

Parents—Catalysts for Quality Arts Programs

Our expectations for what students should know and be able to do in the arts are clear--they are called the--National Standards. These are in place, accepted on many fronts, and are being used as a reference at the state and local levels to build quality arts programs for schools. The arts standards present directions for what school teachers, principals, board members, and all decision makers must put in place. However, the direction for what parents must do to become equal partners in the arts education process is not as clear-cut. If our children are to excel as creative people, parents must be willing to break with the methods and molds of the past, where the arts were only for the gifted or for entertainment, but not considered an essential learning discipline.

For far too long, the visual and performing arts have been used, misused, and abused in our schools; children have gotten exposure for their artwork but have not been educated about the arts. They have even been artistically exploited---expected to produce some form of art or craft for its entertainment or decorative value. We now have a narrow window of opportunity that may allow us to alter dramatically the role and position of the arts in education. The arts standards offer support for examining the traditions, customs, and habits that we have long accepted as arts education in the schools.

I have come to know and believe in the potential and power of parents who support quality arts programs. School boards write policy, administrators execute their wishes. Teachers design strategies and implement the policy. Parents, however, are the true risk takers. They can choose to support the status quo or to defend the arts as an educational necessity that children need to realize their full potential.

I have experienced firsthand the inherent power of parents as true education leaders. I offer two contrasting personal anecdotes as a case in point.

Perhaps, it was my own experience as an itinerant art teacher that led me to dread the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas. The visual art program which I had so carefully planned and implemented had to be suspended while the children made ornaments for the tree and constructed the stage decorations and play costumes. I quickly learned that I was not alone: The music teachers shared my anxiety as we "suspended" instruction to prepare for holiday programs and projects. I listened closely and learned that classroom teachers, too, were voicing their frustration and suspending their instruction while they taught "dances" and coached students in memorizing lines.

No one said I must help with these things, but there were the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, traditions of the past that led me to realize that continuing with these education customs was an appropriate response to the desires of the parents and the community.

But now I function as an elementary school principal with daily decisions that will impede or advance our education agenda for excellence. In this current position, one December, I was faced with a true education dilemma. The music teacher and art teacher, who knew that I was not only sympathetic to the arts but consider them essential in the design of a successful school environment, approached me. The vocal music teacher had clearly stated that preparing holiday music was greatly reducing the quality and quantity of music skill development and appreciation in our school.

Quietly the art teacher was willing to suspend his curricular objectives and comply with the

pressure to decorate the stage and the holiday programs. I dragged my feet, but eventually acted to break with the seasonal tradition. This year there would be no tree decorated with look alike ornaments produced with patterns. Nor would all students parade uncomfortably across a decorated stage to perform music that had been over-rehearsed since August. No, this year would be different. We would walk the talk of education ideals that support the arts as part of, not apart from, what we do in schools. This year there would be a celebration of tradition and we would design experiences for children that would further a deep understanding in and appreciation-for the arts. And parents supported this decision!

The expectations of parents and educators for student performance, accomplishment, and achievement must be clearly focused. We know that for students to be productive citizens who achieve a quality of life, much work needs to be done by many of us who believe the arts are integral to the learning that leads to that productivity and quality.

The standards act as a guide to focus on the connections to culture that abound in the arts. Children are learning that images are critically selected to portray an idea or emotion and that symbols of all kinds are inherent to our collective universal understanding.

Classroom practice reflects this understanding, and this year the programs and presentations project a new and different philosophy about quality arts programs.

The arts standards have set before us a framework for high expectations. While the standards are optional, and not binding, they do offer all of us a basis for decision making. It is parents who must choose whether to promote and advance the role of the arts as central to learning or to impede and stifle this opportunity by insisting on the superficial.

It is my view that parents have the potential to make the most lasting difference. Many parents recognize the power of the arts to encourage imagination, instill confidence and prepare students with creative options for coping with an uncertain future.

Parents have the power to accept methods and strategies of the present and reject procedures and programs of the past---it is a matter of choice.

Parent Checklist for Action to Support the Arts as Integral to Learning

- Is there evidence that the arts programs are a part of rather than apart from the total curriculum?
- Do I look for indicators that all children are provided opportunities in all of the arts?
- Do I support innovative processes and programs sometimes by just waiting to see what happens?
- Do I treat study in the arts as important as study in any area of curriculum?
- Do I expect academic rigor in all subjects, including the arts?
- Do I convey to my child that I expect excellence in all subjects, including the arts?

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