

The Boston Globe

EDITORIAL

Make arts education standard



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Students from the Orchard Gardens K-8 School perform during a dedication of Michael L. Bivins Court at Ramsay Park in October.

JANUARY 02, 2017

KIDS NEED TO learn about the arts. But teachers and parents have complained about the narrowing of elementary and secondary public education — specifically, that federal guidelines outlined by the George W. Bush-era No Child Left Behind Act, and applied by nervous school districts, squeezed subjects other than English and math out of the curriculum.

The Obama administration essentially rewrote No Child Left Behind with the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act, which required that school performance be measured more broadly than by test scores and graduation rates alone. The new guidelines, as the Globe's James Vaznis recently reported, require at least one additional indicator from a list that includes student discipline data, family engagement, student attrition rates, overall school climate, and other factors. But there's one indicator on that list — the availability of arts education — that has proved notably helpful in lifting many of the others, including performance in reading, math, and standardized tests.

Arts education has been shown to improve student performance across the disciplines as well as to have a positive effect on other indicators like family involvement, absenteeism, and school culture and climate. Beyond teaching students about public performance or painting techniques, arts programs also deepen students' involvement in their own education.

“We know that they want to come to school, and that their parents are more likely to come to a parent-teacher conference or a school event if their kids are involved in the arts of if the arts are involved in the event,” says Laura Smyth, a teacher and researcher who has studied the effects of arts education and is now the program director for the California Alliance for Arts Education's Title I initiative. “Every parent wants to come and see their kid perform, right? And in terms of school climate and culture, if you go into a school where there are things that kids have made all over the school, it has a completely different feel than a school environment that doesn't have those things.”

Crucially, the new federal standards recognize the particular importance of the arts for children from poor neighborhoods and for struggling schools.

In that regard, Boston has its own success story — Orchard Gardens K-8 school in Roxbury, which had been one of the state's lowest-performing schools in 2003. As part of the Boston school system's Arts Expansion initiative, Orchard Gardens instituted an arts program, then became eligible for the federal Turnaround Arts program. Test scores

and attendance rates rose dramatically, and suspension rates dropped. Orchard Gardens went from being one of the worst schools in the system to one of the best.

No Child Left Behind did something important: It pressed districts to prioritize keeping students in school and making sure they mastered the most central academic subjects. The law also withheld excuses from schools that kept failing their students. Still, the creators of the law underestimated the extent to which districts would treat arts courses as a frill or, worse yet, a distraction from reading and math.

The new federal rules seek a balance, endorsing an element of a well-rounded education that actually improves performance in core academic subjects. Adopting arts programs makes troubled schools, or schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods, eligible for the current federal law's Title I funds, with special Title II professional development funds for arts teachers. (Orchard Gardens replaced security guards with arts teachers.)

The state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education will be reviewing its accountability standards beginning in January before submitting its Every Student Succeeds Act plan to the US Department of Education in April. Any changes would take effect in the fall of 2018. State officials should resist pressure to add a long laundry list of new criteria; schools still need to be judged by a limited number of objective factors. But access to the arts speaks directly to the quality of the educational experience students receive.