

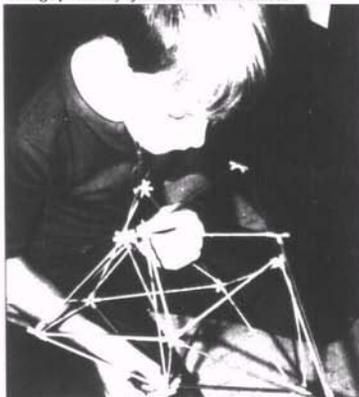
The Arts Are Essential to Education

Let's stop fooling ourselves.
We can't be educated—or civilized—without the arts.



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photograph by Terry Born

Photograph courtesy of South Dakota Arts Council



The arts are systems of thought. Figuring out a three-dimensional sculpture can be as puzzling as a paper-and-pencil problem, but there are no handy little algorithms to make problem solving simple



For the past decade, arts programs in many American schools have been systematically dismantled, causing these subjects—creative writing, dance, music, theatre, and visual arts—to become a neglected educational resource. When we dilute or delete arts programs, we unravel the infrastructure that assures the cultural future of the nation. But far worse, the absence or meagerness of the arts in schooling denies children access to the vast treasury of American and world culture. The result? Their education is incomplete, their minds less enlightened, their lives less enlivened.

The State of the Arts

In many city school systems, elementary children no longer have access to study of the arts except on a cursory basis. Baltimore school children, for example, receive instruction in art and music on an every-other-year basis, and then only a maximum of one lesson per week. In all of Chicago during the 1986-87 school year, there were only 23 full-time teachers of the arts at the elementary level for the system's 498 elementary schools. Similar declines have struck arts programs in Boston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and other cities. In California, there is now only one music teacher for every 1,600 students. In Michigan in 1974, 61 percent of the school districts hired arts specialists. Ten years later, the number had dropped to 40 percent.

Depending upon who you are, where you happen to live, where you go to high school, how well off you happen to be, you might or *might not* have access to study of the arts. For example, according to the National Center for Education Statistics,¹ about half of secondary schools offer basic courses such as music and art appreciation. In general, schools in the South offer far fewer courses in the arts than do schools elsewhere. While larger schools offer such courses as dramatic arts and design, fewer than a third of smaller schools do. Then, too, schools that cater to college-bound students provide more instruction in the arts than do schools with high concentrations of high-risk students. One-third of the seniors in the class of

1982 had *no* instruction in the arts during their four years of high school.

The diminution and demise of arts programs has been exacerbated by the school reform movement that began in 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. That report, along with a series of subsequent studies, pressured schools, teachers, and students to improve their performance in reading, mathematics, science, and other "basic" subjects. Schools responded by intensifying their concentration on a narrow range of subjects, requiring heavier academic workloads, and striving for higher test scores. In their compulsion to improve the three R's, many schools have resorted to "no-frills" curriculums that seriously neglect the arts. The deplorable result, states the recent report of the National Endowment for the Arts,² is that "the artistic heritage that is ours and the opportunities to contribute significantly to its evolution are being lost to our young people."

Looking beyond the mere availability of arts courses, we find a more distressing situation: our willingness to give some children substantive programs of arts instruction and others little, if any. The inconsistency of access to arts instruction represents a form of human deprivation that must

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be addressed. Parents, school board members, curriculum specialists, and school administrators must become aware that what we *fail* to give children is teaching them something as well: that the arts are just for the bright and talented, that they are not really important, and that you can be considered educated without any knowledge of them. Our children deserve better.

Why the Arts?

By denying children the arts, we starve our civilization. We produce children who are more fitted for an age of barbarism than the advanced civilization of the information age. The sheer number of these future citizens and their personal barrenness confront us with prospects of a diminishing cultural future. We will not prosper on the backs of their depleted lives.

But equally important, we fail these children educationally by depriving them of the insights that the arts afford. The arts provide windows to other worlds and to our own inner world. Maxine Greene, professor at Columbia University, says "It is not only the thought of *having* more that moves the young to reach beyond themselves; it is the idea of *being* more, becoming different, experiencing more deeply, overcoming the humdrum, the plain ordinariness and repetitions of everyday life."³ The arts illuminate life in all its mystery, misery, delight, pity, and wonder. Encounters with the arts invite us to explore realms of meaning that, according to an old Persian proverb, lie next to the curtain that has never been drawn aside. Through such encounters, children learn to be open to experience and to burst the confines of true/false, right/wrong thinking and four-square factual knowledge.

The arts can liberate the positive energies of young people. They awaken the learning mechanism because they touch the true inner being, that aspect of the self that is not body, the part that lies outside the domain of science—call it the *spirit*—the well-spring of dreams, caring, daring, and dedication. And when they touch that inner being, they are powerful stimuli



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for motivation and inspiration. Because the arts can break the cycle of disaffection and despair that engulfs so many of our inner-city children, these children need the arts *more*, not less, than suburban youth.

The arts, like the sciences, are symbolic systems that convey meaning about the world. The great thinkers of any age do not express themselves solely by the written word. Picasso, in response to the brutal killing of people in the defenseless village of Guernica in 1937 during the Spanish civil war, painted his outrage in abstract forms. Similarly, Benjamin Britten, in his *War Requiem*, expressed the unpredictable misfortunes of war through the powerful medium of music. As living histories of eras and peoples and as records and revelations of the human spirit, the arts may well be the most telling imprints of any civilization.

Science is not the sole conveyance of truth. If we are to prosper, we need all the symbolic forms at our command. They alone permit us to preserve and pass along our accumulated wisdom. If it were not for the arts in their various forms, how would we express and communicate new visions and new interpretations of our inner being and our outer existence? We need all these ways of viewing the

world, of pondering the meaning of life, because no one way can say it all.

The Arts Are Basic

We do not need more and better arts education to develop more and better artists. We need more and better arts education to produce better educated human beings, citizens who will value and evolve a worthy civilization. Because the human capacity to make aesthetic judgments is far too scantily cultivated, many people fail to recognize that most of the decisions we make in life—from the kind of environments we create in our communities, offices, and homes to decisions about the products we buy and the clothing we wear—have an aesthetic component. That component is too seldom calculated, for example, when mayors make decisions on public housing (when "we build slums and call them apartment houses"), when zoning boards make decisions about appropriate land use, when boards of education approve the architecture of new schools, and when legislators vote on environmental and other issues. When the aesthetic component is ignored, we denigrate life. We abuse people with dehumanizing environments, bombard them with ugliness, and deprive them of the comforts and satisfactions necessary for their psychological well-being.

But there is a far more important reason for schools to provide more and better education in the arts. Quite simply, the arts are how we human beings "talk" to ourselves and to each other. They are the languages of civilization through which we express our fears and anxieties, our curiosities and hungers, our discoveries and hopes. They enable us to express our need for understanding, love, order, beauty, safety, respite, and longevity. They alone are the means we have invented to listen to our dreams, filling our space and time with what our imagination and feelings tell us. They are the universal ways by which we still play make-believe, conjuring up worlds that explain the ceremonies of our lives. Further, they are the imprints we make that tell us who we are,

that we belong, and that we count. The arts are not just important: they are a central force in human existence. Everyone should have sufficient and equal opportunities to learn these languages, which so assist us in our fumbling, bumbling, and all-too-rarely brilliant navigation through this world.

Perched as we are on the edge of star wars, we need the arts more than ever because they reaffirm our humanity. They are the glue that holds society together. With satellite TV transmission encircling the globe and jet aircraft placing us within 24 hours of the farthest reaches of the human family, the peoples of this planet grow closer and closer—but technology does not feed the human spirit. To open the avenues of human understanding, we need every possible means at our disposal. Far from being peripheral to those interests, the arts are a central

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and basic means of hope and salvation for the human race. For these reasons, every youth should be guaranteed access to study of the arts, and every school should provide that access.□

¹Course Offerings and Enrollments in the Arts and the Humanities at the Secondary School Level, (1984), a report prepared

for the National Center for Education Statistics by Evaluation Technologies, Inc., Arlington, Virginia (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office).

²Chapter 1, "Overview," (1988), *Toward Civilization: A Report on Arts Education* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts), p. 25.

³M. Green, "Creating, Experiencing, and Sense-Making: The Art World in the Schools," (July 1986), paper presented at the Columbia University symposium on "Arts Curricula in Transition," New York, p. 5.

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