The Forgotten Arts
KARL J. GLENN

Beginning with A Nation at Risk in 1983, discussion about reform in education has virtually ignored the value of music and the other arts for a well-rounded education. The most glaring omission has come in our six national educational goals.

The attention given to what America 2000 calls “five core subjects” is as extensive as it is laudable. Students in English, math, science, history, and geography will receive American Achievement Tests, and their schools will be recognized with Presidential Citations for Educational Excellence. Federally funded Merit School Programs and Awards for Excellence in Teaching will reward schools and faculty members excelling in the “five core subjects.” But what happens to students who achieve in music and the other arts — or vocational studies or foreign languages? Is their excellence to go unrecognized? Are their schools and teachers not to be rewarded for a job well done?

Nowhere in the defining act of national goal-setting are the arts even mentioned as a subject area — despite the efforts of organizations and leaders in the arts community to urge their inclusion. The fevered activity surrounding much educational reform swarms around significant concerns: If we do not prepare our children to enter and sustain a productive and well-trained work force, if American enterprise continues to flag in its ability to compete internationally, and if we don’t figure out how to provide minority children with a meaningful education, then we may yet fail as a nation.

The reason our nation must educate its children in the arts is that, without the arts, the next generation will lack the essential knowledge, skills, and values — and the sentiments and sensibilities — they need to lead fully human lives. If we continue to put music and the other arts in the curricular back row or, worse, sacrifice them to “budget realism,” we rob our children of their heritage, not just as Americans but as human beings. Whether by design or inadvertence, we dehumanize them.

Music and the other arts are not extras but basic. They are just as intrinsic an element of the term “educated” as are mathematics, language, history, and science. They are inherent to what it means to be human because the arts are the arenas where we work out our deepest longings and articulate our highest hopes. To deprive a child of the knowledge and tools to explore the domain of the arts is to subject him or her to a kind of spiritual starvation; a child with no key to this door grows up with a malnourished soul.

The Good News
In 1990, for the first time in history, music educators, performers and composers, retailers, manufacturers, technicians, and publishers formed an coalition to restore the balance. The aim is to focus the nation’s attention on the pressing need to include music and the other arts at the center — not at the edges — of the curriculum.

The coalition is spearheaded by the Music Educators National Conference, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, Inc., and the National Association of Music Merchants. The continuing results of the coalition’s work are:

- A report, “Growing Up Complete: The Imperative for Music Education,” delivered to every senator, representative, and governor in the country, and to thousands of others.
- A videotape. Let’s Make Music, outlining the declining state of music education.
- A series of public service announcements, urging the importance of music education.
- A national symposium in March 1991 in Washington where leaders in the arts, business, and education took the opportunity to discuss how music and the other arts can make a major contribution to education and society.

As a follow-up to all this activity, the National Coalition for Music Education has established state- and local-level coalitions around the country working to carry the word to local-level decision makers.

The friends and allies of music education must join the state and local coalitions to make an irresistible case for music education. All of us must join together as local advocates to provide the help, energy, and resources needed. Together, we have to make good on the obligation on which the education reform movement from all the available evidence has defaulted.

Author’s note: The Coalition has developed an “Action Kit for Music Education” to help develop grassroots support in states and local districts. The kit includes two videotapes: a 76-page advocacy manual; a copy of Growing Up Complete; and other materials. The kit may be ordered from MENC Publications Sales, 1902 Association Dr., Reston, VA 22091, for $41.50, shipping included.

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