

## Arts as key to learning as the 3 R's

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It can be tough to attract certified arts teachers to live and work in Colorado's small rural towns, but the community of Kit Carson has done it.

The entire town of 300 people has made music education a priority for its only K-12 school, where 100 students excel in academics, the arts and athletics.

Voters there approved giving the school district an extra \$2,000 per student to make it easier to attract in-demand teachers, which helped Superintendent Gerald Keefe hire a first-rate music teacher.

For Keefe, engaging students in music isn't a choice — it's a necessity.

"We're proud of our test scores, but I don't think we'd ever hear someone say that we have to pull students out of music class because they are not passing the test," says Keefe. "That's not an option. We can help them in other ways."

For students in Kit Carson's kindergarten through fifth-grade classes, the arts are a regular part of each school day — just like reading or math.

Not only are students winning national music awards, they're also building strong work ethics, learning about teamwork and sharpening their creativity. Those skills carry over into academics and, later, the workplace.

But according to new data, 29,000 Colorado public school students attend schools that do not offer any formal arts education. In our high schools alone, 53 percent of students are not taking any arts courses. That's worrisome at a time when employers are demanding more creative and imaginative workers.

And now we know the benefits of arts education: higher academic achievement and lower dropout rates.

A first-of-its-kind study by the Colorado Department of Education and the Colorado Council on the Arts reveals that more arts education is linked to more successful students.

The new data released last week associates arts education with higher scores at high schools on the Colorado Student Assessment Program in reading, writing and science and lower dropout rates, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

The arts are as integral to learning as reading, writing or math.

Sound far-fetched? It's not.

In a global economy, graduates with skills such as imagination, creativity and innovation will be heavily sought

Yet school leaders say their biggest challenge is finding time to offer the arts. The state mandates that every school district offer at least some arts, but there's no obligation for each school to teach the arts.

It's a choice for many public schools in Colorado.

According to the findings, on average, elementary students study two hours of formal arts education a week from mostly experienced, certified teachers. Similar data are not available for middle or high school students.

Work is now under way to improve arts education in Colorado's public schools and to better weave the arts into math, science, reading and writing. Origami, for example, can introduce a child to the principles of geometry. Musical notes — a half note, a quarter note — help a child begin to learn fractions.

A team has begun a review of standards and assessments for arts education. The bottom line: We must provide a complete education that includes the arts if we want to graduate students with the creativity and innovation they'll need to soar.

*Commissioner Dwight Jones is the chief school officer of the Colorado Department of Education. Elaine Mariner is the executive director of the Colorado Council on the Arts. For the complete report about arts education in Colorado's public schools, visit [www.coloarts.org](http://www.coloarts.org).*