

# **Strengthening Performing Arts Programs in the District of Columbia Public Schools**

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## **Rationale**

Strong performing arts programs should be a vital part of public school curriculum. Schools that are integrating the arts into curriculum as part of a comprehensive education reform strategy are experiencing positive changes in the school environment and improved student performance. Specifically, performing arts directors in South Carolina and Florida reported strong programs as a result of students taking their courses by choice in comparison with directors in the District of Columbia in which students were not given a choice of their elective course selection. It has become increasingly prevalent that the arts are vital to a well-rounded education. In schools across the country, priorities are being shifted and budget cuts are being made. Therefore, opportunities for students to participate in high-quality arts instruction and performing arts activities are diminishing.

## **Background**

Students in DCPS schools are exposed to arts courses throughout their K-12 education. Specifically, at the high school level, students graduate with a minimum of a half credit in music and 3.5 credits of electives. DCPS Arts is attempting to expand the arts experiences in the District with programs such as DCPS Music Festival, Turnaround Arts, Digital Media Arts, Partnerships, and the Fillmore Arts Center.

Although there are small efforts in effect to expand the arts experience in DCPS schools, there are many schools throughout the District that are suffering from both quantity and quality of performing arts programs.

## **Literature Review**

For centuries, music education and its intrinsic values have been challenged and undermined with regard to relevance in public school education. However, several pivotal events uphold the significance of music education. Specifically: (1) Pre-Christian music education was eminent for music assuming a position in the quadrivium (2) during the Middle Ages, music (theory) was considered one of the higher arts (3) the Renaissance caused the emergence of secular choral music, and (4) throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century, music education was strong and took place outside of church.

Present-day music education is a direct outgrowth of vocal music. One can speculate that without the singing school and singing society movements, music instruction would cease to exist in public school education. (Abeles, Hoffer, & Klotman, 1994). Lowell Mason expresses that vocal music produces social order and family happiness. He further states that strong family attachments are evident when singing together (Mark, 2002). I assert this “attachment” can be transferred to school music programs. Students who are constantly immersed in a cooperative, teamwork environment can heighten their social skills and self-awareness. According to Phillips (1993), music helps us learn about ourselves and others from a cultural perspective.

The correlation between arts learning and standardized testing is extremely noteworthy. Multiple independent studies have shown increased years of enrollment in arts courses are positively correlated with higher SAT verbal and math scores. More than 65 distinct relationships between arts and academic and social outcomes are documented. A few examples are: visual arts instruction and reading readiness; dramatic enactment and conflict resolution skills; traditional dance and nonverbal reasoning; and learning piano and mathematics proficiency. In summary, the six major types of benefits associated with study of the arts and student achievement are:

- (1) Reading & Language Skills, (2) Mathematics Skills, (3) Thinking Skills, (4) Social Skills, (5) Motivation to Learn, & (6) Positive School Environment.

### **Data/Tools/Process**

Performing arts directors from Florida, South Carolina, and the District of Columbia completed a brief survey in order to determine student scheduling in band and choir courses. The directors provided their students with a questionnaire inquiring about their course scheduling. Students were asked if they were taking their performing arts course by choice or if they were forced to take the course by their guidance counselor.

### **Data Analysis**

The results of the data were overwhelming. Data from a band course in Florida indicated that 100% of students chose to take Band 1. Data from a choir course in South Carolina indicated that 90% of students chose to take Concert Choir. On the other end of the spectrum, a band director in the District of Columbia reported that 25% of students chose to take Band 1 while a choir director indicated only 8% of students chose to take Concert Choir. Additionally, directors in District of Columbia also reported that there were several students who chose to take band and chorus however during scheduling, they were not given their preferred elective courses.

### **Recommendations**

In summary, it is vital that DCPS works to improve the quality of performing arts programs throughout the District. In order for the quality to improve, students should not be forced to take performing arts courses. Performing arts should be given the same level of respect and support as sports. Specifically, students are not forced to participate in sports – it is solely based on ability and interest. Consequently, student participation in performing arts programs should be strictly based on student preferences and audition results.

The District of Columbia Music Educators Association (DCMEA) can work collaboratively with DCPS to provide a variety of positive and productive experiences for music educators and students. Specifically, this organization needs to improve the quality of the recent concert festival and music professional development. DCMEA should incorporate a Professional Development Conference in which music educators throughout the District can network and participate in high quality, relevant workshops meetings. Additionally, during the bi-monthly District professional development days, performing arts directors should meet and plan student showcase opportunities (concerts, festivals, solo & ensemble, recruitment performances, etc.). DCPS has to make a greater effort to strengthen the performing arts programs in the District in order to gain higher retention of students as well as performing arts educators.

## **Bibliography**

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