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THE ARTS IN EDUCATION

The Absolute and Essential Importance of Arts Education

by ALLISON MEIER

Year after year, budget cuts have reduced Oklahoma’s funding for education by 28 percent—the highest per-student cuts in the nation. In February 2018, Governor Mary Fallin signed the state legislature’s bill to slash \$16.2 million from the Department of Education. Additionally, reductions to the state’s budget for the Oklahoma Arts Council resulted in the hiatus of several of its arts-education grants and programs. With schools annually adapting to these decreasing resources, the arts are regularly among the first things to go. Furthermore, where arts programming remains, the burden is frequently on teachers for funding and materials. A report released in May 2018 by the National Center for Education Statistics stated that 94 percent of teachers in the United States pay out of their own pockets for classroom supplies.

Yet, studies consistently demonstrate the vital importance of the arts in education. The arts-advancement nonprofit organization Americans for the Arts compiled recent reports showing that students of low socioeconomic status with a high participation in the arts have a dropout rate of 4 percent, compared to 22 percent for those with a low arts participation. Standardized test scores are higher for students who study art and music, while low-income students are more than twice as likely to graduate from college if they are involved in the arts. Although students with wealthier backgrounds can often obtain these valuable experiences outside the classroom, for many students, public schools are their only option for learning.

“With limited resources, we know that choosing arts education over other educational strategies may seem tough, but the research shows that students who learn in and through the arts exceed their peers who do not,

especially those young people who have the most to gain and are often systematically disenfranchised from our education system,” says Jeff Poulin, arts-education program manager for Americans for the Arts. “To be blunt, if we want our schools and students to succeed, arts education is an overwhelmingly effective strategy.”

To bridge the gaps—“Band-Aids,” as they are often called—Oklahoma arts organizations are collaborating with schools and offering programming to supplement curricula.

“Programs delivered by Oklahoma City arts organizations provide excellent enrichment but are not a substitute for in-school arts instruction by qualified arts educators” says Elizabeth Eickman, director of the Kirkpatrick Family Fund. “The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act reauthorized and updated the US Department of Education’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act, expanding the definition of a well-rounded education to include all art disciplines. This policy change will hopefully spark more arts instruction during the school day, with artists and arts organizations providing experiences that enhance learning.”

Coordinated by Arts Council Oklahoma City, the Arts Partnership for Oklahoma City Public Schools connects schools to local agencies, to bring visual and performing arts into classrooms. The All Access Arts initiative, also from Arts Council Oklahoma City, has brought visual and performing arts to under-served schools and other community spaces such as libraries and parks.

The Oklahoma Arts Institute, which promotes the pursuit of art

professionally through its tuition-free summer residency program for high school students, brings in nationally known artists and organizes a fall program for adults and educators. Yet the nonprofit, which operates through a public and private partnership, is also dealing with cuts in the Department of Education, which provides essential matching funds to its private donations.

In recent years, when Eugene Field Elementary in Oklahoma City had to eliminate its visual-arts program, the now defunct artist-run Current Studio partnered with the school on a grassroots endeavor that gave it a short lifeline. Today, the school participates in an artist-in-residence program but does not have a permanent art teacher, and children have “occasional” but not routine art experiences.

Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center launched Art for Every 5th Grader in 2016 to engage each Oklahoma City Public Schools fifth-grade student in contemporary art through exhibition and classroom settings. In August 2018, all OKCPS fifth-grade teachers were invited to Oklahoma Contemporary for a meet-up, with their collected feedback guiding the 2018–19 iteration. The outreach is only a part of Oklahoma Contemporary’s education programming for youth and adults, which ranges from classes and camps to workshops and field trips.

Autumn Brown, a teaching artist at Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center, explains that the goal is not simply “to create little artists, but resilient little people,” and to foster “a mind-set of creativity and growth for life’s challenges.” She has witnessed kids over the age of six who have rarely used scissors, and many who have never had a chance to just be

imaginative or take creative risks. “The frightening thing is those are the things we need to grow as a society,” Brown says.

In the fall, when Oklahoma Contemporary opens its campus in Oklahoma City, more than 8,000 square feet of the new 53,916-square-foot building will be dedicated to galleries and classrooms.

“Our objective is to provide opportunities for students and teachers to develop and exercise these muscles so that they can transfer those skills back to their classroom,” says Julie Delliquanti, director of education and public programs at Oklahoma Contemporary.

These studio-style learning spaces will include areas for early childhood education and a teen art studio. The focus on education in the building’s design is a statement about the significance of learning as part of promoting creative expression.

“We do not see ourselves as a one-stop solution to fix the woefully inadequate support for the arts in Oklahoma City Public Schools,” says Delliquanti. Instead, she adds, through its evolving initiatives and new campus, Oklahoma Contemporary “aims to ensure all students can access quality arts experiences in order to improve their odds of academic and personal success.”





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