



Cutting Upper Darby's Elementary Music and Art Programs is a Dangerous 'Roll of the Dice' Educationally

By Joseph Batory, Times Guest Columnist

The Upper Darby School District's proposal to remove its formal classes for elementary school students in music and art beginning in September, 2012, runs counter to an abundance of research as well as numerous national position papers regarding the value and necessity of music and art for children.

Aside from destroying one of the most vital and successful parts of the Upper Darby School District (its elementary music and art programs), this plan has the potential to deny higher level learning to thousands of elementary students into the future.

All of the top education organizations in America have issued a very strong position paper (The Value and Quality of Arts Education: A Statement of Principles) on the necessity of music and art for every public school student. These include the American Association of School Administrators, the National Education Association, the National Parent Teacher Association, the National Associations of Elementary and Secondary Principals, and the National School Boards Association. The opening statement of this document reads as follows: "Every student in the nation should have an education in the arts. This means that all PreK-12 students must have a comprehensive, balanced, sequential, in-school program of instruction in the arts, taught by qualified teachers, designed to provide students of all ages with skills and knowledge in the arts in accordance with high national, state, and local standards."

Wynton Marsalis, one of our nation's most brilliant musicians, has described these cutbacks of education in the arts in schools across America as follows: "When public education loses the arts, it is threatened with losing its soul. And our culture is threatened with dying from the inside."

Many of the recent national reports on education indicate that cutbacks in the arts may in fact be destroying the "humanity and the creativity" of children in the early grades of our school systems. Even though a substantial body of psychological research confirms the critical importance of music and art for children, music and art programs continually come under the knife of budget-cutters. Tragically, it is the politically motivated national overemphasis on standardized test results which is driving widespread and unfortunate detours away from what really matters in education.

Daniel Pink's *A Whole New Mind*, now in its 16th North American printing and already

translated into 12 different languages, offers a futuristic view of what it will take to lead and succeed in the automated world of tomorrow. This book is the rage of the business world.

Pink's thesis is built around the functioning of the human brain. For years, scientists have pointed out that our brains have two regions, a left and a right hemisphere. The left side handles the factual, logical, linear, sequential and more rational abilities (typically measured by standardized tests); the right side favors abilities like artistry, creativity, empathy, synthesis and big picture thinking (not easily measured). It is not unusual to have either of these hemispheres dominating the way an individual thinks and views the world. Of course, our brain's wondrous workings can hardly be oversimplified, but there are in fact these two hemispheres that have tremendous potential to affect the brain's functioning.

For many years, the "left brain" driven world has been a key to success for millions of Americans and numerous corporations primarily because we were living in a booming Information Age. However, Pink argues that the emerging highly competitive economies of today's world are changing that formula.

Pink notes that for the future, the abilities for success that matter most are in the right hemisphere of the brain, i.e., artistry, designing, innovation, inventing, and synthesizing are now the most valuable assets for success in life.

In that context, music and art programs for children in elementary schools are all about the right side of the brain. Student involvement in music and art fosters creativity, encourages thinking out of the box, requires analysis and synthesis and decision making, enforces self-discipline, promotes critical assessment, creates self-discovery, and fosters vision and creativity.

As a practical example, it is interesting to note that the very best engineers and technical designers in the Silicon Valley industry are, nearly without exception, practicing musicians (Grant Venerable, "The Paradox of the Silicon Savior," as reported in "The Case for Sequential Music Education in the Core Curriculum of the Public Schools," The Center for the Arts in the Basic Curriculum, New York, 1989).

Annette Byrd of GlaxoSmithKline has emphasized the need for education in the arts for children: "We need people who think with the creative side of their brains—people who have played in a band, who have painted...it enhances symbiotic thinking capabilities, not always thinking in the same paradigm, learning how to kick-start a new idea, or how to get a job done better, less expensively."

Clifford Smith, the president of the General Electric Foundation, has issued yet another endorsement of instruction of school children in the arts: "GE hires a lot of engineers. We want young people who can do more than add up a string of numbers and write a coherent sentence. They must be able to solve problems, communicate ideas and be sensitive to the world around them. Participation in the arts is one of the best ways to develop these abilities."

Paul Ostergard, Vice President, Citicorp, has stressed that: "A broad education in the arts helps give children a better understanding of their world...We need students who are culturally literate

as well as math and science literate."

Joseph M. Calahan, Director of Cooperate Communications, Xerox Corporation, notes that: "Music and art education aid students in skills needed in the workplace: flexibility, the ability to solve problems and communicate, the ability to learn new skills, to be creative and innovative, and to strive for excellence."

Former US Secretary of Education Richard Riley has emphasized that: "I believe arts education is one of the most creative ways we have to find the gold that is buried just beneath the surface. Children have an enthusiasm for life, a spark of creativity, and vivid imaginations that need training – training that prepares them to become confident young men and women."

Another Former US Secretary of Education, William Bennett, agrees: "The arts are an essential element of education, just like reading, writing, and arithmetic...music, dance, painting, and theater are all keys that unlock profound human understanding and accomplishment."

And current United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan emphasizes that: "The arts significantly boost student achievement, reduce discipline problems, and increase the odds students will go on to graduate from college."

In summary, the Upper Darby School District needs to rethink its questionable proposal to destroy education in music and art at the elementary school level. In terms of educational outcomes for children, cutting the elementary music and art programs is a dangerous "roll of the dice," flying in the face of much evidence that this proposal may do more harm than good. And Band-Aid approaches of incorporating this instruction into the regular classroom can in no way replicate the educational quality that currently exists in Upper Darby's elementary music and art programs.

Music and art education are closely linked to almost everything that we as a nation say we want for our children and demand from our schools: higher order thinking, effective communication, social and emotional development, creativity, problem solving, teamwork, and equitable opportunity. Upper Darby's children need and deserve these programs.

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