in the Schools:
Advocating for the Arts as Core Curriculum***

“Music is my way of communicating
what it is that my mouth finds too hard to speak.”¹

“Music takes over for me when other forms of expression fail.”²

"The life of the arts, far from being an interruption, a distraction, in the life of a nation, is very close to the center of a nation's purpose...and is a test of the quality of a nation's civilization."³

In these quotations, a child, a composer, and a President of the United States have answered the question: Why should music be taught in the schools?

The members of the American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS) believe that all children should have the opportunity to participate in musical activities and receive music education from highly qualified and inspired teachers. Two important federal position papers were published in 2011: *The Arts and Human Development* and *Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America's Future Through Creative Schools*. *The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies* was published in March of 2012. The purpose of this paper is to offer the perspective of the Academy with the collective experience of its members, to point out the congruencies with the federal papers, to make recommendations, and to call for collaboration with our sister organizations to inform the public and to work for equal distribution of music education as a core subject.

School boards and administrators are often sympathetic to the Academy's position that music should be part of the core curriculum, but feel compelled to justify funding music programs by finding tangible returns on the investment of time and resources. Money is easier to measure than beauty or long-term benefits. It is incumbent upon us, as music educators, to make the case for music as a core subject so convincingly that we no longer have to answer the question "Why?" but instead can focus on "How." AATS believes that the value of music education is beyond price and begins with each individual child. The best ensemble experience allows for individual growth and is far more than entertainment. Children benefit cognitively, socially, and emotionally from the opportunity to participate in music programs. AATS will address these areas individually, for the sake of clarity, all the while realizing that growth at any level tends to be cyclical in nature. The Academy will speak to music education, particularly choral and vocal, with the understanding that the principles apply to all arts education. The following statements of belief were written independently of the position papers of the two national committees. The endnotes indicate the research in those documents that supports the Academy's experience-based position on the benefits of arts education.

Cognition

Cognition in a musical context has been defined by science in many ways, including the integration of right and left hemispheres of the brain, physical (kinesthetic) coordination, eye-hand and eye-ear acuity, numerical sequencing, creative processes, and improvisation. Language and music follow different paths in the brain Robert Jourdain wrote, "The cerebral setup for music is far more diverse and changeable than that for language."⁴ Language describes the contents of the world; music "reenacts the experience within the body."⁵

Further views include musical intelligence, as presented by the educational psychologist Howard Gardner (based on 7 or 8 multiple intelligences), which may

play to a student's strength, addressing a need not being met in other areas of the curriculum. To be sure, music study would seem to engage virtually all of the intelligences Gardner describes: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, and sense of others, in addition to musical intelligence.

“My father was not a good student. He got several D's, an occasional F and many C's throughout his school years. But he seemed to shine when it came to music—and got A's on every report card. I know, I've seen them.

He was fortunate to have music available to him...and teachers who recognized his gift. If his schools hadn't provided music, we would never have heard “Moon River,” “The Pink Panther,” “Peter Gunn” and myriad movie scores.

Felice Mancini (speaking of her father, Henry Mancini) ⁶

Social and Leadership Skills

Social skills involved in music making include learning to make group decisions, to collaborate, cooperate, communicate wishes and opinions, and learn from peers. Music study may intrinsically motivate students, giving them autonomy in their own learning.

Being engaged in choir or ensemble is a very positive way to feel involved and connected as an adolescent in school. A strong music program in the school helps our children find a way to become involved in these group activities and helps provide a way for our children to stay safe and have positive experiences.

Association with children from other ethnic groups, with those with disabilities, and with those of varied ages, helps develop acceptance of others and the sense of “different” softens or disappears. As John Dewey, noted educational reformer and psychologist, argued 100 years ago, education and learning are social processes. He believed that students thrive in an environment where they can experience the curriculum and take responsibility for their own learning, often a very different model than traditionally held in schools even today.⁷

A musical ensemble involves participation in a community that can include election of officers: a living civics lesson, in addition to being a creative, artistic experience. The lack of civic engagement in the United States has become a serious concern for retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. In 2009, she launched *icivics.org*, to provide free interactive lessons and games. "If we don't take every generation of young people and make sure they understand that they are an essential part of government, we won't survive."⁸ We need to take every opportunity to teach citizenship and there is great risk in failing to do so. As Justice O'Connor says, "You don't need legislation, you need a commitment."⁹

Music can help students build confidence and self-esteem. Students often grow tremendously in this regard, developing poise and self-assurance with public performances. With music performance we're often talking about overcoming bold barriers—nerves and performance anxiety. This may help engender tolerance, humility, and collegiality. Culturally, music is a medium to confront these differences, as Dewey implies in his book, *Art as Experience*, suggesting that an art form is embedded in the experiences of a culture.¹⁰

The hard work that goes into a successful performance affords students, not instant gratification, but a medium length delay in rewards that strengthens their ability to work for long term goals. Ultimately, they may learn that the work itself is the reward.

Emotional Growth and Stability

Assessing emotional growth and maturity is a difficult measurement to make, but a crucially important one. There is abundant anecdotal evidence of the role music plays in changing lives, one at a time. Quincy Jones wrote that at age ten, he had decided that, "Music will be my mother."¹¹ Even if measurement is problematic,

the observations of experienced teachers over many years should be given serious consideration.

Music study allows children to develop the capability to find the means to express what is almost impossible to put into words. The arts can offer children an emotional balance; improvisational play might help children “build fantasies in a way that can help them cope with difficult situations.”¹²

Involvement with music, even if playful, is thus more than entertainment. George Shirley wrote:

Entertainment, as defined by most dictionaries, is something that affords the mind rest, relaxation, diversion, amusement; in sum, an agreeable experience. An artistic experience, however, transcends these bounds by offering the mind a challenge, an opportunity for growth; it uplifts as well as soothes and does not have to be agreeable to be worth its weight in gold. Rigorous pursuit of artistic perfection is the goal that prepares psyche and soma in ways that enable future success in disciplines seemingly unrelated to music. The poisonous and shallow view of music as entertainment alone makes it expendable when the education dollars get tight, an easy target for destruction when cognizance of the long-term consequences of such a decision is lacking. History has proven repeatedly that cultivation of the fine and performing arts ensures the continued growth of mind and spirit. In this way, hand in hand with scientific development, civilization is reborn and continues to thrive.¹³

(*Music Education in Detroit's Public Schools: The Struggle to Survive*.
www.newmusicbox.or/article.nmbx?id_6423)

We want our students to *experience* music, not to be simply passive consumers of it, or to know *about* it for a standardized test. Our goal in keeping music in the schools is not to produce professional musicians, but to enrich the lives of all students. To be sure, there will be students like Henry Mancini, whose gifts would never have been discovered, had it not been for his public school music teachers.

The Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de las Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela, known as **El Sistema**, enrolls children from poor families and has had phenomenal success. Gustavo Dudamel, known affectionately as El

Dude, is a product of that training and is now conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic; recognized for his amazing skill and for his curly hair and charm.¹⁴ Training takes time; the “10,000 hour rule” dates back to 1899 and scientists have validated it in recent years.¹⁵ A music program could be dismantled to solve short-term budget problems, but it could take years to rebuild it and produce more “El Dudes.” The Academy believes that all children should have a meaningful musical experience, with the requisite amount of time invested in the quality of instruction and inspiration that would excite the innate gifts of each of them.

Music provides a means for self-expression for children and adults alike, providing a bond between generations that might be difficult to forge with the spoken word. Exuberant, spontaneous songs are sung to boost school spirit for sporting events or as toasts at retirement parties—expert performance is not a requirement. “We Shall Overcome” provided both comfort and strength for the civil rights movement. Crowds along the route of Robert Kennedy’s funeral train sang “Amazing Grace” and after 9/11, members of Congress gathered on the Capitol steps to sing “God Bless America.” In times of tragedy it would be an added tragedy to have no song to sing.

Extrinsic Values: The Benefits to Academics

The benefits of participation in music and arts classes include improved class attendance, better graduation rates, and higher academic achievement, according to studies that have been done since the late 1990’s.¹⁶ We must rely on educational researchers to do longevity studies with the best possible methodology. The links to find the evidence-based studies from the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities are listed in the Appendix. Links to the papers cited above can also be found at the AATS website, americanacademyofteachersofsinging.org.

The benefits of music education may be immediate, but it's more likely that it may be years before the value is realized, and then not in a way that can be measured. Middle School teacher Sheldon Bair writes:

The reality is that we are teaching students whose future jobs do not yet exist! I have another former student who went to college for flute performance and physics at Towson University and then Peabody for acoustics. Her job with Exxon-Mobil is to keep an 'eye' on the tuning forks in pipes through which petroleum flows, and if they don't ring true to find out the cause and have the proper people correct it. She has two labs in northern NJ and loves her job. I had no idea such jobs exist. ¹⁷

Discussion

The Academy of Teachers of Singing would be expected to be advocates for music in the schools. If we don't preach what we practice, who will? We have an obligation to advocate for what long experience has taught us to be crucial in the development of our students and consequently to the wellbeing of our communities. As Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."¹⁸

Why are the two large and long-ranging studies mandated by the President and the National Endowment for the Arts, by themselves, not sufficient to bring about the changes that we recommend? The answer lies in our system of government. The studies provide information and even recommendations, but it takes legislators and school boards to implement them, and it requires that local communities, as well as state and national agencies, bear a responsibility for seeing that these issues are brought to the table for consideration and funding.

The information that we offer must be accurate, and it is possible that some of the individual studies cited by PCAH and NEA have questionable methodology. Research must continue to refine and corroborate results currently available. If the results of a study are exaggerated, it weakens the argument that we present to petition for funding. Dr. Kenneth Elpus, in his exhaustive 2011 dissertation, looked at “socioeconomic status, native language, parents’ education, and race/ethnicity of U.S. high school students.”¹⁹ He stated that the real problem was “unequal distribution” from district to district.²⁰ There are numerous statements in the two federal papers that corroborate this inequality.²¹ In a communication of April 8, 2012, Dr. Elpus stressed that if a website is linked to post ancillary material, it is not acceptable for that site to be blank.

National Public Radio has given the schools a passing grade in arts education because they have programs (only 8 or 9% have no programs at all),²² yet we read frequently of arts funding being cut in order to pay for technology or to cut budgets. Parents are being called on to pay for classroom costs. “Many educators are concerned that relying on such private largess exacerbates disparities between schools in affluent neighborhoods—where parents sometimes raise hundreds of thousands of dollars per year—and schools in poor neighborhoods, which often make do with public money.”²³ If most schools have music programs, what percentage of the student body participates? If a middle school teacher has 60% participation in music, that is unusually good, but what about the other 40%? Might those students be the very ones who would benefit? It should be noted that the passing grade is for the *existence* of arts programs; there has been no grade given to the *quality* of the courses offered.

The members of the Academy are not social scientists, statisticians, neurologists, or urban anthropologists. However, there are chilling statistics that are readily available: White males between the ages of 30-49 with a BA or higher, had only 3% not in the work force. The same age group with less than a high school diploma, had 13% not in the work force in 2010. Communities with a greater

percentage of high school dropouts had higher crime rates.²⁴ It may be very difficult to determine just how many students remain in school because they love music and arts classes, but given the expense to society at large of the consequences of students dropping out, isn't it worth exploring every possible avenue for keeping them IN school?

Extra-curricular activities can be wonderful for those who want to have more participation in music and the arts, but the term denotes just that: extra! An "extra" can have great value, but an activity outside the curriculum may involve an additional fee that a student may not be able to afford and transportation that a student may not be able to find. Sometimes a community makes important contributions of time and energy for programs such as Band Together; volunteers enjoy the opportunity to participate and show support of music education and to help keep it a core subject. James Boord established Band Together and writes, "It is really a great thing that everyone works together on. It motivates many of the teachers who participate and is something they can be proud of. It also shows us that the community cares about the program as a whole."²⁵

As more and more learning is being done online with the loss of social interaction, even in elementary school, music takes on added importance in the social development of children. "This would appear to make it possible to go from kindergarten through eighth grade without ever stepping into a real classroom... collaborative problem solving, socialization, working with other people is key not just to the global economy but to getting along in life."²⁶

There are research questions that still need to be answered. *The Arts and Human Development* cites sources for grants to study those questions. As we await the results of such research, we need not wait to advocate for arts education. We must offer our recommendations to PTAs and the public at large.

Recommendations:

AATS assumes that those in position to make funding and curricular decisions do not have the time to read the several hundred pages in the 2011 federal reports. We can help them by distilling the information and making recommendations. We are all stakeholders in the outcome.

Music must be retained as a core subject, regularly scheduled: a class that can be taken without sacrificing another subject. With merit pay being considered more often and dependent on how well a student performs on standardized tests, how willing will a math teacher be to release a student for a musical activity?

PCAH recommends integrating music into other classes, but AATS maintains that it must not be done at the expense of music as a core subject. Music should be more than a mnemonic device for remembering history or science.²⁷ A highly trained teacher teaching subject matter he loves is absolutely necessary; it is not an “add on” for a teacher in another field. It is not to be what George Shirley calls “art on a cart.” The music teacher can integrate topics being studied in other classes in the repertoire chosen; this is more effective than for the classroom teacher to try to gain the skills necessary to incorporate music in his field.

We must become involved in the political process. We must ask candidates about their positions on arts education; it is not the only issue, certainly, but it is an extremely important one. Every transaction involves more than two people—what is the true cost of the “savings” under consideration? If arts classes are cut, is it truly a savings even in the short term? Where will those students go? Will they go to other classrooms contributing to overcrowding? We must state our position on arts education over and over again as each new team of legislators and administrators takes office

Books, articles, blogs, and even advice columns are addressing the issue of arts education. It is time for a collective focus on expanding and improving arts education. It has been shown repeatedly that brainstorming in large groups does not generate as many ideas as when individuals think about solutions and then pool their ideas. It seems that we become “stuck” on ideas or a particular train of thought when we work in large groups. The best ideas come when they have been debated as the brainstorming takes place and it has been found that ideas continue to form after the debate is over. It is our hope that with discussions and panels at arts conferences around the country, we will be able to pool the best ideas about how we can make the most compelling case in every legislative body, big and small, and promote a groundswell of public opinion. A defeat at any level must not be the end of the story. We must be tireless and we must learn to use social media to alert and inform the public.

Great emphasis has been placed on the teacher and that is indeed where the gift of music is delivered to the student. But that teacher must have the support of an effective principal in a school that is in good repair. We wish to provide the context for a sea change in the importance given to arts education.

“Counting for all the people down through human history, from past to present, the total sum of our genetic inheritance is less than a teardrop. That’s what we pass on for the next century. ...And those who are trying to preserve that teardrop, that heritage, are acting in the finest tradition of all religion, of all culture.....”²⁸

The time to act is now. The AATS website has links to the PCAH and NEA reports and a listing of special programs that augment and support the arts. The American Academy of Teachers of Singing is committed to improving and expanding arts education in the public schools. The Chorus America website lists

March as Music in the Schools month; Arts Advocacy has 27,000 members, and Arts Advocacy Day is April 17. In 2011, MENC became the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), 75,000 strong. Often we are not aware of the efforts of other advocacy groups, and while we need to act locally, a huge concerted outcry is also needed. AATS would like to serve as a catalyst for all arts organizations to work together in pooling our wisdom, fervor, and creativity in preserving the best programs and initiating new ones.

Will you join us?

APPENDIX

For *Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America's Future Through Creative Schools*, go to:

www.pcah.gov **Appendix A** in this paper lists studies on arts education.

For *The Arts and Achievement for At-Risk Youth*, go to:

www.arts.gov then click on Research Reports

For *The Arts and Human Development*, go to:

www.arts.gov, the click on Publications

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The best advocate for arts education is a person from the community - you!

Go to: theperformingartsalliance.org and then to the issues page. Websites change, so the headings may be different, but you should find the following:

- [Benefits of Arts Education](#)
- [Status of Arts Education](#)
- [Policy Leaders Speak Up](#)
- [Public Opinion](#)
- [Arts Education Partnership](#)
- [Tips for Contacting Your Legislator](#)
- [Department of Education Arts in Education Programs](#)

NOTES

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6. Felice Mancini, "Dear Amy" writing to thank columnist Amy Dickerson for recommending Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation for charitable donation, *Washington Post*, January 20, 2012.
7. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (c. 1934) (New York: Reprinted by Perigee Books, 1980)
8. Alexander Heffner, "Civics-minded," Interview of Sandra Day O'Connor in "The Education Issue" *Washington Post Magazine* (April 14, 2012): 35-37.
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11. Quincy Jones, with Bill Gibson, *Q On Producing* (Milwaukee WI: Hal Leonard Books, 2010) 10 (Quincy Jones' mother had dementia praecox, beginning when he was seven. By age ten, he thought he wanted to be a gangster. He had a mean stepmother, which prompted him to make music his mother.)
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16. James S. Catterall, Susan A. Damais, & Gillian Hampden-Thompson, "Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies." *Report #55, National Endowment for the Arts*, (March, 2012): 12-16.
17. Sheldon Bair, email Jan. 16, 2012. He is a music teacher at Southampton MS, Harford County Public Schools, Adjunct Professor at Harford Community College, and Director/Founder of the Susquehanna Symphony Orchestra.
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20. Kenneth Elpus. Interview, University of Maryland on December 21, 2011.
21. President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. (Prepared by M. Christine Dwyer, RMC Research Corporation, Portsmouth, NH) "Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America's Future Through Creative Schools" (May, 2011): 30-33, 54.
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